3. The Plantation

The operation of the plantation gravitated around Dad. In the 1940s, the Waimeqere Plantation was just over 3,000 acres in size: 1,500 acres were planted with coconuts, there were 300 acres of grass paddocks, and 1,200 acres at the back, bordering on the Couborough Estate of Salia Levu, were under secondary growth, mainly guava. 1,000 head of cattle grazed under the coconut trees and were fattened for the market in the grass paddocks. About 100 families lived on the plantation and were completely dependent on Dad for their income, housing, water, fuel, medicine, meat, and land on which to grow their basic crops.

Dad was the owner, manager, and accountant. He had to order all the necessities to run the plantation, understand mechanics, plumbing, carpentry, and animal husbandry. He had to attend to medical needs, solve family problems, and lend the labour money when they were in need.

It was an extremely demanding task that we took for granted because things seemed to work and day to day life went on in an orderly fashion.

Although I was always in close contact with the labour, I never had any familiarity with them and saw little of their wives and children, except those who were allowed to mix with us. The children were taught to be in fear of Dad in particular, and even me, though I was a small boy. If a labourer’s child was misbehaving, the mother was likely to say, ‘Look out, here comes the Turaga.’ Dad was always known as the Turaga Levu or the Bhara Sahib by the Indians, while Mother was the Marama or Mem Sahib. Jeanine was Chota Mem Sahib or Marama Lailai, and I was Chota Sahib or Turaga Lailai. Our common names were never used, at least not in our presence. Even when I was a mere six or seven, I was treated with respect. It was understood that one day I would be the Bhara Sahib or the Turaga Levu and would rule over them and their children.

Most of the labour were the second or third generation born on the plantation. Some had seen Dad grow up and had taught him how to ride horses or do other practical things around the plantation. I don’t think any of the labour had any wish to leave, even if there was somewhere else to go. They knew that they could depend on Dad to take care of them in a crisis. He was firm and dictatorial, but he treated them fairly. In those early days, I can’t ever recall anyone being fired. If they were ever late for work or failed to carry out orders, they would be severely reprimanded or sent home and told there would be no work for them that day and no pay. They never asked for an increase in wages or other benefits. When Dad could afford to pay more—when the price of copra went up or when we had a few years of high production—he increased wages. During
the depression years when we were paid virtually nothing but trade goods for copra, Dad kept all the labour in work while other planters laid off workers. Our plantation was their home and they understood we would go through the good times and bad times together.

Of course they never got rich and had few material possessions. There was no school and little entertainment. But Dad did what he could. In the late 1940s he bought the old Couborough house at Ura and used all the timber to construct neat little cottages, a movie theatre, a shop, and a café. These were the first self-contained cottages on any plantation. On the other plantations, labour lived ‘in lines’, which were barrack type quarters where they had one small room and a detached, and sometimes shared, kitchen. They washed their clothes at a communal tap and used a common pit latrine. We still had some ‘lines’ but Dad upgraded them to make the rooms much larger. He built individual kitchens and bathrooms, and clean, hygienic toilets. The toilet block was quite unique. Dad had blasted down through 20 feet of solid rock to one of the many subterranean streams that flowed out to sea, and built the toilets above this stream. The labour quarters were all within a compound, which was kept nicely mowed and planted with colourful shrubs.

When the theatre was finished, he arranged for films to be sent up from Suva and shown every Wednesday and Saturday night. The labour were allowed in free of charge, while outsiders had to pay three shillings. He also brought in a Chinese shopkeeper and installed him in the shop so the labour could buy their basic needs and enjoy Chinese food, ice cream and bread.

Each family was allowed an area of land on which to plant food crops such as dalo, cassava, yam, bele and fruit. They could use up to 20 coconuts per week and had free access to other fruit trees such as breadfruit, jack fruit, and pawpaws, which were scattered all over the plantation.

Once a week the stockman killed two head of cattle. These were slaughtered under Dad’s guidance and after the choice cuts, such as the fillet, sirloin, brains, tongue, kidney and rib roast, were sent to his house, the rest was divided among the labour, free of cost. If any family had a marriage or a death or some other special occasion, they only had to request a free steer or goat. Dad seldom refused.

When anyone became sick, Dad would diagnose the problem after consulting a large medical manual and he ministered whatever medicines he had on hand. If the problem was beyond his ability to cope with, he would arrange for the person to be taken to the hospital at Waievo at his own expense. Sick people miraculously became better when he suggested this course of action. In those days, the hospital was called the Vale ni Mate, the House of Death. It was
generally considered that the hospital was where you went to die. Boils, stomach complaints, and headaches were the most common problems, but accidents did occur on the plantation.

If a man was suspected of feigning illness he was given a large dose of Epsom salts. This threw his stomach into such turmoil that few attempted this ruse to escape work.

The labour worked five days a week, except for the vata boys—who tended the copra that was being sun-dried—who rotated on a seven-day basis. Most work was finished by three pm. They could then tend their food gardens, go fishing, or sleep. It was a casual, relaxed type of life and I never detected any unhappiness. Indeed, they were quite well off because Dad charged nothing for the benefits he provided. It was a type of paternal feudalism that is now despised. But in those times Dad was looked upon as a progressive employer. In fact he was accused by other planters of giving his labour too much. Certainly they were under his complete domination and had no alternative but to accept whatever he gave them, but they were free to leave at any time. They were not bound to him in any way. Some Fijians did opt to return to their villages, and when they did, Dad helped by paying their fares home.

It could never be said that we got rich at their expense. Certainly we maintained a lifestyle that must have seemed quite grand to them. We lived in the valekau (wooden house) as the main homestead on a plantation was called. We had people to wait on us. We had comfortable beds and nice clothes. But for most of his life, Dad was indebted to the bank. He had considerable assets, but that was all. Like the labour, we lived off the land, and our beef, milk, butter, cream, eggs, poultry, and self-grown crops cost little. Mother cultivated a vegetable garden where she grew lettuce, tomatoes, cabbage, carrots, beans, cauliflower and other things. We also had turkey, which the labour were not allowed to touch. We went fishing and ate prawns and crayfish. There were pigeons in abundance in the bush. To the British colonial civil servants we appeared super rich, but we were not.

I don’t recall having any sense of superiority over the labour that lived on the plantation, although I did look upon them as our labour. I sensed that they somehow belonged to us and I knew that one day I would be responsible for them. They were part of our way of life and we were at the top of the pecking order. There was never any abuse or cruelty, although unquestioned obedience was expected and given. Dad was their absolute ruler. No one, not even the headman, ever questioned his judgement or any of his orders. Indeed, he never invited comment or opinions.
While producing copra was a routine, mundane activity, cattle work was exciting. We had a mixed herd of crossbred Hereford, but Dad took great pride in the Friesian herd that he began developing in the 1940s. He imported bulls from overseas and maintained that Friesians were the best all-purpose beasts, for they gave good milk and beef, and could be trained as strong, docile working bullocks for the carts.

Although we ran about 1,000 head on the plantation, there were thousands of others running wild in the back lands. During the war years, Dad undertook to supply cattle to the United States forces stationed in Suva, and to meet this demand he devised a way of trapping the cattle in the wild.

He had gates made in the fences surrounding the grass paddocks and occasionally left them open so that the wild cattle would wander in and get a taste of the succulent grass within. After a day or so, they would be driven out again. When he made a commitment to ship cattle on the Yanawai and knew the exact day that the ship would arrive he put his plans into action.

On the day before the boat arrived, the gates would be opened so that the wild cattle could come in. A number of tame milking cows would be taken up to the grass paddocks and released among the wild cattle. Then, in the dark of night, the stockman would silently go around and close the gates. At dawn they would storm out of their hiding places and drive the unsuspecting wild cattle towards the cattle race. The milking cows would be the first to head for home and the others, seeing no alternative, followed. The 15 or 20 stockmen would crack their whips and yell and whistle, and in no time the whole herd was into the race. The stockmen kept after the cattle down the three-mile race and before they knew what was happening, they would find themselves penned in a secure yard on the beach beside the wharf. This was when the tricky work started for the stockmen.

The headman had to enter the congested yard with the untamed cattle angrily milling around and somehow loop a head rope over the horns of one of them. This head rope had a slipknot and once it was over the horns it was pulled tight. He then had to quickly tie it to the end of a long rope that ran from the beach to a whaleboat that was moored 30 yards out. Once the ropes were joined he would yell ‘pull,’ and four or five men on the boat would drag the beast off the beach into the water and out to the boat, where it was lashed to the side by the shortened head rope. Once ten head were secured to the whaleboat, a small tugboat towed it out to the Yanawai. Canvas belly slings were lowered by the ship’s winch and passed under the animal’s stomach, and it was lifted aboard and lashed on deck.
Needless to say, the cattle objected vehemently to all this handling and the stockmen were often in mortal danger and were sometimes gored. The furious cattle would often break out of the pen or slip the ropes as they were being towed out to the boat, and escape. All the labour and their wives and children came to watch this spectacle and they yelled and screamed with delight at the excitement.

When the tame domestic cattle were shipped, it wasn’t nearly as much fun. But even then incidents did occur. These cattle were shipped to the butchers in Suva or sometimes to the leper island of Makogai.

Round up time was also a lot of fun, for Jeanine and I were allowed to take part. We had our own ponies, which we learnt to ride at an early age. Round up usually happened twice a year. It entailed herding all the cattle into the stockyards to be sorted, branded, and castrated. The stockmen would go out at dawn and drive the cattle from the various paddocks into the cattle race, which ran from the grass paddocks to the stockyards. As each paddock was cleared, they would move to the next, until they got to the grass paddocks where Dad, Jeanine, and I, and various others would join them at daylight. All the cattle in the grass paddocks were then driven into the race. This was never easy, as they tended to hide in the shade of a huge, twisted grove of vau or wild hibiscus that dotted the paddocks. But they finally responded to the cracking of the stock whips and the yelling and whistling of the stockmen. Once they entered the race the excitement began, for they had to be kept moving lest they turn around and break out of the race. It was a thrilling, never-to-be-forgotten experience, to be part of this movement of 600 to 1,000 head of cattle charging down the race, bellowing and raising clouds of dust with the riders in hot pursuit cracking their whips.

By nine am, the cattle would be confined in the holding yards around the stockyards. They were then driven into a narrow race just wide enough for one animal. This race had sturdy posts and was lined with stout timbers. Dad stood on the platform above and called out how each beast was to be classified as it passed beneath him. Further along the race, stockmen controlled gates which allowed the cattle to exit into selected yards.

This sorting went on all day and late into the afternoon. The cows, calves and breeding herd would then be taken to their respective paddocks, and the fats to the grass paddocks. The branding and castrating would be left until the following day. This task started early in the day, before the heat set in. The young bulls were driven into the race one at a time and jammed into a tight space so they couldn’t move. Dad always did the castrating himself, while one of the stockmen did the branding. The stockmen loved all the excitement and had a great deal of fun throwing the bloody testicles at each other.
Some of the old cows that were not sent back to the bush land were used as shark bait. The sea off our house was infested with sharks, and it was unsafe to swim off the shore. Dad constructed a low concrete wall across the mouth of the small, rocky inlet, which served as our swimming pool. We would often lie in this at high tide with underwater goggles on and peer out into the depths. Quite often we saw sharks gliding by. They were bold and aggressive. Quite often when we were walking along the beach or standing on the rocky headlines of our garden, we would see their sinister black fins cutting the surface. We feared and hated them and revelled in the thought of catching them. The technique Dad used was to take an old cow down to the small rocky beach near the house. It was driven into the water and shot with a .303. The throat and stomach were cut open to release the blood and guts. These would be allowed to drift out to sea. A rope would then be tied to the legs of the carcass as it drifted off the rocky headland beside the pool. The rope was then fastened to a tree in the garden.

This would be done in the evening, just before dark when sharks were more inclined to swim in closer to shore. We would sit on the cliff above the rocks and watch the guts and the trail of blood drift away. It wouldn't be long before there would be a splash and in an instance the guts would disappear beneath the surface. ‘Shark, shark,’ someone would yell.

But we would have to wait until dark before the big ones came close to the rocks to feast on the dead cow. Their appearance would be signaled by a huge wake of phosphorescence and the rope going as taut as a guitar string as the shark tried to drag the carcass away. We would maintain a hushed silence, for the first predators were usually a little timid. But once they got a taste of what was available, they would come in for the kill and others would follow and begin tearing at the carcass and nothing would scare them away.

We would flash our torches over the huge bodies as they lunged out of the water and rolled across the top of the carcass. Dad would stand on the rocks with his .303 and try to get a shot at a grey nose as it came out of the water. The gun would roar and a huge body would explode in the sea. More often than not, those that were injured would be preyed upon by other sharks. It was an awesome sight to see five or six sharks, 12 to 15 feet in length, gorging themselves just ten feet away from you.

Mother clung to us, terrified that one of us would slip into the water and be devoured. But there was no fear of falling in as far as I was concerned. My feet were firmly rooted to the ground.

It was also a lot of fun to put out a shark line. An enormous steel hook baited with a chunk of meat was attached to a length of chain and a long rope was tossed off the rocks. The rope was then tied to a tree. We would sit in the dark,
silently watching the stars, waiting for the bait to be taken. The first sign would be a slight movement of the rope. It would gradually tighten and as the hook bit into the shark it would get frantic and desperately try to escape. There was no hope of pulling the shark to shore and we left it to drown itself. Only when the struggle ceased would the huge beast be pulled onto the beach. In this way bronze whalers, grey nurse, and tiger sharks up to 18 feet in length were caught. We would always open up their stomachs and find a strange assortment of undigested bits and pieces. The jaws were buried until the flesh rotted and the teeth could be extracted for ornaments. The rest of the body was discarded.

Sometimes we would go the beach at Korovou for a picnic. The government road ended at Uncle Rood’s plantations and a rough plantation road meandered through his land to the Fijian village of Vuna at the extreme southern end of the island. We had to leave the car or the lorry at the village and walk a short distance to the beach, which was at the base of the beautiful Vuna Lagoon. The sand was pristine white and the sea that washed upon it was clear and free of sharks. Shady trees protected us from the sun and we laid out our mats and had our picnic. The sand was ideal for building castles and we had some lovely picnics there, until the Chinese storekeeper was murdered.

Throughout the small islands and villages in those days, trade was conducted by the Chinese. At Vuna, there was a branch of the Kwong Tiy chain and the manager was a Chinaman (that’s what we called them) who spoke appalling English and only slightly better Fijian. He usually found it more effective to communicate in Fijian. Kwong Tiy bought all the copra that the Fijian villagers produced and sold them tinned goods, biscuits, tea, sugar, clothing and other incidentals in exchange. Little money changed hands, as most transactions were contra-ed against the other.

Whenever we went to the beach we called at the store to buy lemonade. The conversation would often go like this:

Q. Do you have any lemonade?
A. No.
Q. Oh, you don’t have any?
A. Yes.
Q. So you do have some?
A. No.
Q. (angrily) Do you have it or not?
A. Yes. I not have it.
One day Dad got word that the store had been broken into, the safe busted, and that the Chinaman was missing. He informed the police and when they arrived from Waiyevo, he went with them to the place of the alleged crime. We were agog at the news of any crime, let alone murder, for it was unheard of on the island. With the knowledge he had acquired by the extensive reading of mystery novels, Dad concluded that it was a case of murder and the whole area was searched for the corpse. It wasn’t long before the police noticed an unusually large number of crabs on a particular area of the beach, where we usually had our picnics. They became suspicious and began to dig. Sure enough, the unfortunate Chinaman’s body was curled up in a shallow grave. The next day, two Fijian villagers who had begun to spend money rather foolishly were arrested, questioned, charged, and taken to Suva. They were found guilty and hanged. It was a story that Dad retold and embellished many times over the years. After that we never really enjoyed going to the Vuna beach. We did, however, often go to the lookout at the southern end of the village, a spot on a high cliff overlooking the outside edge of the Vuna Reef. Huge seas rolled in and crashed onto the reef, sending spray cascading high into the air. It was an exhilarating place where we always took visitors.

Dad looked upon the Vuna villagers somewhat differently to his own labour. His labour were his servants, whereas the villagers were independent. That is not to say that he respected them. In fact, he was critical of how they used their extensive and fertile land. They could have made a lot of money out of it, he claimed, but instead they let it go to bush and wasted their days sleeping in the village. There were, however, certain village chiefs with whom he had a good relationship. Maina, his chief stockman, was a high chief from Vuna. Then there was fat Karalo, who was nicknamed Elefante by his people, as he was as big as an elephant. There was also Lui Lala, who seemed to be a cut above other Fijians. He and his family were hard working boat builders who owned a small store. Then there was Baba, (which always struck me as an unusual name for a Fijian), whose clan often did weeding contracts for Dad. Our carpenter, Waisiki, also came from Vuna.

I think one reason Dad tried to maintain good relations with the Vuna people was that his grandfather had bought a great deal of land from them, and there was always a slight feeling of guilt at having acquired it for a few shillings an acre. There was always some fear in the back of his mind that they may try to claim it back. In fact, they made a claim to the Royal Commission conducted by Sir Alan Burns in 1959.

Uncle Rood, on the other hand, despised them so much that he wouldn’t have them on his land. Not that any of them ever wanted to work for Uncle Rood.
Dad did engage Baba and others from time to time to do weeding contracts. He would negotiate with Baba, saying that a certain paddock needed to have all the lantana and guava pulled out, and the two of them would ride around the paddock, inspecting the amount of work that needed to be done and agreeing a price of say £100. Baba would then bring up a gang of 40 or 50 men who would complete the job over five or six days. Dad would ride around the paddock each day to ensure they were doing the job properly. The gang would build a temporary shelter on site and sleep there. Quite often Dad would provide rations and also kill a steer for them to eat. The money earned by the gang would be used for a communal project in the village.

Dad also brought in gangs of men from other islands such as Koro, Vanua Levu, or Lau, but this cost a lot more, as he had to charter a ship to transport the men to and fro. There were always gangs of men searching for work, but Uncle Rood usually had trouble getting any to work for him. Dad told the story of how Uncle Rood had grievously offended the redoubtable Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, who was a high chief from Lau. Whenever the Yanawai came in, Uncle Rood would sit on his verandah, which faced down the extensive sweeping lawn to the front gate, which opened onto the beach where the passengers disembarked. In those days it was forbidden for any Fijian or Indian to set foot inside the house compound and no one dared to do so.

On one occasion, Uncle Rood watched as passengers disembarked from the Yanawai launch and to his amazement he saw a Fijian come up to the front gate, open it and start walking up the lawn to the house. He screamed out in anger, ‘Get out of my garden you black bastard.’ Of course he didn’t know until much later that it was Ratu Sukuna, who took such umbrage at the insult that he gave instructions to his people in Lau that no Fijian should work for Uncle Rood. His orders were obeyed for many years.

The BBC brought us the devastating news of the bombing of Pearl Harbour and I began to learn about a horrible little bug-eyed man called Tojo. He meant no more to me than Hitler, and Hawaii seemed just as far away as London. But when the Japanese took the Philippines and Singapore and began fighting in the Solomons and New Guinea, I began to understand that they were closer to home.

The first manifestation of this was the arrival of American troops. A large garrison was stationed in Suva and Nadi, warplanes began flying overhead, and ships of war passed by our shores. Dad and Mother became worried about what would happen. But the troops seemed to be benefiting us. Many Officers came up on the Yanawai for R&R. They often came ashore and were entertained by my parents, and on their return to Suva sent us all kinds of luxuries that were
available in their canteen but unavailable to us: tinned ham, chocolates, nuts, liquor, and cartons upon cartons of Lucky Strike, Camels, and Phillip Morris cigarettes.

It was about this time that Jeanine and I started smoking. We had previously tried dried banana leaves, but these were not too good as they often burst into flames and scorched our eyebrows. When the US cigarettes arrived, it was easy to steal them without Mother knowing. Our favourite retreat was Jeanine’s dollhouse. Dad had made her a perfect ten square foot miniature house with all kinds of doll’s furniture. We would sit in there for ages without being disturbed, smoking to our heart’s content. If some of our friends happened to join us, there was the danger of smoke billowing out, and we were caught, as we sometimes were, it was the scrubbing brush and bathroom treatment.

When the Japanese captured the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, my parents said that Fiji was next and that we would have to prepare. Dad dug a huge hole in the poultry yard and covered it with coconut logs and two feet of earth. There was one doorway leading down into this rather unpleasant burrow. It was cold, wet, and smelly, and I hoped that we would never have to hide there. Its purpose was to protect us in case of air raids. The main retreat was a hideaway up in the mountains, which would take longer to reach. It was stocked with tinned food and other basic necessities. We would only go there if the Japanese landed.

One night we were terrified to hear a battle raging on distant Koro Island. We could hear the booming of big guns and exploding bombs and could see all the fireworks in the sky, despite the fact that Koro was 40 miles away. We were certain the Japanese had arrived and the next day were relieved to get a press call that it had been the American Forces exercising in preparation for a major assault. This turned out to be the Solomons where some of the bloodiest battles of the Second World War took place.

Nonetheless, it was a long time before we felt safe. Dad maintained watchmen day and night along the coast. Their task was to sit on strategic rocky points and watch for ships or submarines. Any that were seen were immediately reported to the District Officer.

I had all kinds of images of the war. The magazines we received often contained pictorial descriptions of the brave deeds of soldiers, sailors, and airmen, who were duly decorated with Victoria Crosses, Distinguished Service Orders, Distinguished Flying Crosses, Military Crosses, and Military Medals. I developed a low opinion of Italians, as it seemed quite an easy task for a single Australian or American to single-handedly capture hundreds of them in a desert wadi. General Montgomery was my favourite hero, as he seemed invincible in desert battles as he rode his tank. The stirring words of Mr
Churchill, which I couldn’t understand, always excited me, as they seemed to ring with heroism. The British airmen dressed in blue who fought in the skies over London seemed like supermen. The Germans always appeared like iron robots with absolutely no feelings. I couldn’t understand how a feeble little man like Hitler could command these larger-than-life barbarians. The Japanese were clearly evil murderous swine who delighted in torture, and were led by mysterious, villainous generals and admirals. Their Kamikaze pilots baffled me, and their endless numbers scared me. The Americans all seemed to take the war so lightly that I wondered how they could possibly win. They seemed to be in it for the fun.

Dad was always working and worrying about things. Ours wasn’t a very happy home, for Dad seemed constantly preoccupied with his problems. While attentive to our needs in so many ways, Mother never appeared happy. Of course, at the age of six or eight, I had no knowledge that their marriage was shaky. Only many years later was I told that they had only stayed together for the sake of Jeanine and me. They often argued so vehemently at the dining table that I’d burst into tears and Jeanine would leave the table in a rage.

Dad had strong likes and dislikes about food and suffered from chronic indigestion. He had regular doses of Hardy’s Indigestion Powder and whenever Mother gave him food that upset him there was a row.

The best times were when we went horse-riding together. He and Mother were at peace as we trotted along the grassy plantation roads. We inspected weeding contracts, fencing repairs, the condition of the cattle, the fall of coconuts, or the work being done on the roads. The best ride was when we went up to the hills at the back of the grass paddocks. In places it was so steep that we had to dismount and lead our horses. From the top of the hill, some 2,000 feet up, there was a spectacular view across the plantation to the west and east across Salia Levu to the sea and the distant islands of Lau. To the north we looked up at Taveuni’s highest mountain, the 4,040-foot Ului Qalau. To the south was the stormy South Cape. We would often sit for hours to let our horses recover as we talked about life on the plantation and Taveuni, and sometimes Dad would relate the experiences of our ancestors.