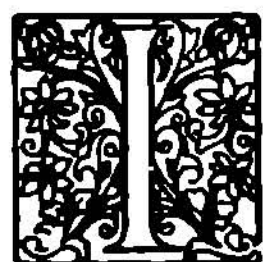


## The Mystery of the "Manahiki."

By J. VINCENT.



WAS six weeks down with fever in hospital at Honolulu, and I came out a broken man. They said at the agent's that there was no work going in the port, but a bar-tender told me of a billet on the islands, so I sent a wire out of my last few dollars and waited with what patience I could for the answer. It was a goodish spell before it came, for a long message from across the sea-beds broke suddenly "click! click!" into the office; one of history's big deals in human life, some ten thousand souls wiped out by a tidal-wave; so my little concerns had to stand aside and let the death-news flash across the world. At last the old chilly reply came, "Filled up," and, sick at heart, I stumbled blindly out of the office, and on the doorstep walked into James Calder, a man I had not seen for ten years.

"Sorry," I muttered, for I did not recognise him at first, but he caught me by the coat.

"It's a precious wee world, Gregory!" he said. "Why, I thought you were in the Rio London!"

"So I was," I replied. "Turned it up for gun-running, but there wasn't a cent in the game, so when the brass was gone I came away East. Got the push at Hong-Kong and I've only just left hospital here. How's yourself? I'd heard you were in the West India way."

"Just so," said Calder, "but I dropped into a bit last year, and I am on my own now. My word, I'm sorry for you, old man; you look like a corpse. Funds bad?"

"Well," I answered, "you could push all I have across a bar and go out fairly sober. There's nothing going here, either. Filled up. Don't suppose you could offer me anything, could you? I'm not proud."

"We can't discuss matters here, anyway,"

said Calder. "Come over and have a bit of food with me and I'll tell you."

And so, after dinner, as we sat on the hotel veranda, he told me.

"About twenty years ago, in one of the out-of-the-way groups—call it Salvation Island, if you like—they had a sort of mascot, a graven image, such as are common over the South Seas. The fame of this Aitu was big, and some local fortune-teller had given out that if ever it was lost or stolen things would be uncomfortable for the islands, the King, and the thief, too.

"This tale got round somehow to old Spencer Ayres, one of the Pacific trading toughs. He didn't care a clam-shell for the curse; his bill was long enough, anyway, and he promptly stole the thing, meaning to blackmail the King for its return.

"However, it seems the fortune-teller wasn't talking through his hat, for Spencer and his ship, the *Manahiki*, went down during a squall, just under the lee of Salvation Island, and only two of the Kanakas they had aboard succeeded in getting on shore, where a trader found them, very small in the waist, a fortnight later.

"Sure enough, too, the luck of the island seems to have gone off in the Aitu's luggage. First the King died, then the copra failed, after which the 'trades' strewed the beaches with wrecked fishing-boats; and this kind of thing continued in a most distressing fashion.

"At last, after two years of misfortune, the then King and his council determined to fish up the mascot if they could, and to bring him back in state; so, having obtained information as to the wreck from the survivors, off they went.

"They found the wreck right enough, for the *Manahiki* had gone down gently, and lay on an even keel, in about eight or nine fathoms of water.

"The image had been stowed in the

forward-house abaft of the foremast, and there a diver caught sight of him through the open door smiling as if he liked his quarters. But when the man went down the second time with a bight of rope to put round the mascot they saw him suddenly jump backwards out of the house with grey, unearthly hands reaching after him through the door, which hands caught him by the throat so that he fell in a heap, and when at last they got him up he was dead—stone dead—but without a mark on him.

"Then the chief pulled a steady face and said it was an accident, and called for volunteers to go down at so much a shot, raising the price till at last a second man, with a line about him so that they could fetch him up quick in case of trouble, went down.

"His mates saw him disappear through the door, then almost at once the signal rope jerked frantically, and it took eight strong men with creaking backs to lift the poor devil out of the house; and no wonder, for they could see huge grey hands holding him crumpled up like a rag doll. Then of a sudden the grip relaxed, the haulers fell in a heap, and the body of the man shot up from the water and then lay very still with swollen white eyes.

"The look of him was good enough for the natives. There was no getting them to hang about the place; they swore that all the bottom of the sea, about the wreck, was creeping with unholy things, and before many minutes the schooner under all sail was nipping out of the lagoon.

"But the luck of the islands has been so wickedly bad that the chief is ready to give top prices for the mascot, if he can only get the thing back. And that," concluded Calder, bringing his fist down on the table, "is how matters stand now, and I'm going to have a shy at salvaging that jim-jam. I've got a tidy lot of Kanakas, but at this sort of game there's not a dollar's worth of sand among the lot, and I want a man like you to stiffen them up. So if you like you can come on to-night. The screw will be all right, the food is all right, and we'll arrange a good commission for you if we pull the thing off."

It seemed a weird sort of story, but I had heard odd tales enough round that department of the sea, and it seemed to me somehow that there was money in the business. Besides, a berth was a berth, after all, and I guessed Calder did not go butterfly hunting in the way of trade. So we settled the deal between two cocktails and I went aboard right away.

The *Tongarewa* was a dainty, hundred-ton of teak that you could sail with a handkerchief. She had been built for the copra and fruit trade, and carried, beside us two whites, eight Kanakas, who pigged in the forecastle, where there was a gaudy print of Kammeham-mehah V. and a dirty looking-glass for them to grin into. One of the Kanakas was a dime wonder, even for a South Sea Islander, a huge twenty-five-stone giant called Kaman, and one of the two survivors of the *Manahiki*. Calder had run him down in Sydney and brought him along to show us round the wreck.

There was no moss on Calder when he took on a job, and in three days we cast off at nightfall from under the shadow of the Devil's Punch Bowl, dodged through the channels and the drift of shipping, and stood out to sea.

We had a quiet time the next fortnight. The big, kind Pacific was asleep; but all of a sudden the "trade" sprang upon us with a roar. The waters were astir from the Farallows to Fiji, and we staggered with whining tackle and storm sails set hard as clenched teeth, till one evening we made our landfall between two grey rags of rain, and ran across the combers to the clever handling of Kaman into the stillness of the lagoon beyond.

About midnight the sky cleared. Sea and island lay black and white, like a photo-slide, under the big Tropic moon. It was my watch, and I walked up and down the deck listening to the cannonade on the reef outside, where the water spurted up into fountains of white fire. The moon yellowed and swung down the west like a huge Chinese lantern; the dawn star ran up and spilled fire in the green of the east. Then, hand over fist, up came the dawn clear as polished brass, and Salvation Island stood before us. It lay against the south, long and saddle-backed, tufted with small scrub palm and wreathed with wheeling sea-fowl, but there were no natives about, the place was too barren.

The northern coast off which we were lying ran forward in a number of bays, and across these was strung reef upon reef, the outward ones a dancing ground for the tall combers that volleyed up into thunder and smoke, so that the ear was filled with their noise. The very place to pile a schooner, I thought, looking on the maze of roaring ledges among the idle lagoons.

By this time most of us were on deck prospecting the island. Kaman was charting

the place on his great copper fingers, and Calder listened, while the other Kanakas stood round gaping and showing the whites of their eyes.

By and by we got under way, with Kaman at the wheel. The set of the currents was strong, but the schooner crept with quiet shadows over the lagoon, till Kaman suddenly gave a shout, the kedge splashed into ten fathoms of water, and the *Tongarewa* hove to, slowly circling by the head.

I must say the thing did Kaman credit, because there, right under the bows, like a solid shadow, lay the poor old *Manahiki*, about twenty fathoms away. She had only a small list to starboard, so that the decks lay fair and even below, and the two stumps of the masts, studded with barnacle, rose like the piles of a bridge, within a yard of the surface. Though the weeds and the shells had buried her into a thing of the sea, you could still see in that wonderful clear water the white Tropic paint grey among the raffle. Aft the foremast was a little forward-house, and it was here, according to Kaman, that the Aitu was berthed. The door stood conveniently open; you couldn't complain as far as that went, and it seemed a soft thing to go and call on the old man; but I suppose it was due to the tales we had heard, for sure it is that, as we looked over into the green depths below, an unholy sickness came over us. Hideous, clammy shapes seemed to crawl among the waving tangle of weeds, slipping into open hatchways, and coiling like knots of water in the shadow below.

I don't mind saying now that the meat on me was crawling about my bones, and I guess the others felt the same. So there we stood staring blankly, with the roar of the reefs drumming in our ears, and now and again, in between, you could catch the ghostly chuckling of the lagoon about our ship's side.

"Say, old pal," whispered Calder to me at last, wiping out the inside of his cap, with a sickly face, "we must set the blacks to work at once—there's a blooming spell or something about the place."

We had to boot some of the niggers, but they picked themselves together at last. The first thing was to chart the wreck carefully and make out the set of the currents, which was a puzzle, but we got hold of the right end at last. Then, by a warp, we slung the boat squarely over the forward-house, about twenty yards from the *Tongarewa*. All this took some working and it was noon before we were well fixed up. Calder, myself, and seven Kanakas were in the boat. The light

flickered up the sides of the ship and the sun was as warm as a clear fire, but we felt deadly cold about the belt; I couldn't tell you why.

"Kaman looks scared, and that's a fact," I whispered to Calder, for the big Kanaka, his face grey, was crouching in the bows, nervously licking his thick lips.

"Here you, Kaman!" said Calder, though his own voice was none too big; "you ready, what's up?"

"Me catch fear," said Kaman, slowly rolling his eyes. "No go down."

Calder whipped out a bag and emptied it before the Kanaka and counted out seventy-eight Yankee and twenty-two Chilean dollars.

"See here, Kaman," he said, "fifty dollars if you can tell us exactly how the Aitu is placed; a hundred if you get a rope fixed about it. Now don't sit there shivering and let your pluck freeze, you blubber-lipped baboon."

"You talk fine, boss!" answered the Kanaka. "S'pose Aitu make me dead?"

For answer Calder slammed another canvas bag on deck.

"S'pose, you fish-eyed fool," he said, "I say another fifty dollars. See here, down on the nail. Not one piece more, savvy?"

The Kanaka did not move.

"All right," shouted Calder; "go to blazes then. You don't get one piece more," and he scooped up the money.

"Stop," said Kaman, with a jump; "all right, boss, I go."

He threw off his loin-cloth, fastened a heavy knife by a leather slip to his wrist, settled a line round his armpits in case of accident, and swung the guide-rope, with its great stone weight, plumb over the forward-house, then flashed over the side. We saw him alight with a bound before the door and peer into the inside of the cabin, steadying himself on the slimy foothold of the weeds, then quickly he passed through.

The line ran between our fingers and stopped. Then suddenly we felt it alive in our hands, and Kaman sprang backward out of the door, stabbing at some unseen enemy. Then hands grey and shapeless laid hold of him, and at the touch he leaped frantically towards the surface, then crumpled up like a broken toy. But by this time we had our backs into the rope, and he came at a leap. Down below, in the ghastly coil of water, strange things were moving, and wicked bubblings broke about Kaman as we hauled him aboard; then all was quiet again. We laid the big brown body on the warm planks





"WE HAULED HIM ABOARD."

of the boat, got the water out of him by the Royal Humane Society method, poured a dram down his throat, and after a bit he came round ; but he couldn't speak.

Calder and four of the Kanakas went aboard the ship with him ; I stopped behind in the boat with two cowering Kanakas. The sea and the wreck seemed absolutely quiet, and yet down below there in that cabin some devilish mystery was packed. I thought the thing over carefully in a pipe of tobacco and my mind was made up. Presently Calder called me aboard.

"Now, Gregory," he said, "put a name to

this, if you can. Kaman's come round, but there's no mistake he made the landfall of Kingdom Come. I can't make out what he saw, but there's a whole crowd of them down below. They work the show between them, and their touch is pretty near as good as death. There isn't a man will go down again, and I don't see my way to blame them. I wouldn't go myself. Call me a fool, if you like, for I shall drop a couple of thousand dollars over this job, but I've a wife and family, and I can't take any chances. The thing, whatever it is, is a holy terror."

"I don't know but what I'm not a bigger

fool," I said. "Anyway, I haven't got a family nor a wife, and I'm going to see this thing through, one way or another. I reckon that blooming jim-jam is keeping a sort of irregular establishment down there, and I'm going to find out a bit about it, if I have to blow the boulder out of the sea. It's no good your shaking your head, Calder; I'm dead on this job, so just you fetch the diving-suit up and put it through while I interview Kaman."

The Kanaka was lying back in his bunk as yellow as a stale egg, and so dazed that it took me half an hour to get this much out of him.

Looking in at the door, he had seen the Aitu leaning forward from the farther wall with a slip of rusty chain round him to keep him on his feet. The cabin was amazingly dark, except flush in front of the door, and it seemed to him as if the shadows were too substantial, still he couldn't see much amiss. Anyhow, he was just going to slip a rope over the Aitu's head, when the shadows became alive, scores of angry eyes flashed out on him, something slipped forward, huge, horrible hands flapped about, laying hold of his arm, and at the touch his senses slipped from him like water. He didn't remember anything more till he came to himself aboard the boat.

I found Calder fumbling with the diving-dress.

"You're never going?" he muttered.

"You bet!" I said. "I mean to hustle the blackguard and teach him manners."

"You don't know what you are talking of," said he, in my ear. "My God, I was looking over at the forward-house and I saw those awful hands come groping out of the door. He's at home, and don't you make any mistake."

"You might have kept that chip to yourself a bit longer, partner," I answered. "But I'm not going to be bullied. Someone, me or him, is asking for trouble, that's a bet."

"You'll remember you are doing this on your own? I won't be responsible."

"Just so," I answered. "I know all about that, but I hope to pull through, and if I don't I guess I sha'n't have a chance to come and prosecute you."

It took some time to get that diving-suit to go, but about four in the afternoon it was ready, and I was sitting in the boat with my helmet on my knees. I own I took a last look round before they screwed me in. It was a glorious sight. The sky was without flaw, the blue walls of the sea crumbled

into silver dust on the edge of the lagoon, and about the folds of the cliffs the sea birds hung like coils of smoke with shrill gusts of sound. I took my fill and felt a kind of fear settling on me, so I just shook hands with Calder, they screwed the helmet on me, made all tight, the pumps began to pant in my ears, and, with a heavy gaff in my hand, I went over the side. The water closed above my head with a roar; as I slid down the guide-rope there was a thick silence through which the air-tubes sobbed and whispered, and then in a moment I felt beneath me the soft, thick weeds of the deck.

Presently I dimly made out the long sweep of the bulwarks, the up-driving bulk of the foremast, and the forward-house. A crowd of small fishes fled before me like a flight of birds, and now my heart swelled up as big as a bucket, and the blood was boiling in my ears as I crept closer and looked within. By this time my sight had grown used to the dimming light of the sea, and, lurching forward toward the doorway, I saw the big seven-foot figure of the Aitu grinning and ugly as they make them, while to the right and left lay the solid shadows.

I had a bight of rope with a running knot ready, and with the gaff I hitched it over the head of the joss, settled it about his middle, where he had something of a waist, and drew close, putting my feet against the door-posts for a leverage. The door was slimy, my foot slipped, and I was jerked inside on my face. I quickly scrambled up, and then my flesh crept about my bones, for a huge, dim shape crowded out the light. Fierce eyes burned in circles around me, and grey, monstrous hands shot out and just missed their hold as I jumped back and upwards in my fear. For a moment, quick as I was, one hideous claw laid hold of my bare hand, and I felt a fearful numbing pain, then the green about me burst into fire which shrivelled my brain like a flame.

When I recovered I was lying on my back in the boat, the good blue sky above me and the warm sunset about my face.

"Have you got him?" I jerked out at last.

"Lie still, mate, and don't worry," said Calder, white to the ears. "That was a touch and go."

"Never mind me," I told them; "I'm all right. Start raising the joss. He'll come as sweetly as a cork. There's no strength in the cabin roof if you have to pull him through it, but he's heading for the door now."

They wouldn't listen to me at first, but I persisted, and when they bore on the rope





"ONE HIDEOUS CLAW LAID HOLD OF MY BARE HAND."

they saw right away the head of the Aitu shove out of the door, and there he stuck. So we warped the schooner close, rove the rope through a block at a yard-arm, and laid on.

Kaman came in with his twenty-five stone and a power of language, and I guess between us we'd have lifted the Pacific. The rope tightened, and with a run up came the jim-jam, his streaming face all agrin. I can tell you he looked pleased at the welcome, for the cheer we gave him wiped the birds off the cliffs.

Inside of ten minutes he was lying snug in the fore-cabin upon a pack of spare canvas, smiling with a face like a winkle-barrow.

"You beauty!" said Calder, shaking his

fist at him. "I could kick your bung-nose off. I guess we'll clear out now, Gregory; you can tell us all about it afterwards."

"Hold on, Calder," I said; "give me a quarter of an hour. I've a bill to pay before I go."

"Don't you go in for any blooming foolishness now," he answered. "Aren't you satisfied? By gum, it was a near thing for you!"

But I went below and fetched up a dynamite bomb, such as the natives use when they go fishing. The schooner was already wearing away, so I dropped into the dinghy and cast off. It was getting dark, but I mapped out the wreck carefully and located the forward-house. Then, without hurrying, I settled the bomb in a flour-bag, lit the fuse, screwed all tight, and, with a line, slung the whole neatly just in at the door below and sculled off for my skin. Those bombs are a cheap and nasty quality of goods; or perhaps I misjudged the time. Anyway,

before I was clear, the sea beneath me came up with a gasp into a stack of water and the boat was clean filliped into the air, chucking me like a biscuit head first against the thwart, where I lay half stunned.

Presently I heard a big shout, and staggered up dazed and bleeding. The sea was still creaming and slapping against the sides of the boat, where all manner of wreckage jostled on the tumbling water, but what took my eye was something that writhed and pitched among the raffle.

It was a huge, hideous, pearl-grey thing, with a sack-like body full three yards long, one end with a fierce, fanged mouth beneath a battery of glittering eyes, while on either side of the trunk stretched strong suckers fitted

with hand-shaped feelers. Calder had put out from the ship and was now alongside.

"You blamed fool," he said; "you nearly hoisted yourself and us to glory. Are you hurt?"

"Not much," I answered. "So that thing was a surprise-package, was it?"

"Aee!" broke out Kaman, "I savvey now. Big sleep-fish. He touch you, you go sleep—die. Kill fish for him dinner same way."

"By Heaven, he's hit it," said Calder; "I saw a nipper of the same class two years back. He could shock you like a penny machine at a fair. We shoved him in a bucket, and he didn't half make you skip if

to stop to put a wreath on the coffin, anyway. Let's clear out of the pool."

We weren't idle aboard, and within ten minutes the *Tongarewa* was drawing across the lagoon to the breaches in the surf. We had to handle her tenderly, for the Pacific jumped at us out of the darkness with a volley of foam. The schooner went down to the catheads, drew up, ducked again, and then sprang like a goat into the open sea.

We made the Society Island in seventeen days and ran into the roadstead flagged. You should have seen how they put in the time for us when they heard what we had aboard. They say it was the biggest corroboree ever known in the islands. Any-



"THE MONSTER SPUN ROUND AND ROUND, BEAT THE WATER, AND THEN WENT DOWN."

you put your hand in the water. I've heard they can knock a fish silly at six yards. But this brute sha'n't trouble anyone again, anyway," and he whipped out his revolver and emptied the six chambers in the creature's head.

The monster spun round and round, beat the water, and then went down, all waving hands and frills, for everything in the world just like a drowning woman. It made you feel sick.

"By Heaven!" said Calder, "I ain't going

way, all the missionaries had to scoot. I wonder now how any of the natives survived, and they didn't boggle about the price either.

Calder did the straight thing by me—I always said he was the right sort—and my share came to a good two thousand dollars. Moreover, the chief, as soon as he could speak, handed over to us the whole of the copra trade and boycotted outside firms. That's some years ago, and I'm thinking of retiring. Yes, it has been a soft job all the time.