

THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

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THOMAS GILCHRIST

SURVIVAL

WALKABOUT stirred to awareness of a splash but he did not at once look over the side. He was immediately conscious of his bones, cramped as they were in the narrow bow of the dinghy, and he moved to give them some freedom. Upon opening his eyes the first thing he saw was a wavering, undulating mass of black in the stern sheets; and when, presently, his sick eyes focused and the mass steadied and resolved itself, the preacher remembered it was the Kanaka. Bu squatted with his elbow in one hand and his chin in the other, dark, silent and primitive as the elements, like something the formidable night itself had left behind.

The other white man, Murdoch, straddled the 'midships thwart, to one side, but Walkabout did not look at him. He knew already that Murdoch was sneering. He knew also that the little swirl alongside, the little subsiding swirl that alone broke

Assorted semi-simians and missing links, banding together against the elements, initiated the cooperations we call civilization. But when the elements rebel—or when man's disloyalty

the vast mirror of the sea, accounted for the fourth man.

Behind the Kanaka a bar of light was breaking above the horizon. It changed swiftly to riotous orange and red and green. A planet was snuffed out and the sun, blood-red and immense, lifted quickly and with purpose out of the sea, blazed suddenly and dissipated the short-lived glory of the Pacific dawn. And the interminable night gave way at last to another and more interminable day.

Walkabout drew himself upright, drew his fingers outwards across his eyes and down over his brine-encrusted beard. He looked up again

Ancient as the islands were these Kanaka mysteries. Would they prevail against trackless ocean—and the evil white man?

to man destroys the union—then civilization may fail, including its precious science. Then the savage walk triumphant! Here's the whole story in, precisely, a nutshell.

and when he spoke it was not to Murdoch.

"What happened, Bu?"

The Kanaka looked up and his cave of a mouth opened and his eyes glittered redly but he did not speak.

"What happen *imatung* Grayson?" Walkabout tried again, though he had been unable to find a common dialect with this native.

The dinghy lay perfectly still, there was not a whisper of a breeze, not a ripple on the water now. The sun was already scorching their bodies; a small white-metal buckle lying on a thwart reflected its brilliance. It was Murdoch who answered at last, his

voice thick with fear and malice:

"What the hell do you think, preacher? He died, of course. So we saved you a job. We threw him over." He paused. He was panting already with the effort of speech. "I told you we should have saved his water ration," he shouted. "He'd have died anyway."

"As we shall ourselves, no doubt," the preacher told him placidly. "Very soon."

Murdoch looked at the old man insanely, then back at the Kanaka. "Get up!" Murdoch shouted. "Get up and do something, you bloody scavenger! What d'you think I hired you for? Christ!"

Walkabout watched through half-closed eyes. Bu grinned uncomprehendingly and the grin made a hole in his face like a pit. His huge tongue lolled between powerful white teeth and a chuckle came across the boat. Walkabout saw that Murdoch was shivering now, shivering and sweat-

ing in the growing heat; and he knew Murdoch was remembering that men still ate their kind.

Murdoch turned to Walkabout again, quickly, frightened. There were heavy pouches under Murdoch's eyes. Lines ran from his nose to the sides of his sun-blistered lips, lines made darker by a week's growth of beard. His face, that had been naturally pale, was now aflame like his shock of hair and his stocky legs. His thick hands trembled on his knees. He was clad only in shorts and a singlet.

"Christ!" he breathed again.

Walkabout inclined his head. "You may well call upon Him," he said.

"Upon who?" Murdoch snarled. "God?" He looked at the Kanaka again and he laughed on a rising note of hysteria. "Yes—God and this bloody savage!" he shouted. "How long do you think it'll be, preacher?"

Walkabout closed smarting eyes, opened them again to the intolerable glare of the sun.

"Depends on your faith, Murdoch," he said. "Your faith in God—or maybe in this bloody savage, as you call him." His long nose twitched again. He hove himself up and supported his body with his elbows on the gunnel and a malicious note was in his voice when he spoke again. "He won't eat you—yet—if that's what you're afraid of," he said. "It's your red hair—and ginger beard—Murdoch. I fancy he'll want to let your beard grow some more."

Murdoch was holding his breath. He expelled it now.

"It's an oddity in the Islands, a

ginger head," the preacher informed him. "The women go nuts over them. They want red-headed babies. The men go crazy over them, too. They have a way of preserving them and hanging them up in their huts. Gives them prestige, a red head."

Murdoch stared at the old man, jaw hanging loose, and Walkabout closed his eyes again. He wished he'd been better known in—and himself know better—the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. He was known in nearly every other group in the South Pacific. He had been wandering about the Islands for as long as most whites could remember, and he was not unaware of his reputation. To the natives he was something of a legend. They had called him Walkabout because of his energetic paces up and down and around and about when he delivered his sermons. He entertained while he instructed, and in this he was deliberate. To the whites he never denied the remnants of an American accent—confused now with a welter of native dialects, pidgeon English and a smattering of Oxford, lifted for his own amusement from King's Commissioners. Nor did he trouble to deny the rumor that he had once been a 'Frisco pug and playboy. He never bothered to deny or acknowledge anything concerning himself, intent as he was upon hammering home the Word; drawing only when strictly necessary upon his pugilistic prowess.

Hunger tore his insides now and his parched tongue all but choked him, but he had an urgent need for self-expression.

"Consider, Murdoch," he said, "the quaint humor of Destiny, the three complexities of civilization she's thrown together in a twelve-foot dinghy. A month ago—a mere month ago—you were in your stockbroker's office in Sydney. You were manipulating millions in currency, bank presidents probably fawned upon you, thousands depended—once hooked—upon your good will. And then you took your yacht for a cruise and skippered her yourself, since you're a navigator, a yachtmaster—by school standards. But the Pacific—the vast, implacable Pacific—did what it does to most amateurs who don't respect her. She turned your toy of a ship upside down, and now—where are you? A navigator!"

"What's this—a sermon?" Murdoch sneered. "If I had my sextant—"

"If you had your sextant—and your chronometers and almanacs and tables," Walkabout added. "In that case I could reckon our position myself."

The boat stirred and they both looked sharply at the Kanaka. He was paddling with the bailer, spinning the dinghy. He changed the paddle to the other side and the small craft shot ahead and presently they saw a coconut shell alongside. Bu scooped it up, grinning, almost with an air of triumph. He held it aloft and examined it in the manner of a connoisseur.

It was only a half shell and it was without meat. Walkabout closed his eyes again, wearily.

That had been Bu's business, of course, scavenging. After Walkabout had taken passage on the yacht, they

had anchored in Tabiteuea, and there Murdoch had first seen the Kanaka: sitting in his dugout against the background of the reef, fishing with a line between his toes, paddling without hurry to pick up a bottle or a can thrown from the yacht.

"By God!" Murdoch had said. "Now there's something for you! There's sheer independence for you! Scavenging the sea by day, sleeping on the earth by night. And propagating the species—"

He had told Walkabout that he thought it would make a good story back in Sydney; and that night in the cabin he had rehearsed it to his guests and dutiful listeners:

"And that's how one part of the so-called human race lives . . . following its instincts like the beasts of the jungle." Murdoch had evidently liked that thought. He had been intrigued by the Kanaka much as he would have been intrigued by an ape. He had hired him as a sort of specimen. . . .

Walkabout felt the dribble of lukewarm water on his chest and he opened his eyes without alarm. Bu was standing over him, naked as the day he was born, and he was wringing out his *lava-lava*. He dipped it in the sea again, his motions so easy that he never disturbed the balance of the frail craft. His muscles rippling under smooth, brown skin, he bathed the old man's legs with the gentle touch of a woman. Like Murdoch, Walkabout had been asleep when the yacht tossed them all into the Pacific, and he was wearing only shorts and a rag of an undershirt.

The old man nodded as Bu turned to Murdoch with the dripping *lava-lava*, and he saw Murdoch cringe. It gave Walkabout an odd sense of betrayal. He experienced a brief surge of anger that no man of God should have permitted himself. Murdoch's mouth opened and closed and Walkabout saw that he was trying to speak but couldn't because the metal buckle had been placed in his mouth. Bu continued his ministrations and when he had finished he retrieved the buckle and gave it to Walkabout to suck. It induced a very small amount of saliva. Then Bu slipped gently overboard.

The sun climbed and smote the white men like the blast from a furnace. There were only bars of shadows directly under the thwarts now. Murdoch had wilted, passed into a stupor. Walkabout himself could hardly stir his bones in the sack of his skin. Pain stabbed him to the marrow when he moved. A formidable emptiness filled his shrunken stomach and his swollen tongue could scarcely taste the metal buckle. It had been a whole week now. He knew that the end was near.

The boat tipped slightly and he opened his eyes again. Bu was climbing back over the stern, using one hand for leverage. His body dripped and glistened as he moved, his eyes shone redly and he breathed a little heavily. In his free hand he held his knife. And then Walkabout was conscious of a sudden flow of saliva to his mouth; for, spitted on the blade, was a little leathery slate-gray fish.

Walkabout's eyes lit as he recog-

nized the fish. The law of chance or, more scientifically, the calculus of probability, had pulled off a miracle. He knew that a shark had contributed that fish; that a shark had been with them for a while and had left, leaving its parasite, *remora*, the sucker fish, attached to the bottom of the boat among the marine growth. And so they would eat. They would eat because a shark had found a surface upon which to scratch itself. It was something of a miracle, but when Bu had carefully removed the eyes and was pounding the fish into a mixture of green weed, he remembered it was the Kanaka who had restrained them from removing and using the weed even when they were crazy with hunger. It was an application of the laws of Nature. It was primitive wisdom transcending scientific knowledge. And Walkabout began to hope again.

Bu fed them a part of the mixture and then gave them the eyes of the fish to suck, for that kept the thirst away. Walkabout remembered this fact only when he experienced it. He remembered long droughts in the Islands when even the landholders had gone fishing because of the eyes. And this reminded him that island communities were divided into two simple groups, the landholders and the fishermen—but once there had been a small class of aristocrats: the navigators of the tribe. They were the really great few, the early Polynesian navigators, who had handed their secrets down only to their sons.

Walkabout raised his head and looked intently at the Kanaka, who

was absorbed now in removing the fiber from the coconut shell. But presently he shook his head wearily. Since the coming of the *imatung*—the white man—native craft had died. One only heard vague tales now of those old navigational feats. . . .

He looked again at the immense emptiness of the sky, listened to the profound silence of the universe. The sun was half-meridian, behind him, and his head cast a shadow over his body, relieving it. He fell into an exhausted sleep.

He awoke to the crazy wallow of the dinghy and the inhuman scream, and he lunged instantly at Murdoch. Fire ran through his marrow and blazed before his eyes, but he kept Murdoch from slipping over the side. Bu came over and together they got him to the bottom boards again, where he subsided, face in hands.

"You are right, preacher," he said after a while; and Walkabout knew a moment of relief—until Murdoch continued: "You've had your day. You're beyond love—or don't know it—like the blackfella. I am different. I've got to live. I can't lose her."

Walkabout's still strong teeth showed through his beard in what might have been a smile. It was incredible! On the yacht Murdoch had talked a good deal about Connie, his wife; had passed her photo around—along with those of his automobiles and a complete album showing the magnificent interior of his house. So that this love he talked about was nothing more than pride of possession; but by Murdoch's own stand-

ards it was, evidently, something that gave him the right to live, even if others should die. . . . Walkabout heard him speak again, hoarsely.

"We should kill the blackfella!"

For a moment Walkabout couldn't speak. And then he laughed. He laughed until he wondered if he himself were giving way to hysteria, and he stopped abruptly.

In this wreck of a man with insanity flickering in his eyes, he could scarcely recognize the stockbroker. It had taken just a week. The physical deterioration was natural. This was the Kanaka's environment — not theirs. But that with the teaching of two thousand years Murdoch had not acquired any moral fiber—that, to Walkabout, was unpardonable.

"How?" he asked. "He's got the knife. And only he is able to stand."

"That's right!" Murdoch whispered. "He's the only one with a knife. That's right!" He looked up suddenly. "Why d' you suppose he's feeding us, preacher?"

"Why? Isn't that self-evident, Murdoch?" Walkabout ran his fingers down the stickiness of his beard and watched the other carefully. "If you wanted to transport some—beef, say—and you had no means of preserving it *en route*, how would you do it?" he asked. "Take it on the hoof, wouldn't you?"

Murdoch's eyes burned, looking at him. "Christ!" he said.

Walkabout closed his eyes.

When he awoke it was to the gentle fanning of a breeze and the sight of a single cloud in the east. Bu was crouched over his coconut shell,

steadily boring holes with the point of his knife. Murdoch straddled the thwart, his mouth not hanging now, his eyes moving from one to the other. Walkabout hove himself upright and scanned the sea. It was rippled, whispering alongside the boat. The immense silence was broken at last. It was as if a verdict had been delivered. He plucked at the undershirt that clung to his suffocating body and let the delicious breeze caress his skin.

"But we're still lost," Murdoch said, as if the other had spoken. "And all that bloody savage can do is sit there and make ornaments! Ornaments out of coconut shells!"

"They also use them in the process of shrinking heads," Walkabout said. "Shut up!" Murdoch shouted.

"I find it intriguing," Walkabout persisted, "to think of one of God's black children placidly gnawing on the thigh bone of a bank president—or a Sydney stockbroker; and his worldly head decorating the hut of an island chief!"

"Christ!" said Murdoch again, savagely. He stared at the Kanaka. "Yes," he said. "He's making ornaments, all right. I've got some—had some—on the yacht. Ashtrays and things," he chattered.

Walkabout continued to watch Bu through half-closed eyes. The Kanaka was shipping the tiller now. That done, he set a tiny makeshift sail with his *lava-lava* and the boat hook. He moved the tiller with his foot and the dinghy tugged forward. He remained standing, shading his eyes and looking into the setting sun. And when

the change of light told Walkabout that the sun had set behind him, he saw Bu sit down again and reach for his coconut shell.

And Walkabout considered, with dawning intelligence. Had he been navigating his old mission-schooner he'd have been taking a bearing of the sun now—an amplitude at sunset—to check his compass. There was no compass here, but there was, he remembered from those old native tales, a relationship between the sunset bearing and the run of the sea and the particular season; and this breeze was the beginning of the south-east trades.

It was, after all, elementary! It was so darned elementary, in fact, that it had escaped the notice of the scientific minds, the educated ego, of his own race! Walkabout marveled and he licked his lips slowly:

"Bu—you sonovagun!"

Bu heard his name and looked up; nodded but said nothing. Walkabout nodded back gently. Murdoch had been watching them both carefully. "There's something between you two! You mamby-pamby parsons and your savages! You suck up to them—ruin them! Letting the race down!"

Walkabout didn't answer, only wondered, suddenly, where the other had found so much new energy. And with that his eyes fell on the after thwart where the remaining rations of fish and weed had been . . .

Oddly, it didn't occur to him to suspect the Kanaka. He turned his head again slowly and looked into the leering face of the other.

"You sonovabitch, Murdoch!" he

said. He returned his attention to Bu. In the twilight, Bu was standing now with the half coconut shell in his hands, and he had filled it with water. It dribbled through the holes that were punched, equi-distant, below the rim. There was a little nick on part of the rim itself. Walkabout followed the direction of his gaze and saw that he was watching the star, *Sirius*, that peered brilliantly over the western horizon. And as *Sirius* set he saw him raise the coconut shell very carefully, so that no water spilled. He turned towards the south and placed his eye to a hole in the shell; and in the southern sky a great, bejewelled cross was hung. . . .

Kaama! It was *Kaama*, the Southern Cross; and the Great Star of *Kaama*, which was a *Crucis* in Walkabout's books. The natives had spoken a good deal—years ago—of the Great Star of *Kaama*, as if it held the secret of life; much as the sun worshippers must have looked upon the sun. Walkabout stared now, forgetting pain and hunger.

It was clear that Bu was taking a meridional observation of a *Crucis* through the "sights" of his coconut shell! And—of course—the water in the shell, governed by the series of holes, made a perfect horizontal plane—an artificial horizon!

It was utterly preposterous at first! Walkabout ran his fingers over his brow in puzzlement. It was so simple it defied immediate understanding. One needed declinations and right ascensions and a sextant that would measure an altitude. It was impossible otherwise. But it came to

him at last. All stars, of course, maintained the same relative position to each other. When, in these latitudes, *Sirius* set, a *Crucis* was, evidently, at its zenith. If a man knew the standard of measurement, he could cut sights in a coconut shell to indicate a given latitude by that star's meridian altitude in relation to the rim. If it showed above the rim, you were south, and if below, north of your standard latitude.

After all, it was only a matter of long and accumulated observation. And what else was science?

Walkabout laughed silently. The impudence of it! The stupendous simplicity of this old miracle, this mystery! He subsided, fearing hysteria again, and he watched as Bu lowered the shell, sat down and leaned on the tiller. The boat came round and as night closed in again they were steering a northerly course by the pointer stars of the Giant Dipper. They indicated the Pole Star, which couldn't be seen in southern latitudes—which the Kanaka could never have seen. But he had set a course by it!

Walkabout laughed again, silently, because he didn't want to appear derisive. There was a wisdom under God transcending mere intelligence if you were ready to accept it. But then he caught his breath. The Kanaka's calculations could only be very rough, of course. Lucky if they were within thirty or forty miles. And at their couple of feet above sea level they wouldn't see an island more than a few miles distant. Walkabout closed his eyes again.

In the morning the sun came up in the old man's face and he knew that Bu was still steering west. He sat by the tiller, not moving, like something carved in mahogany. Murdoch was awake, sitting astride the middle thwart, and his jaw hung loose and only his eyes moved.

"Well, preacher," he said. "The blackbird tried his gods last night. See him?"

Walkabout nodded. He was immensely weary of Murdoch.

"They've sent us a wind."

"Yes," the other agreed. "A wind to take us to hell! But no food! no water! no land! . . . But I won't be the next to go, preacher." He could only whisper now.

Walkabout looked at him curiously and then he saw something gleaming from under Murdoch's hands. It wasn't the buckle. The buckle was glinting on the after thwart, with a fiber string rove through it now; and that was all that was beside the Kanaka, apart from the coconut shell. The old man hauled himself slowly upright; ran a tongue over his lips.

"Give me that knife, Murdoch!"

And Murdoch laughed, madly. The Kanaka looked across, unperturbed.

"No, no—you crazy bastards!" Murdoch shouted. "It won't be my head that goes first!"

Walkabout laid his arms along the gun'le and gave himself a tentative hoist. But his legs gave way as if they had neither bone nor muscle. He sank back again.

"The Kanaka is a Gilbertese," he reminded Murdoch. "From Tabi-

teua."

The significance did not register on Murdoch and the old man said no more. He had known so many wealthy sightseers who never saw or learned anything. It didn't matter much anyway. Murdoch had collapsed again, trembling with the effort he had made.

The sun was half-meridian now and Bu was steering, steering by the shadow cast by the makeshift sail, when Walkabout saw him glance up and stare; and then he stood up and he clapped his hands and pointed; and his grin made a black hole between his gleaming teeth.

"*Noria! noria! Te aba!*" he shouted, his voice an odd falsetto.

The boat fell away precariously and tumbled into the trough. He lunged back to the tiller but still pointed triumphantly, crouching.

"*E koaua! Te aba!*"

Walkabout's breath came fast as he strove to rise. He gasped when he made it to his knees. He scanned the horizon ahead and he checked with the Kanaka's pointing finger and he checked again. There was nothing! There was no land! Not a break on the horizon! There was no surf, no reef. He checked again, a trifle desperately now, and then he saw that the Kanaka was pointing into the sky ahead! There was only a little cumulus cloud there, like a ball of cotton wool, drifting slowly across the sky.

He sat back and he stared at Murdoch. Even the native, he supposed, could stand only so much before his reason went. Hallucinations came first. Then—

Murdoch was deadly calm now, and as if he divined the other's thoughts, he nodded.

"Yes," he said. "Plain mad!"

The knife was in his right hand and his body was tensed. The Kanaka was still gazing at the cloud. Walkabout's jaws worked and he couldn't speak, but he sprang first and he never knew how he did it.

He lay on a bed on the veranda of the mission house in Tabiteuea and the world was a warm, bright green even through his closed eyelids. He listened to the chatter of natives voices outside somewhere, and he recalled those last fifty seamiles; and the boom and smother of surf as they shot the reef, and then the smooth lagoon and the whole native population waiting on the beach in the shade of the splayed coconut palms; and the canoes that had put out to salute them.

And he saw again this Bu, this scavenger of a Kanaka, as they hit the beach. He saw him stagger up to where the women stood, and the shining buckle was in his hand with the string of coconut fiber through it. He saw the girl then, as dusky a beauty as he had ever baptized, run half-way to meet him; and the buckle—the metal buckle that had once held up Murdoch's pants and had later promoted saliva in their mouths—Bu suspended from her neck like a diamond-studded cross.

Walkabout stirred. He thought of the little cumulus cloud that had

been alone in the sky and was a mystery no longer. They had failed to read what Nature had written for them—that was all—what Nature, scorned, made visible only to those who would look. There had been a faint, almost imperceptible, green tinge on the bottom of that cloud, and it was the reflection of a lagoon—fifty miles away.

Walkabout opened his eyes and turned to the other bed. Murdoch was propped on an elbow, smoking a cigarette, watching him. He had been shaved, fed, rested; he was a stockbroker again.

"I wondered when you'd wake up, preacher," he said pleasantly. "I've been waiting to tell you something. Know what I'm gonna do?" He examined the end of his cigarette and looked up again. "Well, I like that boy—that bloody scavenger. Bu, or whatever you call him. So I'm going to take him back with me to Sydney. God—I can *use* a man like that!"

Walkabout lay still, scarcely breathing. It was incredible! It was indeed! He was quiet for a long time, listening to the chatter and laughter outside. Then, without opening his eyes, he said very deliberately:

"Murdoch, I was once a 'Frisco pug, as they say. We'll be up and about soon. I'll work you over then. By the time I've finished with you, you won't be able to take anybody to Sydney. And then I'll re-introduce you to one of Nature's gentlemen. Yes, Murdoch," he added, remembering, "and a great lover."