5. Island Life

This was the operation that I came back to in 1953 at the age of 19. I moved into the spare room in the old house and it seemed as spooky as ever. I was never happy there. I bolted the doors at night but there was that damn manhole in the ceiling above my bed where there were strange sounds.

My day began at six am when Angana served me breakfast. It was always pawpaw, poached or scrambled eggs, toast and tea. I then walked up to the goat yard, opened the gates and let the goats out. I inspected them for any signs of disease or injury and sometimes did a head count. I then went on to the vatas and was there by seven o’clock to see that all the men had started on time, and discussed with Ram Roo which copra was dry enough to be taken to the copra shed that day. I stayed with the boys for a while and always maintained a friendly relationship with them. I was Turaga Lailai or Chota Sahib and was always given absolute respect and obedience, and seldom found it necessary to exert my authority. I then went on to Ura and checked on the start of the operations there. Once or twice a week I would have a horse saddled and waiting for me at Ura and I would go into the Ura fields to check on the work. On other days I would do the same at Waimaqera. Most days I would be out on horse back until 11 am despite the weather. Taveuni was an extremely wet place and I never managed to keep dry until I obtained one of the famous Australian Driza-Bone coats which were the best ever made.

At Waimaqera, I had a big grey gelding which had a good turn of speed, but one had to be careful about galloping around a copra plantation. It was safe enough on the grassy plantation roads but when you got off the roads, in amongst the trees, the rider had to have total control over the horse to ensure there were no mixed signals as to which side of a tree you wanted to go. I would check on the work of the copra cutters, the bullock boys and Bete’s gang. Sometimes, if the dryer boys were going out to the bush to cut firewood, I would join them and help select the tree to fell and I would take my turn on the 12-foot crosscut saw. It was tough, backbreaking work and I couldn’t keep up with the powerful Fijians but I did win their respect by sweating with them, and they always did a good days work when I was with them. Otherwise they tended to ease up and take much longer than necessary to cut their task of one lorry load.

Lunch was at 11 am, and I had this with Dad. It was usually curry or cold meat leftovers from the previous evening, fish or salad. I read for a while and then went into the office to spend a couple of hours doing all the necessary bookwork. Afternoon tea was at two p.m, which I also had with Dad. I then
went to Ura or Waimaqera to check on the copra corning in and the completion of work at about four pm I was then free to go fishing in my 14-foot boat with its 10 horsepower Johnson or go spear fishing with one of the labourers.

When the evening meeting was over, Dad would order Angana to bring the drinks. A bottle of whisky, soda siphon, glasses and ice were brought on a silver tray. We poured our own whisky while Angana put in the soda and ice. We usually had two drinks before dinner except if we had visitors.

Angana had taught Dad how to ride a horse when he was a lad. He came to work in the house in 1950 when he was 60. He was effusively humble, polite and eager to please, but Dad gave him a terrible time. He would sit in his chair on the porch where there was a button on the wall, which rang a bell in the kitchen. Whenever he wanted something, be it a glass of water or an Aspro, he would press the button and if Angana did not respond immediately Dad would yell at the top of his voice. Angana would come running and gasp, ‘Ha Sahib.’ If he was a moment later than Dad expected, Dad would yell at him, ‘Where the hell have you been?’ He abused him continually no matter what he did and I never heard Dad compliment him once. Stranger still, I never heard Angana complain. He seemed to accept that this was the way of things.

When Dad was ready for dinner, he would call out to Angana—who would be dressed in his white jacket, green cummerbund and topi—to serve dinner. There was always a four-course dinner with soup, a savoury, a roast and dessert. Between courses, Angana would stand in the corner of the room and watch us eat. As soon as our plate was empty, he would bring the tray of vegetables and offer a second helping. If it was a warm night, he would stand on the verandah and pull the punkah. When we had finished he would take the plates away and bring in the next course. If he began taking the plates away before everybody had finished, he was scolded terribly by Dad.

After dinner I read for a while and was in bed by nine pm.

While this was my general routine, there were variations to it. For example, if a ship was corning in to load copra, the whole programme changed. The dry copra was stored in the huge copra shed. The night before the ship was due, contracts were let to groups of men to bag the copra. This entailed hanging hessian bags on wooden ‘horses’, shovelling the copra into the bags, ramming it with wooden poles and stitching the bag. Each weighed 140–150 pounds. Gangs were paid five pounds per 100 bags. Depending on the interval between ships arriving, there could be 500–1,000 bags to load.

When the ship arrived, the whole labour force was used to load the copra. The men carried the 150-pound bags on their shoulders to lorries in front of the copra shed where they were transported to the wharf. Whaleboats from the ship
came to the wharf and the bags were tossed onto slings in the whale boats. Little launches then hauled the whaleboats out to the ship where the slings of copra were winched aboard. Each whaleboat carried 50 bags. During this operation, Dad drove the men at a frantic pace, and he took great pride in boasting that he could load a ship faster than anyone else on the island. Each sack had to be counted by Ramrau and the ship’s super-cargo and when they agreed on the number I completed a bill of lading with a letter to the copra millers in Suva. When it arrived in Suva, the copra was graded into first, second, or reject grade. We were paid according to the price set by the Copra Board for each grade. If Dad didn’t get first grade he would appeal and he usually succeeded.

Another variation to my routine was to go by horseback to inspect the water supply sourced at Ura or Waimaqera. I particularly enjoyed the ride up into the hills 2,000 feet above Ura. The water source had to be cleaned and if cattle had broken through the surrounding fence, I had to summon Bete to repair it.

It was a peaceful and beautiful place up on the shoulder of the mountain looking down across the whole expanse of the south end of Taveuni and out across the straits to Vanua Levu. I did most of my thinking up here in this lovely place. Since returning to Taveuni in 1953, I had begun to think a lot about my life.

Sometimes I would take my .22 rifle with me and, when I had completed the inspection, I would go off into the bush and hunt for wood pigeons. It was an easy walk through the bush as there was little secondary growth. The birds rested on branches of trees where they fed on berries and they were quite easy targets. I always felt a certain mystery about walking around these mountain slopes. I had a powerful feeling that there was something there for me, but it wasn’t until years later that I discovered its significance.

Despite my easy lifestyle, I desperately missed the friends I had left in Melbourne. I was a naturally gregarious person and my social life on Taveuni was restricted. I sometimes regretted my decision to return, but in sober moments I understood that my destiny was to take over the Tarte land and carry on tradition.

My only friend and ally at that time was my cousin Adrian. He was about eight years older than me and had been toughened by working with Uncle Rood. After leaving school in New Zealand he joined the Civil Service and for a while was aide-de-camp to the Governor. He worked for Uncle Rood for a few years, until they had a real bust up and Adrian demanded his share of Vatuwiri so he could go out on his own. He was a hard worker with some good ideas on plantation management.

Adrian wasn’t able to put his plans into effect until he had his own land because Uncle Rood would certainly not change from his own way of doing things. He brought in tractors and trailers. He started controlling weeds with weedicides,
he repastured his land so he could run a higher number of cattle per acre, and when he had sufficient cattle he opened a butchery. We discussed these innovations at length over many whiskies and I tried to get Dad to see the wisdom of adopting them. Eventually he did make some concessions.

In the evenings I would often go to Adrian’s place for a drink and we invariably polished off a bottle of Scotch. If there was anyone else there, such as a commercial traveller or a government official, we would play the game of Cardinal Huff. This was a certain formula to get drunk quickly. I was obliged to get home in time for dinner with Dad and if I was late and he had waited for me, I was given the cold shoulder. If I was a little drunk, Angana would watch in glee as I struggled with my food. But God help him if Dad saw him smiling.

Saturday was payday. Ram Rao came down to the office at seven am with his day book and read out the details while I entered them all in the main ledger and made the calculations of pay due and pay deductions. There were always many of these. Fijians had to pay a Provincial Tax for being away from their villages and Dad paid this on their behalf and deducted it from their wages. But mostly he agreed to advance on wages for many of the obligations they seemed to have and these too were deducted from their wages.

After totalling up the wages for the week, I gave Ram Rao the cash, which I had obtained from the Morris Hedstrom or Burns Philp stores up at Waiyevo, or I gave him a cheque to cash at Charlie Chung’s store. The labour would spend their wages at Charlie’s store during the week and at the end of the week he gave the cash to me in exchange for a cheque, which he then sent to his bank in Suva. It was basically the same cash going round and round.

Ram Rao took the cash back to his house and at noon the labour came to see him to collect their wages.

After Ram Rao left, I had a stream of men calling to see me to obtain loans or ask for assistance in their personal problems. Dad had readily passed all these kinds of matters over to me to deal with. In considering their requests, I had to remain sensitive to the fact that if I said no, they had nowhere else to turn. But if I was too lenient, I would be swamped by others. There remained the expectation that Dad would take care of them until they died and, when he passed on, I would do the same.

My Saturday afternoons and Sundays were free.

Invariably, Adrian and I would go diving or fishing in his 18-foot boat on Saturday afternoon. Saturday night was always dinner at Dad’s with Adrian, Spencer and Talei, and maybe the Douglasses from up the coast or any commercial people or
government officials who happened to be visiting. They arrived at five pm and we drank until dinner was served at six-thirty pm. We always had a roast dinner, either turkey or beef. Then we went to the movies.

On Sunday I went to Waiyevo to the tennis club. I enjoyed tennis and threw myself into the game and the club’s administration, and was soon made Secretary. One of my first tasks was to try and change the Constitution to allow Fijians and Indians to join. There was an outcry, and if I hadn’t been a Tarte, I think I would have been thrown out. But after some gentle persuasion they agreed to allow ten Fijians to come in as a trial, but definitely no Indians.

I had become friendly with the expatriate doctors, the District Officers, the Morris Hedstrom and Burns Philp Managers, and some of the other plantation managers, and often went to their homes for Sunday dinner. I eventually persuaded the members to put in a small bar and sell drinks. It proved to be a disastrous idea, for many of the half-castes drank heavily and when they got drunk they became abusive. I remember one part-European, (that’s what we started to call them), Frank Peterson from Naselesele, who would sell his weekly production of copra to the Morris Hedstrom store on a Friday and take half of his payment in cash and the rest in rum or beer. He would drink until it was gone and remain on the dry until the following Friday, when he sold another supply of copra. He was a really hard case, and very unpleasant when drunk.

The social arrangements on Taveuni had changed since my pre-school days in the early 1940s.

The state of Indians had not changed much, but some had purchased copra plantations or ran reasonably good stores and taxis and spoke good English. They had been to the schools that had sprung up in the last decade or so. Fijians were still regarded as ‘lazy buggers’ and the fact that most of the Fijian-owned land was overgrown with weeds was, we believed, evidence of this. But in the mid-1950s a Fijian took over as District Officer and another as Medical Officer. This forced the locals to re-appraise their attitudes and give these men the respect that was due to the office, if not to their person.

Many of the old planter families had died or sold out. There remained only the Tartes, Douglasses, the Halsteads, and the McKenzies. Managers had moved onto many of the other plantations or foreigners had bought them. These new people had no racial prejudices. The part-Europeans who were descendants of old families began to assume a higher profile and so a social levelling process was in place. But the Europeans remained at the top of the pecking order and even when people like Dad or Adrian took on a Fijian lady, she was given no status or recognition. There were plenty of snide remarks about such black-white relationships. The Douglas family used to boast of being descendants
of the Black Douglasses of Scotland, but Eddie Douglas had sired so many illegitimate children from Fijian ladies that the term Black Douglas took on a different meaning and they were the butt of many jokes.

The 1950s were the last of the best years for the copra industry. Most of the plantations had been planted during the second half of the 19th century, and the trees were well past their best years of production. There was an urgent need to replant but few had the necessary confidence in the future of copra and coconut oil to invest in the long and costly task of cutting down the old trees and replanting. The Fiji Tall species, which most plantations had, did not bear until six or seven years and didn’t reach maturity until 15. There was another variety, known as the Malay Dwarf, and Dad did plant up some 50 acres of these in an area where most of the old trees had fallen down. But although this variety would produce one ton of copra to the acre, it did not stand up well to hurricanes. When our Fiji Tall trees had been at their peak we were getting a half ton of copra to the acre, but in the 1950s this was down to less than a quarter ton per acre.

Our plantation was still one of the best in Fiji. The trees were planted in dead straight rows.

Underneath was rich pasture where healthy cattle grazed. Well-formed roads criss-crossed the paddocks, and the labour compound was an attractive little settlement.

All copra was sold to Island Industries Ltd, a subsidiary of Carpenters. They produced the coconut oil which was sold to the United Kingdom under a British Ministry of Food contract that was due to expire in 1959. Under this, Fiji received a guaranteed price, which was highly remunerative, but all knew that when the contract expired it would not be renewed and we would be exposed to the volatile world market.

There was increased pressure from the millers and the Copra Board to produce better quality copra and this necessitated higher drying standards, which cost money.

Then there were the social pressures to provide better housing, work conditions and pay for the labour, as well as the ever-present threat of hurricanes, which hit from time to time with disastrous consequences.

Despite all this, the copra planter lived well in the 1950s and early 1960s. This was partly due to the fact that the planters owned most of the rich flat land on Taveuni and could produce most of their needs from the land. Beef, goats, poultry, turkeys, milk, butter, cream, fresh water, fish, prawns, crayfish and all kinds of vegetables were virtually free. They had servants to do all their
chores and cheap labour to work the plantations. Communication with the outside world improved considerably during the 1950s when the new airline, Fiji Airways, began flying on a regular basis to Matei airstrip at the northern end of Taveuni. They used the three engine De Havilland Rapides that seated about seven people and flew to Taveuni twice a week. This enabled us to get our mail and more urgent goods from Suva on a more regular basis, although at a higher cost. Yet, there was the difficulty of getting the goods from Matei to our southern end of the island. So Dad put in his own airstrip on Ura. As soon as it was up to Civil Aviation standards, Fiji Airways began flying in to Ura.

Charlie Chung opened a post office at his store on Waimaqera, so some of our mail came in by air although we still received our regular mailbag on the inter-island shipping service every two weeks.

This shipping service also brought us another service which we had lacked: banking.

Seeing the need to service its clients, the Bank of New South Wales placed an officer aboard the inter-island ship, which travelled to Levuka, Savusavu, Taveuni and the northern islands of Rabi, Qamea and Laucala. This officer would disembark when the ship first arrived at Vatuwiri. He would be met by his regular taxi and would work his way up the island calling at the plantation houses and providing any banking services that were required.

On the return trip, the officer would again come down the island and call in at each of the homes and do whatever he could to assist. He was often called upon to buy things for the planters in Suva or take messages. I remember once giving him my old shoes to take to a boot maker in Suva for repairs.

The telephone system had not improved. Although the eight-gauge fencing wire had been replaced by a small coaxial cable, it was still strung on the coconut trees and broke whenever there was a hurricane and the trees blew down. The single line to the south end was replaced by about four lines and at Waimaqera we were on a line with our cousins at Vatuwiri and the Vuna village. The main stores on Taveuni, like Morris Hedstrom and Burns Philp, began to stock a greater range of goods, but we still had to carry a considerable stock on our own plantation, such as new copra knives and axes, files, cane knives, twines, marking dye, nails, timber, sacks, fuel and parts for the motor vehicles, grease, oil, fencing wire, tools, pipe fittings, paint and office needs. Those that could be obtained from Morris Hedstroms or Burns Philp were delivered once a week when the delivery lorry made a trip down south. Similarly, all household goods that we could not produce on the plantation were ordered through Morris Hedstrom and Burns Philp and delivered once a week.
Dad maintained the Ura airstrip at his own expense. It had a grass surface and had to be mowed at least once a week by a man with an ordinary mower. It was an immense and boring task for the poor chap. Dad also built and maintained the terminal building and for a while even hired and paid for the officer serving the terminal.

Another of his community efforts was to give land for a school on Ardmore. The Vuna Hall had become too small and unsuitable and there was an ever increasing number of children from Waimaqera, Ura, Qarawalu and Vatuwiri in need of a school. A four-classroom block with bathrooms and toilets and teachers quarters was built. As well as giving the land he contributed to the cost of the school. While this was a charitable and noble thing for Dad to do, Adrian frowned upon it, saying that education would only lead to trouble because the labourers’ children would get ideas about improving their lot and cause them to be frustrated with their way of life.

During the 1950s the winds of change were blowing across the political landscape of many colonies as the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization pressed Britain to grant independence.

On Taveuni we were rather aghast at this, as we could not conceive of the British leaving Fiji and handing over control to the Fijians and Indians. We were aware of what had happened in Kenya and were extremely fearful of the United Nation’s attitude triggering uprisings in Fiji which could threaten our own lives and the sanctity of our land. We made vows that, as ownership of the land was our sacred right, we would defend it with our lives.

In 1959, the Burns Commission was constituted. The Chiefs of Vuna went before it and said that the Tartes had acquired their land with knives and axes and, as they now wanted the land back, they would return the knives and axes. This incited fresh concern and anger towards the Tui Vuna.

We had frequent visits by men from the British Foreign Office who came to study Fiji and report back to their masters in London. Whenever they came to Taveuni, we were invited to the District Officer’s home for a cocktail party and were expected to bow and scrape to them. Most of them were pompous asses who had preconceived notions of what we were like and what was best for us.

More often than not the District Officer would ask Dad to have them for dinner. He was by then the most senior and respected planter on the island, Uncle Rood having died in 1955. Some years before, Dad had been offered a Knighthood for the Tarte’s services to Fiji but had rejected it because Uncle Rood was his senior. They had never offered it to Uncle Rood nor made a second offer to Dad.
Naturally, Dad entertained these men in regal fashion and it cost him a great deal but they took it all for granted and I don’t think they heeded any of the views that he expressed.

I vividly remember one such official, whose name was Donald Durks. He was a weedy, pasty-faced, introverted man, with few redeeming features. Spencer was by then into shark fishing. The idea was to anchor a dead steer on the reef and wait for the sharks to come in and feed off it. We would then go out in his 20-foot boat and just watch them feed, or harpoon one and drag it ashore. I think that the District Officer at that time rather mischievously asked Spencer to take Donald Durks out shark fishing. When we got to the bait, at least ten of the 12-foot monsters were feeding on the carcass and poor Donald Durks watched and quivered in fear. He really was in a state of shock and never uttered a word the whole time. That was the day I slipped on the deck and went overboard. I swear I was back in the boat so quickly that I never got my feet wet.

In 1955, my back began giving me trouble again. I had developed Scheuermann's disease at the age of 17 and spent nine months in a metal brace. It was a spinal disorder that needed specialised treatment. But Dad was a firm believer in Fijian medicine and always had a ‘witch doctor’ on hand. At the time of my back flare up, he was ‘consulting’ a man named Masuwini who came from the northern island of Qamea and had a reputation for being able to cure anything. I tried to explain to Dad that my back problem was not something that would respond to any mumbo jumbo medicine, but he kept insisting that I at least give Masuwini a try. In the end, just to please him, I did.

Each day at dawn I had to rise and put my head over a basin of water in which certain bark and leaves were soaking and inhale the fumes for half an hour. Then I had to lie in a bath also filled with leaves and bark for another half an hour. Finally, Masuwini rubbed me down with oil then sent me down to the sea to swim for half an hour. It seemed like a fruitless exercise but I went through it for seven days. Of course, my back was no better so I went to Suva to see a doctor who took some X-rays and recommended that I go to see my specialist in Melbourne. I did this, but the osteopath said there was little he could do as the vertebrae in my spine were permanently damaged. I was quite despondent, but slowly over the next six months the pain subsided, eventually disappearing, never to re-occur.

The experience taught me never to dismiss unilaterally any natural medicine. Maybe it was Masuwini who cured my problem.
I spent three months in Melbourne on that trip, most of the time working with an interesting old man on a new concept for making copra. He was introduced to me by my Uncle, John Wilson, who owned a large electrical manufacturing business.

Old Ashford’s idea was to husk the coconut with a device that he had developed, then to carry the whole nuts by conveyor belt through a tunnel heated to a high temperature by electrical power. This power would be achieved using a generator driven by a suction gas engine that would be fuelled by the husks and shell of the coconut. At the end of the conveyor journey the nuts would be cracked open and the whole kernel would pop out fully dried and in perfect condition. In theory it sounded great, and Ashford came back to Taveuni with me to work out the practical problems of the process. He did all his drawings and calculations, then went back to Australia and promptly died. So nothing came of this great idea.

Another project I worked on for some time was one that was aimed at enabling us to derive revenue from the husks and the shell of the coconut. The husk is the raw material for all kinds of coir products, such as rope and mats. I corresponded with a number of manufacturers of the coir processing machinery, mainly from Germany. There were large coir industries in Ceylon, India and the Philippines. It was a well-established process, but the difference between these places and Fiji was that, in Fiji, coconuts were not brought into a central depot, and to enable the project to work we would have to change the whole plantation management process. The cost of the machinery proved to be exorbitant, the quality of the Fiji coir poor, and the problems associated with introducing the process became insurmountable.

There was also a demand for ground up coconut shell as filler in thermosetting plastics. I negotiated for some time with Monsanto, one of the world’s largest chemical companies, on the details. Grinding the shell was no problem but achieving the right quality was extremely difficult, as it would have been necessary to husk the nut expertly and clean it thoroughly before grinding the shell. Once again the process proved far too costly and so another good idea failed.

I threw myself into these kinds of projects because I could see that we had to derive a greater income from the coconut to remain viable in the long term. We were wasting valuable resources that were used in other coconut producing countries. Furthermore, I became bored with the unchallenging routine of my work on the plantation. It was a great lifestyle that I knew millions would envy, but it was unfulfilling and because of Dad’s dominant role I had little power of authority.
The boredom led me to drink more with Adrian and to go on more fishing trips with him to the remote islands and reefs north of Taveuni. To satisfy my sexual needs I started an affair with a girl from Vuna village. The first night I met her, I brought her back to Waimaqera and made love to her in my room before taking her back to the village late at night. Of course Dad heard the jeep come and go and obviously heard the noise of a second person in the house. The next day he made it clear to me that I was not permitted to bring another Fijian girl into the house as it would be an insult to Vuki, who was a high chief in her own right. I found this logic difficult to understand but had no option but to accede to his wishes. So I made love to her in other places.

Apparently the Fijians from the village took umbrage to people like us having affairs with their young girls, and one evening when I took the girl back to the village, I had a scary experience. I usually drove into the village compound and let her off then went home. On this particular night I drove into the village, switched off the engine and chatted to her for a while. It was a dark night and I suddenly found that the jeep was surrounded by Fijian men. The girl was pulled out of the jeep and ran off, and the men surrounding the jeep said to me in no uncertain terms that I was not to come to the village again or to have anything to do with their women. I was angry and terrified and decided to get out of the place as quickly as possible. I switched on the ignition and tried to start the engine but to my consternation the starter failed to work. The jeep could be crank started with a handle. This handle was in the back of the jeep, so I leaned over, grabbed it, and stepped out of the vehicle. I must have looked quite menacing, standing there with a big, iron crank handle in my hands, for the Fijians stepped back. Realising I had a slight advantage, I said to them in an angry tone that I would do whatever I bloody well liked. I then went around to the front of the jeep, put the handle in place, gave it a swing and to my immense relief the engine caught. I threw the handle into the back of the jeep, stepped inside and took off in a roar. Only when I was clear of the village did I realise that I was shaking like a leaf with a empty feeling in my gut. Henceforth, whenever I dropped the girl off, I did so well clear of the village.

Soon after that, I met a girl from Laucala. It happened soon after Dad began staging boxing contests at Waimaqera. We constructed a proper covered boxing ring just beside the Vuna Hall and built a fence around it to contain 500 people. The then heavyweight champion of Fiji was Atunaisa Camaibau from Somosomo, and we got him to help us put together contests of one 10-rounder, two 8-rounders, and four three-rounders. We were able to attract the best boxers from around Fiji as Dad promised them purses they had only dreamed of. We advertised the event and on the day of the contest launches came from all over Vanua Levu and buses brought people from the length and breadth of
Taveuni. We had a packed house of 500 people and were able to pay the two main contestants £500 each. Dad took nothing but the bare essentials to cover expenses.

After the event he had a big party at his house and fed and gave drinks to all the notables who came to the contest, including Europeans, part-Europeans, Fijians, and some Indians. The whole thing meant that he was out of pocket a tremendous amount, but he took satisfaction from the fact that he gave pleasure to all those who witnessed the contest. He gave money to the boxers themselves and entertainment to the people who lived on our plantation and the surrounds. There was no funny business in the judging of the fights. The event proved so successful that we staged them every three months. There was a lot of work involved in it for me personally and we later formed the Taveuni Boxing Association, with many championships of Fiji being held at the Waimaqera Boxing Stadium.