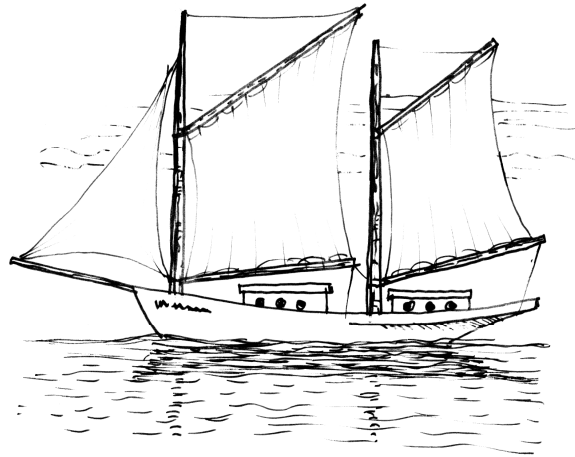


Peter Ambuofa

Part 1



“Dad there’s a ship coming into the bay! It looks like the one that takes men to work in Australia.”

Ambuofa was a young man who lived at the northern tip of the island of Malaita, in the eastern region of the Solomon Islands, during the early 1890’s. He had been sitting on the hillside above the beach at Malu’u gazing out to sea when he noticed the sails on the horizon and watched as the lugger drew closer to the shore. He had rushed up the hill to where his father was working in the food garden to tell him about the approaching lugger.

“True, it is one of those ships,” replied his father, “Now Ambuofa, you are old enough to go and work over there yourself. I want you to go on that ship and work for those sugar cane farmers.”

The lugger pulled in as close to the shore as it could, then a small boat brought the master and an officer ashore.

“Look! Here come the men who went away three years ago!” cried Ambuofa. They watched as a second small boat approached the shore with several young men on board. They carried bundles in their arms and on their backs, clothing and other goods bought with their hard-earned wages.

“Are there any strong young men here who want to work in Australia?” the master called out.

“Yes, I’ll go,” responded Ambuofa as he lined up in front of the master. Several of his friends joined him. “We’ll go and work in Australia, and then we can buy clothes and other things to bring back to our families, like our friends who just returned.”

“Right,” said the master at last, “I have all your names. Get into the small boat and we’ll go. I want to visit another village down the coast before night-fall.”

“Goodbye!” called the men to their families on the shore. “We’ll come back with presents for you.”

“Goodbye,” the family members called back, some tearful, wondering when they would see their young men again.

“Get down below,” bullied the master of the lugger when they had scrambled aboard, “Keep out of the way while we get going. You can come up on deck when we are out to sea. All I want is to get you there in one piece. The stronger you are, the better the price I get for you.”

The young men had never been away from their island before and they watched sadly as the Malu’u bay disappeared from sight. Then at last even the highest mountains that formed a spine down the centre of the island had faded into the distance. It was a rough trip and many of the men were sea-sick.

“I’ll be glad to get on the land again,” said Ambuofa to his friends. “This rough sea is awful.”

“We’ll be arriving at Bundaberg soon,” came the captain’s rough voice one morning. “Get up on deck now, everyone. Hurry up!”

As the lugger drew in to the wharf at the port of Bundaberg, the young men stood on the deck gazing in wonder at the new world that was opening up before them.

“Look at those huge ships,” Ambuofa said to his friends. “What are they doing with all those bags on the wharf? What’s in them?”

“They’re loading bags of sugar on to the big ships to send to countries far away,” replied a man who had been there before.

A tall middle-aged Australian came striding along the wharf. The master of the lugger called him over to his vessel.

“I’ve got some good, strong young men for you this time, Mr. Young. They are from Malaita. Take a look at them. They look like a bunch of hard workers, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” he agreed, “I’ll take all of that group there.”

Having settled for a price the men from Malaita were herded on to a barge and taken up river. As the barge chugged slowly along they were able to have a good look at everything they passed. On either side of them were cane fields, their feathery plumes waving in the gentle breeze.

Occasionally there was a break in the cane fields, and they saw the rolling green hills in the distance.

“Here we are,” said Mr. Young as they finally pulled in to a landing. “This is my cane farm, called Fairymead. You see the buildings over there?” He pointed to some long wooden sheds. “That’s where you will sleep and live. Find yourselves a bunk bed and settle in.”

The men from Malu’u found a space where they could all be together and looked around. There were crude shutters at the windows that could be closed when the heavy rains poured down during the wet season. The wooden bunk beds were the only furnishings in the building. This was to be their home for the next three years.

“That building over there is where our food is prepared and where we eat,” observed the man who had been there before. “The food is different - no yams or taro here. We mostly eat rice or bread with some meat. And there’s plenty of fruit around.”

The new-comers were soon put to work cutting cane.

“You’ll each take a machete and you’ll have to keep it sharpened with this file. Slash into the base of the cane stalk and toss it in a pile behind you. Another team of men will pick it up and load it on to the dray,” they were directed by the foreman.

The men looked towards the end of the cane field where they could see horses hitched to a large dray. “That’s a huge animal isn’t it?” they commented as they set to work on the cane cutting. It was the first time they had seen horses.

It was hard, sticky work bending over all day cutting cane. Their trousers and shirts were soon black and sticky with cane juice, and they were very thirsty.”

“I’m terribly thirsty,” Ambuofa complained to his friends, “it’s time to stop for a drink.”

There was a canvas water bag hanging in the shade of a tree so the men all put down their machetes and enjoyed a drink from the water bag. They had been up since sunrise and were sent out to the cane field straight after breakfast. Now the heat of the sun overhead was beating down on them so they welcomed the short break and the water. At the end of the day they were glad to trudge back to their living quarters for a meal and a well-earned sleep.

Six days a week this was the routine, but Sunday was different. It was a rest day and the Kanakas (the name given to imported labourers), were free to have a break from work. But there was something else that made Sunday different. It revolved around Miss Florence Young, the sister of the plantation owner, Mr. Young.

Some ten years before Ambuofa and his friends came to work at Fairymead, Florence Young came to stay there with her brother. She was to teach the Bible to the children of the white people there, but she became keenly interested in the islander men working in the cane fields.

"I feel so sorry for those men," she thought, "they've never heard about Jesus, God's Son, or about the Creator God. God loves them as much as He loves us, but no-one has told them about Him."

She was sitting on the verandah of their timber home one day, looking out at the men slashing away at the cane in the fields when her brother joined her.

"You look very thoughtful, Florence," he observed, "What's on your mind?"

"I'm thinking about those workmen out there. God loves them as much as He loves you and me, but no-one has told them about Him. There isn't a Christian missionary to help them anywhere in Queensland."

"That's true, Florence, but what can we do about it?" asked her brother.

"I believe God wants me to teach them. I could have a reading and Bible class on Sundays when the men don't have to work. What do you think about that?"

"But these fellows have never had any schooling. They've never learned to read. They've never even seen a book before. Don't you think you'd be wasting your time?"

As others heard about Florence's project they were equally doubtful. "It won't last," they said. "They won't be able to concentrate for very long. Why should you bother?"

However, Florence persisted, believing God was calling her to do it. Their overseer's help was enlisted. He spoke to the workmen one evening explaining to them in Pidgin as best he could, "On Sunday Miss Young wants to talk to you. She will teach you how to read, and she will teach you about God our Creator and Jesus His Son. If you would like to join the class, come along on Sunday."

Ten men came to the first class on the following Sunday. Florence had only one book, a reader which her sister had used in her early days, but she believed that as God had called her to do this He was going to give her wisdom to do it well. First she had to master the Pidgin language herself before she could teach her students anything, but bit by bit she learned enough to pass on each week. For the first lesson she produced a butterfly chrysalis and used it to illustrate the truth of death and resurrection, particularly relating to Jesus.

Week after week she prayed, "Lord, what do you want me to teach them this time?" And each week the Holy Spirit, the Teacher, gave her the wisdom to reach the minds and hearts of these men. The men were each given a large print New Testament from which they learned both to read and to learn about the Christian faith.

Contrary to the expectations of those around her, Florence saw the number of men in the class grow and their interest and understanding steadily increased. In 1885, nearly three years after the Sunday lessons began, one man, Jimmie Aoba, stayed behind after the class. Shyly, he confessed to Florence Young, "Missi, I want to belong to God. I want to know more about Him. We have a lesson on Sunday, then there are six days without lessons. Could you give us lessons every day?"

Florence was delighted to respond to Jimmie's request, so every night, after the evening meal they found a quiet place sometimes on the verandah, or in a shed, or the wash-house, and Jimmie would bring along a few of his friends. Jimmie soaked up the teaching, now that he had turned his back on the evil spirits he used to believe in and trusted in God. He prayed earnestly for his friends, "Please Lord, help my friends to know you too."

Jimmie was in poor health and some months after his conversion he died of tuberculosis. But within nine months of Jimmie's death his prayers were answered and twelve of his friends had believed in Jesus and decided to live a Christian life.

One day, when the Young family was all together, they began discussing the growth of Florence's work.

"God has been very good and has blessed our work at Fairymead." observed Florence.

"But think of all the other sugar cane plantations where there are islander workmen. No-one is teaching them."

"Do you think the teaching could be extended to other plantations?" asked Florence's sister-in-law, who had joined Florence to help her with the Sunday Bible classes.

"We could write to all the plantation owners and ask them if they would be open to receiving a Christian teacher to come and teach their workmen." suggested Florence's brother.

So a letter was written to 'all employers of South Sea Islanders' and Christian friends, informing them of the appointment of a missionary to the Kanakas and asking them to provide facilities to hold a class on each plantation.

The missionary would be supported by the freewill offerings of friends of the Queensland Kanaka Mission. It happened that Mr. George Muller, a Christian from England who had raised thousands of pounds to provide homes for needy children simply by praying to God, was in Sydney at this time. He saw a copy of the letter and said to Florence's sister, "I think the Lord wants me to help with this work," and he gave to Florence the first contribution to the mission.

"Tell your sister to expect great things from God and she will get them." were his words of encouragement.

In 1886 the missionary, Mr. Johnson, was welcomed on the plantations and there were many lives transformed as the islanders responded to the Christian message. Other teachers joined the mission and the work grew.

Ambuofa, now known by his Christian name, Peter, with some friends from Malu'u, had become Christians and for the three years they spent at Fairymead in the early 1890s they learned about living a Christian life. Now the time was fast approaching when they would return to their island home.

"Our lives have changed such a lot since we came to Fairymead," Peter said to his friends one day. "We've started to live the Christian way and we're different from when we first arrived here."

"Yes," replied one of his friends, "we used to get angry and fight with anyone who crossed us. In the village we always had to carry a spear in case we needed to defend ourselves."

"And we always had to have a 'pay back' if anyone did us wrong."

"It's much better now. Someone hurts us and we forgive him. We don't have to fight all the time. Our villages would be much happier if everybody followed the Christian way."

"We don't have to be frightened of evil spirits or the witch doctor either, because God's Holy Spirit is stronger and He protects us."

Then Peter grew thoughtful, "You know, it's going to be hard going back to our people in the village. They'll want us to be like them, and that's not the Christian way to live. I heard that some of the Christian men who went back were killed by their families because they didn't want to return to the old ways in the village."

"We should pray for our people and ask God to help them to know Him."

So the men prayed a lot for their families and friends back on Malaita whom they would soon be meeting again, praying that God would keep them strong when they returned to their villages.

It was during the year 1894 that Peter and two of his friends boarded a lugger to return to their home village, Malu'u. After several days the mountains of their home island could be seen on the horizon.

“Look! There’s Malaita! You can just see the tallest mountains away over there.”

“Oh, it will be good to see our parents and brothers and sisters again!”

“It will be wonderful to have yams and taro to eat.”

But underneath all the excitement there was an underlying concern which Peter expressed,

“I am praying that they will believe the Christian message that we have learned,” he said seriously. “We know God loves us, but they haven’t heard about Him yet.”

These young men had experienced such a change in their lives since they learned to know Jesus, and they wanted their people to know Him, too. With growing excitement they watched as the lugger pulled in to Malu’u harbour. Finally the small boat was lowered and the three young men came ashore, back on to their home land at last. It was not the custom for them to go straight into a village, even their own, without being invited by the people of the village. There were four young lads looking for crabs on the beach. Peter called them over and asked them, “Would you go up the mountain to our village and tell our families we have returned.”

The three young men sat on the sand under a tree to wait, watching the mountain path for the first sign of their family members. Then at last Peter recognised his parents coming down the path, his father carrying his spears and his mother laden with two large bundles.