

CHAPTER XVI--BECHE DE MER ENGLISH

Given a number of white traders, a wide area of land, and scores of savage languages and dialects, the result will be that the traders will manufacture a totally new, unscientific, but perfectly adequate, language. This the traders did when they invented the Chinook lingo for use over British Columbia, Alaska, and the Northwest Territory. So with the lingo of the Kroom-boys of Africa, the pigeon English of the Far East, and the beche de mer of the westerly portion of the South Seas. This latter is often called pigeon English, but pigeon English it certainly is not. To show how totally different it is, mention need be made only of the fact that the classic piecee of China has no place in it.

There was once a sea captain who needed a dusky potentate down in his cabin. The potentate was on deck. The captain's command to the Chinese steward was "Hey, boy, you go top-side catchee one piecee king." Had the steward been a New Hibridean or a Solomon islander, the command would have been: "Hey, you fella boy, go look 'm eye belong you along deck, bring 'm me fella one big fella marster belong black man."

It was the first white men who ventured through Melanesia after the early explorers, who developed beche de mer English--men such as the beche de mer fishermen, the sandalwood traders, the pearl hunters,

and the labour recruiters. In the Solomons, for instance, scores of languages and dialects are spoken. Unhappy the trader who tried to learn them all; for in the next group to which he might wander he would find scores of additional tongues. A common language was necessary--a language so simple that a child could learn it, with a vocabulary as limited as the intelligence of the savages upon whom it was to be used. The traders did not reason this out. Beche de mer English was the product of conditions and circumstances. Function precedes organ; and the need for a universal Melanesian lingo preceded beche de mer English. Beche de mer was purely fortuitous, but it was fortuitous in the deterministic way. Also, from the fact that out of the need the lingo arose, beche de mer English is a splendid argument for the Esperanto enthusiasts.

A limited vocabulary means that each word shall be overworked. Thus, fella, in beche de mer, means all that piecee does and quite a bit more, and is used continually in every possible connection. Another overworked word is belong. Nothing stands alone. Everything is related. The thing desired is indicated by its relationship with other things. A primitive vocabulary means primitive expression, thus, the continuance of rain is expressed as rain he stop. SUN HE COME UP cannot possibly be misunderstood, while the phrase-structure itself can be used without mental exertion in ten thousand different ways, as, for instance, a native who desires to tell you that there are fish in the water and who says FISH HE STOP. It was while trading on Ysabel island that I learned the excellence of this usage. I wanted two or three pairs

of the large clam-shells (measuring three feet across), but I did not want the meat inside. Also, I wanted the meat of some of the smaller clams to make a chowder. My instruction to the natives finally ripened into the following "You fella bring me fella big fella clam--kai-kai he no stop, he walk about. You fella bring me fella small fella clam--kai-kai he stop."

Kai-kai is the Polynesian for food, meat, eating, and to eat: but it would be hard to say whether it was introduced into Melanesia by the sandalwood traders or by the Polynesian westward drift. Walk about is a quaint phrase. Thus, if one orders a Solomon sailor to put a tackle on a boom, he will suggest, "That fella boom he walk about too much." And if the said sailor asks for shore liberty, he will state that it is his desire to walk about. Or if said sailor be seasick, he will explain his condition by stating, "Belly belong me walk about too much."

Too much, by the way, does not indicate anything excessive. It is merely the simple superlative. Thus, if a native is asked the distance to a certain village, his answer will be one of these four: "Close-up"; "long way little bit"; "long way big bit"; or "long way too much." Long way too much does not mean that one cannot walk to the village; it means that he will have to walk farther than if the village were a long way big bit.

Gammon is to lie, to exaggerate, to joke. Mary is a woman. Any woman is a Mary. All women are Marys. Doubtlessly the first dim

white adventurer whimsically called a native woman Mary, and of similar birth must have been many other words in *beche de mer*. The white men were all seamen, and so *capsize* and *sing out* were introduced into the lingo. One would not tell a Melanesian cook to empty the dish-water, but he would tell him to *capsize* it. To *sing out* is to cry loudly, to call out, or merely to speak. *Sing-sing* is a song. The native Christian does not think of God calling for Adam in the Garden of Eden; in the native's mind, God sings out for Adam.

Savvee or *catchee* are practically the only words which have been introduced straight from pigeon English. Of course, *pickaninny* has happened along, but some of its uses are delicious. Having bought a fowl from a native in a canoe, the native asked me if I wanted "*Pickaninny stop along him fella.*" It was not until he showed me a handful of hen's eggs that I understood his meaning. My word, as an exclamation with a thousand significances, could have arrived from nowhere else than Old England. A paddle, a sweep, or an oar, is called *washee*, and *washee* is also the verb.

Here is a letter, dictated by one Peter, a native trader at Santa Anna, and addressed to his employer. Harry, the schooner captain, started to write the letter, but was stopped by Peter at the end of the second sentence. Thereafter the letter runs in Peter's own words, for Peter was afraid that Harry *gammoned* too much, and he wanted the straight story of his needs to go to headquarters.

"SANTA ANNA

"Trader Peter has worked 12 months for your firm and has not received any pay yet. He hereby wants 12 pounds." (At this point Peter began dictation). "Harry he gammon along him all the time too much. I like him 6 tin biscuit, 4 bag rice, 24 tin bullamacow. Me like him 2 rifle, me savvee look out along boat, some place me go man he no good, he kai-kai along me.

"PETER."

Bullamacow means tinned beef. This word was corrupted from the English language by the Samoans, and from them learned by the traders, who carried it along with them into Melanesia. Captain Cook and the other early navigators made a practice of introducing seeds, plants, and domestic animals amongst the natives. It was at Samoa that one such navigator landed a bull and a cow. "This is a bull and cow," said he to the Samoans. They thought he was giving the name of the breed, and from that day to this, beef on the hoof and beef in the tin is called bullamacow.

A Solomon islander cannot say FENCE, so, in beche de mer, it becomes fennis; store is sittore, and box is bokkis. Just now the fashion in chests, which are known as boxes, is to have a bell-arrangement on the lock so that the box cannot be opened without sounding an alarm. A box so equipped is not spoken of as a mere box, but as the

bokkis belong bell.

FRIGHT is the beche de mer for fear. If a native appears timid and one asks him the cause, he is liable to hear in reply: "Me fright along you too much." Or the native may be fright along storm, or wild bush, or haunted places. CROSS covers every form of anger. A man may be cross at one when he is feeling only petulant; or he may be cross when he is seeking to chop off your head and make a stew out of you. A recruit, after having toiled three years on a plantation, was returned to his own village on Malaita. He was clad in all kinds of gay and sportive garments. On his head was a top-hat. He possessed a trade-box full of calico, beads, porpoise-teeth, and tobacco. Hardly was the anchor down, when the villagers were on board. The recruit looked anxiously for his own relatives, but none was to be seen. One of the natives took the pipe out of his mouth. Another confiscated the strings of beads from around his neck. A third relieved him of his gaudy loin-cloth, and a fourth tried on the top-hat and omitted to return it. Finally, one of them took his trade-box, which represented three years' toil, and dropped it into a canoe alongside. "That fella belong you?" the captain asked the recruit, referring to the thief. "No belong me," was the answer. "Then why in Jericho do you let him take the box?" the captain demanded indignantly. Quoth the recruit, "Me speak along him, say bokkis he stop, that fella he cross along me"--which was the recruit's way of saying that the other man would murder him. God's wrath, when He sent the Flood, was merely a case of being cross along mankind.

What name? is the great interrogation of beche de mer. It all depends on how it is uttered. It may mean: What is your business? What do you mean by this outrageous conduct? What do you want? What is the thing you are after? You had best watch out; I demand an explanation; and a few hundred other things. Call a native out of his house in the middle of the night, and he is likely to demand, "What name you sing out along me?"

Imagine the predicament of the Germans on the plantations of Bougainville Island, who are compelled to learn beche de mer English in order to handle the native labourers. It is to them an unscientific polyglot, and there are no text-books by which to study it. It is a source of unholy delight to the other white planters and traders to hear the German wrestling stolidly with the circumlocutions and short-cuts of a language that has no grammar and no dictionary.

Some years ago large numbers of Solomon islanders were recruited to labour on the sugar plantations of Queensland. A missionary urged one of the labourers, who was a convert, to get up and preach a sermon to a shipload of Solomon islanders who had just arrived. He chose for his subject the Fall of Man, and the address he gave became a classic in all Australasia. It proceeded somewhat in the following manner:

"Altogether you boy belong Solomons you no savvee white man. Me

fella me savvee him. Me fella me savvee talk along white man.

"Before long time altogether no place he stop. God big fella marster belong white man, him fella He make 'm altogether. God big fella marster belong white man, He make 'm big fella garden. He good fella too much. Along garden plenty yam he stop, plenty cocoanut, plenty taro, plenty kumara (sweet potatoes), altogether good fella kai-kai too much.

"Bimeby God big fella marster belong white man He make 'm one fella man and put 'm along garden belong Him. He call 'm this fella man Adam. He name belong him. He put him this fella man Adam along garden, and He speak, 'This fella garden he belong you.' And He look 'm this fella Adam he walk about too much. Him fella Adam all the same sick; he no savvee kai-kai; he walk about all the time. And God He no savvee. God big fella marster belong white man, He scratch 'm head belong Him. God say: 'What name? Me no savvee what name this fella Adam he want.'

"Bimeby God He scratch 'm head belong Him too much, and speak: 'Me fella me savvee, him fella Adam him want 'm Mary.' So He make Adam he go asleep, He take one fella bone belong him, and He make 'm one fella Mary along bone. He call him this fella Mary, Eve. He give 'm this fella Eve along Adam, and He speak along him fella Adam: 'Close up altogether along this fella garden belong you two fella. One fella tree he tambo (taboo) along you altogether. This fella tree belong apple.'

"So Adam Eve two fella stop along garden, and they two fella have 'm good time too much. Bimeby, one day, Eve she come along Adam, and she speak, 'More good you me two fella we eat 'm this fella apple.' Adam he speak, 'No,' and Eve she speak, 'What name you no like 'm me?' And Adam he speak, 'Me like 'm you too much, but me fright along God.' And Eve she speak, 'Gammon! What name? God He no savvee look along us two fella all 'm time. God big fella marster, He gammon along you.' But Adam he speak, 'No.' But Eve she talk, talk, talk, allee time--allee same Mary she talk along boy along Queensland and make 'm trouble along boy. And bimeby Adam he tired too much, and he speak, 'All right.' So these two fella they go eat 'm. When they finish eat 'm, my word, they fright like hell, and they go hide along scrub.

"And God He come walk about along garden, and He sing out, 'Adam!' Adam he no speak. He too much fright. My word! And God He sing out, 'Adam!' And Adam he speak, 'You call 'm me?' God He speak, 'Me call 'm you too much.' Adam he speak, 'Me sleep strong fella too much.' And God He speak, 'You been eat 'm this fella apple.' Adam he speak, 'No, me no been eat 'm.' God He speak. 'What name you gammon along me? You been eat 'm.' And Adam he speak, 'Yes, me been eat 'm.'

"And God big fella marster He cross along Adam Eve two fella too much, and He speak, 'You two fella finish along me altogether. You go catch 'm bokkis (box) belong you, and get to hell along scrub.'

"So Adam Eve these two fella go along scrub. And God He make 'm one big fennis (fence) all around garden and He put 'm one fella marster belong God along fennis. And He give this fella marster belong God one big fella musket, and He speak, 'S'pose you look 'm these two fella Adam Eve, you shoot 'm plenty too much.'"