

Robert Müller (1887-1924)

The Island Girl



Das Inselmädchen first published in Munich, 1919.

Republished in Vienna, 1946 (almost unnoticed).

New critical edition by Igel Verlag, Paderborn 1994.

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INTRODUCTION

The German Reich's brief foray into overseas colonialism between 1884 and the First World War stimulated a crop of imaginative fictions (dusky maidens, faithless natives, intrepid white men), political-philosophical treatises (white man's burden, racial destiny), and medical-sociological tracts (interracial mixing, tropical sun and northern brains, atrocities medicalised as 'tropical frenzy' ...).

A few years before *The Island Girl*, the Viennese avant-garde writer and cultural activist Robert Müller had published his major work of fiction: *TROPICS: the Myth of Travel* (1915; translated 2020), a dazzling tour de force of modernist writing that begins as a Boys Own adventure in search of lost Conquistador gold, proceeds through steaming jungles to an untouched native village where all European preconceptions and prejudices are turned on their head, and ends as an unsolved murder mystery. Filled with outrageous conjectures about evolution, consciousness, sexuality, present and future human types, etc., the overall mood is high-spirited: a very active intelligence having fun with the notions and foibles of civilisation.

The Island Girl, Müller's second venture into the colonial world, offers a rather different mood. This tautly-written novella presents a collision between naïve preconceptions and a milieu which the protagonist at first finds "abhorrent" (not just the island and its native population, but the residents of the colonial quarter too). Despatched by international authorities to monitor the island's government following a brutally suppressed uprising, the Belgian Raoul de Donckhard, for all his preparations, has arrived with "everything a European could possess, who as yet knows nothing of the Equator."

Slotted into a humdrum bureaucratic post, he soon loses his zeal, and adapts to the slow pace of his colleagues. He finds the "dusky maiden" trope is taboo here: on various pretexts (miscegenation; STDs) Europeans are forbidden to form liaisons with islanders – although the Governor himself is hinted to have "illicit affairs". Instead the island has somehow attracted a bevy of European ladies of doubtful virtue, and wife-swapping is not unknown.

Raoul, tantalised by a glimpse through his telescope of an island girl on a cliff-top, is repelled and bored by the Europeans. Eventually he encounters the "island girl" close up, and starts to explore her mentality and her view of the world – though this apparently does not proceed as far as full sexual relations. Formally rebuked by the Governor, Raoul falls into a lengthy fever; is declared unfit for tropical duty, ends up in Chile – where by chance he encounters his island girl, who has been banished, in a brothel. She is the last of her royal lineage.

That's the outline; but there's much, much more in almost every vivid paragraph. Take the opening: Raoul's first view of the island leads him to imagine its entire geological, biological and human past. The story is a continuation of these millennia of natural history. Some images are of almost poetic intensity, e.g. the lances of the Polynesian migrants who first people the island. As they sail, these are held crosswise over the passengers. They are tipped with irregular flint flakes that make them seem to "stare crosseyed like bare tent-poles over the flying campsite".

Following his suicide in 1924, Robert Müller was almost completely forgotten for half a century; now his Collected Works in German fill some 18 volumes. He remains completely unknown in the Anglosphere, outside a tiny handful of scholars. I hope my translations of *The Island Girl* and *TROPICS* will one day repair this deficiency.

Chris Godwin

March 2025

OF ALL the things on the island that the Belgian Raoul de Donckhard found unsettling, it was the girl on the southerly clifftop who first reconciled him.

Across the jagged edges of the bay's pool-blue seashell the ocean heaved malachite-green, for moments erect like a thick pitted rock and then, impelled by a closer look, shattered in long spiral combers tangled in a myriad crumpled slivers shaved by an endlessly whirling machine out of Infinity. By lifting his gaze, Raoul de Donckhard allowed the motion all around him to harden again like scar tissue. The island lay like a gaping denture on a shelf, stark and vacant, a blue gum underpinned by the seashell of a bay. Raoul found the sight abhorrent. The solitude of distance and ocean had solidified to a gnashing gesture, expressed in this expansive line of cliffs.

Raoul raised the spyglass to his eyes. The hard cry scattered to a mist of lines and specks, Raoul focused, it gelled, settled to more distinct stages of life. The cliff was bare, but not dead. From hidden spaces in this feature dumped so crudely on the landscape, a delicate existence streamed.

Raoul put the spyglass down, and blinked. At once the wave-quarry around him splintered to a myriad surfaces carted away to endless depots, pages turning and weathering as he looked. Raoul closed his eyes and saw before him the island and its young history.

A dazzling but tough vegetation had broken out across the island. One day the ocean floor, driven by internal fury, had thrust jagged points through the ocean's upper bound. The sea ebbed away as if swallowed by a fiery chasm. The seafloor crust broke apart under this dreadful exertion, the artistic assemblage of coral reefs was crushed to powder by the compressive motion of deep fire-muscles juddering over them. Pale black jungles of kelp died in broiling sunshine to ash the crannies of this virginal island; rotting fish-corpses made tiny gardens of corruption, to be kneaded by a thousand hands of pelting tropical rain into a dough of creation across the whole island. Rain tamped the dough firm, the sun stabilised it. The avid Earth opened her womb, as pregnant seed-winds from distant continents wafted over and deposited in her their delicate loads. But the murky patina laid down by wind and rain on bedrock and jagged slopes and level ground – it too was scoured by the first dreadful confusion of erupting rock. Yet how terribly hard and random it all still was here! You had to doubt Nature's righteous purpose; here only one strong simple idea could produce justice, form, and growth. And Nature, which put its origin so drastically on show and, unperturbed, kept what remained going, had the same idea.

Raoul saw it clearly: the Idea. On the edge and far inland, pillowy blocks squeezed cheeks together. Dreadful pressures had created big bare surfaces; hurricanes blunted their edges. Hundred-meter protrusions rose sharp and steep, small chiselled volcanic towers with no other purpose, gas vents, smokestacks, the same angle again and again; a ruthless ambition soared even now when all lay dormant already. Nature no doubt proceeded from this primal ambition and its relicts. Into this chaos collapsing slowly to an organic order she inserted a righteous idea that behaved not entirely freshly made, but was nourished on a more ancient will. Nature persists by transitions. She introduced vegetation to accompany those void expanses and abrupt over-steep angles, two

immeasurably simple principles. The tree-forms on this island were novice work. They sprang stiff from the earth and rose high before any branches spread, foliage struggled podlike up the trunk. A curious plant, a thick giant thistle, kinked its sideshoots straight up, carried pure-red heads of flowers like the strictly regulated flames of a candelabrum. The first inclination to spread sideways was penalised here in a struggle of nature with itself in favour of an older island principle. Raoul called to mind the paralysing horror that came over him every time he had to wade through the jungle of candelabrum plants. He found the straight line that grew into the pale round moon fascinating, absorbing, chilling. Closing overhead were hooded figures, bystanders built on the same principle: the hypnotised palms that grew out of this island.

Stone trees punched into the blue. Basalt bushes menaced, their provenance's conscience, a principle, a seaworld motif, condemned to a degraded life that surely once lived in coral reefs. In unfathomable yearning, veined mineral branchings mimicked the scribbles thrown off by the progress of waves on the sea's surface. Doggedly the cell retraced the ancestral shaping instinct of the wave. *The island was of the sea's race.*

Pointless for the sea to collapse into surfaces. But from the same motifs the sea, now become island, created the island-types that were to be brought forth from sheer surfaces and abrupt angles. First another force and tradition, the wind – in power and lineage the ocean's equal – will smooth out, shape and spread wider the callow sharp-edged youth, emerging Nature's awkward age.

Raoul realised that out of the careless confusion of the eruption, only one simple hard idea could lead to justice. The new life took its form from the dead. In this landscape the dead, for all the searing heat, had frozen life's tongue. He fought down his disgust, and acknowledged the justice Nature was aiming for.

As simple as a child she scribbled lines that were to bring forth order: slender giant fungi – that was the trees; a fearfully simple landscape; enough; it provided for the humans who from the continents made their way across the water. Men stood shoulder to shoulder in high-prowed canoes, at their feet clusters of women with infants tumbling from every bosom and hip. Little girls squatted over pet hens, doves with wheel-eyes sat on warriors' shoulders, flapping against the swirling breeze. Lances tipped with irregular flint-flakes grew like branches out of the men, stared crosseyed like bare tent-poles over the flying campsite, the wind caught the close-packed poles as if they were sails, and impelled overladen boats towards some shore even as those aboard peered uneasily aft to see if angry gods of their homeland were pursuing in their wake.

Storm surges from deep inland, wandering wavebanks from seaward, drove a great people into the dancing vessels as cloudbursts and swollen rivers became yellow milky swirling floods. A thousand boats capsized silently in the hollow trough of a swell and drowned their human freight in a drowsy horror. Others suckled slowly, carried trustily on through flood-pillars over wavecrests and suddenly, somewhere, wallowed in the calmest of becalmed waters; people reached for their longest ululations as if their lives depended on it. On such days, sharks sunned their bellies. But a friendly breeze blew the other dozen boats with the pole-sails into the bay.

From that moment the flint-flake lances were deemed holy. Was this not the same wind – once the island had been manured with cadavers, and endless action had

smoothed the corpse-humus – that belatedly bore seeds from the continents and from other islands? A typhoon in Asiatic waters swept up swarms of insects and birds and carried them past banks of still air over an entire quadrant of the Earth, until it grew sluggish, and like wine from a pipette dumped everything onto the island. From the unbroken eggs of dazed or crushed little females, a whole animal realm arose. This time, the wind mortified the island with human beings. Ever since then the wind has outranked the previous god, and its whistling in the lances of stone is carefully heeded. This must be true, for the island's myths say so. Proof may be found in the grove of holy lances in the fissured niches of an ancient ruined crater. Raoul de Donckhard focused his spyglass and was able to make it out beneath the summit of the steepest and highest cone.

How many hundreds and thousands of years had passed since then? The humans settled and adapted. They built, discovered, procreated, fished, fought, and laughed a lot. They were a select few, fortunate and saved. They retained the gentle relieved smiles from those days, when the ancestors landed in the blue shell of the bay after so many stupefying days and nights. They retained the smiles when floating islands with symmetrical clouds approached on the gentlest breeze and cast boats off, and the horrid sight of glinting men with shark faces and hard scales on the immoderate bodies clambered ashore. The islanders had seen few enemies; all their elaborate fighting was limited to private quarrels, and only the absence of abundant big game caused bellies to growl belligerently. Their stone lances had stood for the longest time up in the holy cleft under the ancient volcano's helmet. Now they had little wooden lances with intricately carved blades, not harmlessly edged. The island had no metal, the friable rock did not lend itself well to handling; using wood and pebbles they worked doggedly and inventively on wood.

All at once, after their initial unpractised astonishment – they had had little opportunity to practise – they leapt straight from primeval times into a highly developed Age of Metal.

They kept smiling even as a hitherto mildly comforting myth became history. They were hardly ever the first to raise their wooden spears against the chain mail and steel helmets of the fish-men, not out of calculation, but because they had no need. They trembled when the floating islands with the now very small clouds – the sight had caused one or other honest head to waken a blade from its stupor and flourish it at the holy lance-grove – when they began to thunder, and round smoking boulders whizzed right overhead; the heat singed their hair, and the indecent whine laid them with obscure premonitions flat on their bellies.

The fish-men returned to their islands, which were soon understood to be oversized and astonishingly contrived canoes, and then departed soon after, clad in marvellous clouds. They left behind gewgaws and joy, and carried off fresh firm fruit of the mussel-beds that in generations of islanders had engendered organs seemingly of steel, and economical techniques of movement and breathing. Further visits by the scale-people and shark-faces brought more and different kinds of fripperies, while the new excitements they brought literally attenuated the nerves of the islanders who had hitherto lived such peaceable and uniform lives. Now divers often went several times a day down to the gravel of the broken sea floor, where the depths were clear inside the

broken rim of the bay's shell, this side of the kelp-jungle boundary that coloured the ocean green. But some through over-exertion became exhausted, and shot suddenly to the surface. The eyes, all shine lost, collapsed to little bloody sponges, they dangled like slack pouches. Open veins crept from ears, nostrils, and under the nails. The islanders watched, howled, shook their shoulders, wise men uttered serene pronouncements, but still everyone kept smiling, just that now the smiles were different. Sceptics with deeply furrowed faces and souls recalled the floating island that turned out to be a big canoe, and the deceiving cloud-masts – some secret of the tribe that had arrived with wind-lances (so said the myths) must have become lost here – and they looked up to the lances of the ancients, which one day would wander down from the peak and back into the sea.

Years passed. The fish-men came again, and again, and little by little climbed out of their scale-clothing; now big beautifully folded mats draped heads and limbs. The island folk, starved of patterns, could kneel all day, and with glistening avid eyes lose themselves in the action of these great aprons and head coverings. The lines that decorated their wooden implements had been angular: steep arrays of strokes, feathery motifs, baroque branchwork, repeated endlessly. Now suddenly a new taste appeared, to which older artists violently objected, branding it decadent and foreign. But the younger generation prevailed, as always, and dated a new, softer and more varied art from this foreign fertilisation. Body tattoos moved in new encircling rhythms, the connection between decoration and body grew closer; instead of an accessory, art became an elaboration. The older generation of islanders laughed at this newfangled mode of expression, but the young were in holy earnest. Thus did the clothing of European and American seafarers work initially on the imaginations of the island folk. Several new species of fowl and small animals – goats and dogs – came onto the land, and multiplied. Rats too, of which there had never been any before; they proliferated enormously and after several generations were a serious nuisance, which alongside the shy indigenous turtle kept the youngsters' hunting instincts up to the mark.

On the heels of the French missionaries who one day took permanent possession of the island, Portuguese officers and administrators arrived in consequence of some political horse-trading; they upgraded the palisaded mission on the southern promontory of the island to a fort, shot a few leading families to ensure good order, and turned the island into a hotter and even more languid Portugal.

THAT was the island's history. Between the beginning and the present day, no more than a few millennia might have passed. Away over this span of time – charted by learned cassocked Frenchmen in a cell in the palisaded fort after careful researches and time-consuming chains of conjecture – Raoul now gazed, raising and lowering his powerful spyglass. To the unarmed eye the island was as always a bare line of cliffs, the same that had risen from the sea's depths, stony remnant of a uselessly lovely act of violence by Nature. Through the lens it snapped to a lush but rather rigid splendour, earnest frugal vegetation, a drab nagging tropical landscape.

Raoul de Donckhard trained the spyglass on the island's trees, on the broad stretches covered with the candelabra plants that always seemed to him the symbol of the island's most ineffable secrets. Through the lens he climbed ashore, down through the ages into

a chock-full cellar into which he had to introduce order – not a natural order, for Nature fabricated her own simple hard ideas, but so he could scrutinise his own thoughts about the island.

He felt a lack of connective tissue between the polished and tractable pattern of his thinking, and the landscape. His thoughts bore the foliage of another zone, they spread out grandly in every direction. His inner life extended in many-stranded convolutions, unlike this island's tendency towards stark simple strands; his worldview was of a copious in and out of cosmic breath. Like a cockerel facing a chalk mark, he was fascinated by the consequentiality of existence, but also unsettled. For all the tropical lushness, he sensed its poverty and onesidedness, and he came adrift in the first weeks of his arrival.

He found himself in the company of the neutral gendarmerie officers who had been despatched to the island, with the agreement of the American government, to help quell native unrest. Atrocities committed by the Portuguese as they put down the rebellion ran counter to the spirit of the International League of Nations for Colonial Culture. Raoul's dual mission was as a monitor, and also as an obedient functionary in the Portuguese administration. As a captain in the Belgian gendarmerie he had recently volunteered for the international Congo, to which he had been drawn early on by his Nordic yearning for extremes, and by fanciful changes in his view of life. Now he quickly changed horses. In preparation for his African career he had sought out Portuguese contacts who could provide introductions in their Angolan colony. The notion of being in the Tropics, in direct contact with the wildest Nature and primitive humans, was the passion underlying his preparations.

In January 19xx, when he at last arrived in the Tropics, he had in his possession everything he needed: from the most basic essentials to the acme of fashionable sports gear to a treasure-house of geographic book-learning, as well as considerable qualities of physique: everything a European could possess, who as yet knows nothing of the Equator.

Of course he arrived too late for his principal role. The rebellion, erupting in a manner that his initial impression of such a harmless childish race rendered incomprehensible, had already been put down, and all traces of the bloodbath inflicted by the Portuguese had been erased. It seemed that the islanders' rebellion had been blown out of proportion by the emotive Lisbon press, and by later reports in the Washington and Boston dailies on the vengeful acts of the island's overlords. Raoul de Donckhard reported for duty to Governor Don Calgareos; appointed as an officer in the civil administration he was to deal with files, and only the working hours were exotic

He had come as a psychological lion-tamer, expecting to bring to heel monsters with machine guns and a superiority complex regarding human nature. Now he made file notes and wrote numbers in an ink that smelled sour in the heat. Was it this disappointment that led him to despair?

Raoul de Donckhard had grown to a fine figure, full-bodied with that stocky solidity in the undercarriage that can be observed in the English and the Dutch, but he was Belgian. He belonged to a type that arose gradually in the west of Europe and spread to the north and east. It is of Celtic origin, and is defined by ineffectual bouts of fatigue, by a glumness that sits in the head rather than the emotions, by a cerebral compulsion to overcome material problems using spiritual means; one finds it among prominent

businessmen, engineers, criminologists and sports people. These traits are a consequence of mental training.

He had envisaged himself battling primal forces – and he shuffled papers. As he stumbled ashore from the launch, his brain was filled with images of Humanity, Earth and Culture, of unbounded structures and patterns, of future peoples, of novel human interactions. He resisted for two days, subjected every impression to his obstinate prejudices, filed them away internally around his European life-centre, and on the third day the ground collapsed from under him. The external tempo and trend were stronger than the inner armoury he had brought with him to the Tropics.

Nowhere could he make a connection. He could neither think nor dream. After the first onrush of general impressions every observation became marooned, and he faded away from sensory undernourishment. His condition rejected everything on offer. For a week he worked like a maniac in the office, and only in the office, seeing nothing of the island beyond what his official brief required, and nothing beyond the path between the office, the officers' mess and his bungalow. He worked whenever hours of mindless sleep were not preferable, worked to master the business, and from this standpoint, once technical details were converted to large generalities, to embark upon personal tasks. He dealt with correspondence from all corners of the globe, sucked in reams of paper with the same hot hunger as the fan spinning with a brassy rattle on a pedestal beside his desk; by means of a cracking new argument resolved matters needing consideration in a way that still smelled of the European camp, and later, once they had passed a superior's desk, had to translate them into a more island-friendly tempo. It was like having his ears boxed. He tried out minor rearrangements of his office space, his desk, the orderlies; for a day or two those around him exhibited a tepid surge of zeal which ended at last in the wastepaper basket that stood all week unemptied while a garland of screwed-up papers amassed around it. But soon the incidence of waste paper reduced to a trickle. Over the next fortnight Raoul grew physically weary. The neighbouring offices, staffed by colleagues of higher and lower rank, were no longer overwhelmed by documents flying out of his office, and found him more likable.

But he was so far gone that he never once found himself unbearable. He grew vegetative and stupid. Even though regular daily excursions would have enabled him to know the entire island, he never left the Portuguese quarter and the administrative zone. He seemed to have been there for years already, and had no desire to see more than was necessary. His jaw became slacker, his face fuller and redder. In the non-commissioned mess he drank schnaps like the others.

In the fourth week he recovered. He discovered one connection to Europe, one common variable not implicated in his personal collapse, an objective source of humanity: and that was the files. He recovered as he came upon their soul, and suddenly understood the fervency with which the other Europeans here immersed themselves in procrastination, how they grubbed deep into every triviality and technical detail. Not one of the details was trivial. They were the only sign that spoke to the tectonic imagination with which Europe goes to work. Construction, will, future – these announced themselves in vain; a collaboration that spread beyond this inert, closed-off island telegraphed itself to be sucked up by European souls avid for breadth, growth and

enterprise. As befitted his greater European hunger, Raoul closed his files half an hour later than everyone else. The files, this flotsam of his personal task, were a muffled reminder of the greater things that can form in a European mind.

The horror of a tropical existence is its total lack of a future. Landscapes of the temperate zone awaken hopes, expectations of an elevated kind, they create complex forms that perhaps penetrate to the observing mind from the more personal trim of the forest. The Tropics do not favour personality. Raoul found that the characters of his companions from the steamer, originals from European nations, became remarkably blurred with the change from the saloon deck to the hospitality of the officers' mess. The Tropics eliminate the personal task, only the biggest possible machinery can make sweeping inroads here. For the first time in a long while, Raoul apprehended facts, differences. First: he was now actually in the Tropics. Second: he was not in the Tropics, he was holding back in a European bastion. Third: the Tropics cannot be understood through an ordering of the personal, such as has emerged in Europe in the shade of more murmuring and orderly forests.

These observations – nursed and kneaded by heat, weariness, slight fevers and nausea, dazzlement, anxieties – helped him out. He discerned outlines, light and shade, differences, his imagination, after a period of inaction, set itself once again slowly and doggedly in motion.

Six weeks had passed. It was on this day that for the first time during this period he attempted to exert himself, to take a more general look at the island. He first tried it from the sea. He cut the island out from the surrounding waters. With the modern telescope he could both look it over and see into it. He sat in a ribbed boat with a high prow, encased in raw animal hides like a kayak; tough flayed cattle had helped once, the skins rendered like rubber. The boat was cleverly balanced and hard to capsize; on the inside the untreated fringes of the skins formed an edging made stiff by dirt and salt. The deeply ugly profile of a sea monster – a ray, perhaps – served as a paddle. The boat itself was as tatty as a fished-up shark corpse. Raoul's imaginative powers imbibed fates and histories from the comparison. In such vessels with their lofty flint-flake lances (as French missionaries interpreted the myths), the island people had first swept into the bay. Raoul saw the island become itself. He took stock of its history, its developing plant life, its humanising, its unambiguous ideas. He saw himself following on the heels of Frenchmen and Portuguese. Not until now was it properly discovered in its total otherness and bizarrerie, as a European substance, a stimulus to the consciousness of people who turn their thoughts mostly to material things, and have that tight little aspect to the mouth.

RAOUL'S spyglass could see a long way, but its field of vision was limited. As the boat bobbed on the waves, the island wobbled as a vague jumble in the fine crosshairs. The sea settled to a calm, and the spyglass fixed on a single point. A figure leapt clear and isolated into the scope, lacking any background, astonishingly close.

Raoul adjusted the focus to the jutting group of cliffs where the figure must be located. A broad brown head turned slowly from west to east, like a pearl in the fingers of a connoisseur, then back again. Raoul caught the clever dewy gaze from so close that he was shaken.

He found himself face to face with a primal human being, with a specimen that felt itself unobserved. The face must be pointing straight towards Raoul's canoe, closer attention radiated from the brow of the individual, whose mind was clearly concentrating. The upper body was bare, an orange-yellow sarong draped hips to knees and over the outstretched thighs. The arms reached out to grip the ankles; the toes splayed over the pale hard-treated soles while the entire person concentrated.

The concavity of the lower body caused by the crouching posture exaggerated the folds at the chest, so it was impossible to tell if it was male or female. In the island people the sexes were little differentiated by body shape, the sloping shoulders of the males – a swimmer breed – were little bigger than those of the women, they were just as broad-hipped and padded, and had the same dumpy short-legged lower body. The whole race to some extent had a feminine appearance, but the women too were muscular. The squat bodies moved with great calm and solemnity, especially apparent in the rubble of the basalt hills. But when the figure on the ridge slowly withdrew its hands from the ankles, and straightened its back, still gazing in the direction of Raoul's canoe, and the splendid chest with the well-proportioned hollows and the groove from throat to navel came into view, he could see from the straight shoulders and pert breasts that it was a mature young female.

He studied the face. It was dark as a Maori's, with snarls of dry black hair; the head was too large by European standards, between the smooth brow and the region of the incisor teeth there grew an extensive nose, as if hauled forth with its nostrils that drooped to the mouth, a likeness to a bud that was at first disquieting. The face radiated intelligence and a dusky attractiveness; the unpleasant aspect became familiar. The sharp incisors flashed white between long dark-blooded lips, the teeth were making chewing motions. The expression was wistful.

Raoul put down the spyglass and grabbed the paddle. He looked for an orange-yellow speck on the southernmost cliff, but was unable to make it out with the naked eye. When he paused his paddling and took up the spyglass, the blue sky and the cliff were empty.

Years of yearning for undiminished physicality came awake in Raoul. The dome of a European brow covers a monstrous erotic tension. In the bilges of his errant soul he bore an unacknowledged secret, a nourishing thorny illusion: the naked body. Every one of his thoughts was accompanied by an unspoken desire for the primal condition. Novel phenomena like sport and outdoor activities are breakouts from a tightened constraint. All travel develops basically from an inclination for a primal humanity that has receded far into the background.

Then the White man comes into the Tropics. Whatever he has felt to be his core falls to pieces, melts away in the tremendous light that fills the days and tolerates no secrecy and no shadows. It is not the naked primitive landscape that enervates; the abandoned secret of the body disillusion him. Nakedness blunts every thorn. The European's mental depths, his secret erotic hoard, flatten out amid bare human flesh. Sudden mass nakedness is a shock to the emotions of a White man in contact with tropical intensity.

Like all Whites, Raoul had envisaged the Tropics as an extravagant and amoral love idyll. He struggled to master the changes his mental life had been exposed to these last six weeks.

He had grown disadvantaged by nothing other than a body, his own, his human body. In the Tropics this is not the content of the human soul. The removal of inhibitions is destructive.

RAOUL put on weight following his canoe outing, and was upset when Lovadel the pharmacologist read off the number in his pharmacy. Auburn Fowler, the young engineer from San Francisco, invited him to work off the pounds on the tennis court he had made, which was little used. The young man, graduated by the swift half-decent schooling of his homeland into a lusty self-confidence, took Raoul under his wing and conducted him volubly to the grey rectangle, detailing its history. Green weeds had grown up between the white posts ever since Calgareos lost his enthusiasm and Major da Cossilias' wife grew fat, having for some months been the highlight and centre of attention for a gaggle of cavaliers. What, Raoul doesn't know the da Cossilias woman? The big blonde Bohemian? Oh, her. He knows her. Then what? Engineer Fowler, who was installing the island's telephone system, glanced around and laid his Indian mouth (which always looked irritable, not unlike Raoul's own) close to Raoul's ear for content-rich communication in bad French. Raoul came to a stop, stepped back a little, and regarded the little speaking-motor in the other man's face as it worked away in rhythmic explosions. People here fighting over that woman? His Excellency and "the kid" (as that kind of young sprout was nicknamed back home in the States) had once challenged each other for the barbarous blonde in historic tennis matches? Raoul recalled the healthy-looking Slav woman as a figure at family evenings in the officers' mess. The young American broke out in a dreadful tirade at the lovely blonde's weight gain, the irritable folds around his childish mouth pouted in the kind of sourness attached to unattainable grapes. He looked meaningfully down at Raoul's flanks.

On a few mornings Raoul, bursting with energy, rose at half past four, played for an island-hour (which generally fell a little short of the European standard), his terrific serves pursued by yelling clumsy island youths, and learned whole bookloads about relationships on the island in a chilled-drink American mix of sport and love, devoid of taste but with lots of high life. After a noisy night at the Club that continued to four in the morning, he agreed with Fowler a one-day break in their daily practice, which never resumed. That night his blood had become heated. He thought about the eight almost paralysed weeks since his farewell evening in Brussels. Island gossip, wielded with a certain spirit and a Romanesque delicacy, unveiled to him an image of life which for all its contemptibility offered substance and substitute for the inner desert into which the European's soul ventures as soon as it steps foot in the Tropics. He put it all together: the files, the cognac, the tennis court, Fowler's bad telephone connections, the gossip – these were the real colony, Europe's bastion, the atmosphere required by more or less European lungs. It surrounded like a radiance even those Whites who would see themselves as shipwrecked Crusoes.

That evening he tried to forget that on the other side of that implicitly understood world there lay another, simpler and at the same time more mysterious, in which each person with the ruminative jaws would be presented with an individual task. But the liquors delivered by the latest steamer from Santiago made him lightheaded, and flushed

away the heavy dregs of his Flemish blood. Beneath a sumptuous low-hanging starry sky, kept at bay by nothing more than dribs of metallic light from the Chinese lanterns in the gallery, he approached the wives and girlfriends of Portuguese officials, the flirts of foreign agents and adventurers. Not all the women were sallow-skinned Portuguese – slow-eyed, breasts heaving, fingers gauntleted with rings, little filigree fetters at the throat, and chain-links jingling from the earlobes. The African brows and lips of their husbands streamed heat into the lighter profiles of more northerly and easterly females – France, Vienna, Jewesses from Hungary and Russia, some bleached-blond Kirghiz types; acerbic Serbian women, their contours charged with enormous sexual energy: all of Europe's erotic genius was here assembled. How had these women ended up here? Were they driven by instinct? Were so many of their profession on the high seas that any net cast even by an island as small as this would haul in a full catch? Or was it not rather the islands of White men in the South Seas who were caught, had to be caught, in a dragnet woven by steamer routes of women from the big continents?

No one knew anything definite about these women. Whenever Raoul used his newcomer's privilege to ask discreet questions, the name Calgareos always slipped past in the cautious response. No one knew anything, and no one was interested in the back story to an obvious fact, no one was analytical enough to perceive the obvious anomalousness of the phenomenon.

Mlle Farouche, the stocky Frenchwoman with the crimped hair, girlfriend of a tall olive-skinned caballero, tapped Raoul on the mouth with her ostrich-feather fan, immersing herself for a moment in the tender force of the blow to which alcohol had seduced her to explicitness. But when Raoul asked about previous travels, the alcohol was not strong enough to unlock the seal of her origins. And the Frenchwoman's momentary abandon was reserved, compared to the imperious inclination – in both senses – of Draga Bogovic. The Serbian was pretty enough in her way to enslave our strong Fleming. She had powerful eyebrows and strong eye-sockets, her grey gaze led directly to love; in her strident voice, itself not very pleasant, there lay the sonority of an unassuageable passion descending into spiteful trivialities. She bore the stamp of true female power, creature of a race of mothers; among all the refined specimens from America and Europe and the rather washed-out Portuguese ladies, she seemed the perfect personality for this life on oceans and islands. Whatever her female senses required, she took. When she smiled at Raoul, she bared her teeth a little. He thought: Europe still has one kind of primal human.

"Which of these is my friend?" she repeated, laughing; her eyes darted, and came to rest on Auburn Fowler. "I've never had one here," she added ironically, and glanced at Raoul. "How you ask! Which of these am I supposed to like ...?" Her gaze flooded him with heat, her eyes were of the female sex, organs for the love-tussle. "That boy there? I'm already past that – or maybe not ready yet. But the Governor is a pretty man," she said, forced to choose an object to her taste that had to be way out of bounds.

"A man-doll for teenagers," Raoul, naïve about women, retorted.

Triumph smouldered in her narrowed eyes. "Oh, you're jealous!" and she smacked him. "A woman of temperament could for sure find herself in worse hands!" She stared at him in curiosity, thinking she had given him enough to discern her wishes.

Her challenge was so bold and obvious that, even though she acted stand-offish, her conversation kept leading him on. This was also the reason why, as the garden emptied and couples one by one companionably took their leave, he did not disappear with her, unlike Senhora da Cossilias with her little Chilean professor who looked Japanese. The Boguvic woman pointed the couple out to Raoul as they thought to vanish unremarked behind the natural screen of a hedge. She laughed at the Major, who seeing himself left alone, angrily fell silent and betrayed his evil suspicions only when he spotted Mr Fowler and let fly with his “damned old nigger” at one of the coloured waiters. Then the Major happened on a slim brunette who might be French or Creole. The Governor’s daughters, the upright father-widower behind them, gracious grandes dames with foolish pretty faces, chivvied young Fowler out onto the light-sprinkled street, calling to his American gallantry. But Raoul stood back and stayed, even as the Boguvic woman in her Parisian heels, one leg pressed passionately against his thigh, dug into his calf. He didn’t even wipe the dust mark from his white linen trousers, paid no attention to her sturdy and not at all unshapely legs. He didn’t even relish her suffering, even though she showed so forcefully that all she wanted was to see her passion reflected somehow in his facial expression. She contradicted him, half annoyed, half contemptuously, in everything. He recalled what had led to this, from the first occasion when she crossed his path.

Shortly after his arrival he was walking on the harbour quay when he almost collided with her. He sensed her pretty grey gaze hungrily eyeing his body. She was not very big, but this quite unfeminine gaze made her seem almost big and somehow fearsome. He said “Excuse me!” and turned away, in clear sight of the Governor, who must have been watching the incident with his head on one side. Later he saw her Medusa-face again, with the straight nose springing directly from the forehead, and the flaring nostrils. She failed to recognise him.

Does she want to go home alone. Fernando, a diminutive lieutenant sweetly ironed into a glittering gold-threaded uniform, his moustache varnish-black, lurched up, gulped, “Oh there you are, you little beast!” and leaned confidingly against her; she, cross now, let him slide to the ground; but when he started to swell again with fine words and even gave her shoe a pathetic kiss, her whipped-up aggravation found a natural outlet. Without a glance at Raoul she headed off jabbering with the lieutenant. She ignored Raoul so completely that he felt distress. He saw himself a figure of fun: another man reaping what he had sown.

Only a few men were still around. They hugged, wept, cursed Europe and Lisbon and Paris, and kicked out at the coloured waiters. Raoul, immersed in a hard-ridden monologue, shrugged off a ridiculous literal duty: he found it tasteless to intervene on behalf of humanity against these drunkards. The other opportunity which had arisen with the attitude revealed by the *damned old nigger* was forbidden to access his memory. But as he pondered the question: where, on an island such as this, in the midst of the world ocean, does drunkenness reach a limit and humanity begin, and started to become agitated about himself, he was sought out by Lovadel the pharmacologist.

He pointed a thumb at the rowdies and said: “That lynch mob who’d like to see the coloured man hanged are the very same ones who go with his women!” He had a bad conscience, being Portuguese, and tact for Donckhard’s international mission. He felt

the best way to denigrate the loudmouths was to assign them to the lowest status – those who engage in illicit congress. Which meant at the same time relieving the colony of any responsibility. Raoul tut-tutted, but then a thought occurred to him and he asked: ‘But why is it forbidden, actually?’

“That’s a long story!” the pharmacologist replied with a greasy smile. “Supposedly the ban rests on social grounds, but there’s a hygienic aspect behind it. The recent uprising was triggered by an epidemic of venereal disease among the island girls. The island men attributed it to evil poisons from White lovers. These races succumb quickly to any such bacillus. The Governor strictly enforces the ban. And it’s a sensible measure, but still, politics and love in the South Seas,” he opined, the tone belying what the words said.

In the pale morning Raoul went down to the shore, sucked in a chestful, out, in, cooled his manly agitation, and let the calmly lapping waves settle him. The water was like oil, you could hear the pebbles that it rolled along, a song of tiny angelic choirs, a mill rippling uninterrupted, mile after mile.

AT AROUND six o’clock Raoul untied the little official cutter from the jetty where it was moored, hoisted the foresail, and rode out of the pool on a land breeze. He tacked just off the island, and watched it emerge rapidly into the sun.

The crude emotions activated by the sultry evening steeped in women and liquor soon dissipated. Desires that acquired teeth from the self-inflicted abduction of a woman who previously meant nothing to him relaxed to a balmy tension. Despite the lack of sleep, he felt imbued with powers. At seven he stepped between the narrow resin-scented shelves and saw heaps of files lying. He sat down, composed a request for an increase in his manual staff, and worked away until close of business at ten. At eleven he took lunch with other officers in the same veranda garden where twelve hours earlier he had looked on as human fates unfolded by lantern light. In the sublimating noonday sun, everything momentous and personal about the previous evening appeared smaller – commonplace and bureaucratic. Only the dark-skinned waiters in their sailor’s jerseys and the starshaped vegetation attested to the nearby equator.

Instead of flinging himself into the hammock washed by gouts of warm air from the electric fan to sleep away the hottest hours until four, Raoul wandered, a little unsettled, along the few drab streets of the quarter. Wooden villas all with the same steps and open verandas lay dry and hard, frozen in a kind of heat-frost. Excessive heat produces the same effects as cold. It enervates, life freezes under heat. The quarter, normally an animated whole, shattered to a pile of opaque crystals; not a human was to be seen on the baking paths between the front gardens and their many shrubs, all seemingly shocked to a suspension of growth. Here and there a slat creaked, a thunderclap amid the sound-dried silence. Raoul jumped. A lump of mortar rumbled from a crack onto wooden steps; it was like a boulder smashing to bits. Were the surfaces of the cubes threatening to collapse? The little Andalusian wooden towers at the corners of the villas were trying to link their stiff arms. The noon ghost had enchanted the tropical world. Heat-frost sucked at every juice.

It produces, even in humans, the same effects as cold: flickering nerves, nervousity, little life-warm eruptions against the silence. Raoul was a northerner; so while his limbs hung on him like heavy alien instruments, his inwardness vaulted in a ravening desire for action and pleasures against the torpid resistance of the flesh. He sauntered heavy-footed as a sailor past garden fences, his head lifting with sweet images above the dead noontime. As he leant against a carved pillar, he heard footsteps.

It was a “civilised” female, wearing European ladies’ shoes but no stockings, the effect was shameless because the skirt was short, a somewhat outdated fashion that had made its way here from continental big cities, made of poor satin; at pocket height it gaped like a harmonica. As always with the island girls, it was worn clumsily, hitched too high over the naturally feminine hips and causing the belly to bulge, which the islanders considered the height of attractiveness. A yellow blouse of cheap fabric completed the graceful girl’s deformation. It was an unspoken rule that the so-called *civilised* natives, employees and labourers hired by the government, had to wear European dress, as Christianity demanded. The girl was bareheaded, short hobgoblin hair curled over the ears, the powerful eyebrows were a continuous sooty streak.

The little thing smiled while still some distance away, and directed her gaze at him. On a heated bestial impulse he stuck out a leg, she evaded it, laughed, and hurried on.

He saw the dark skin above the lace-up shoes and heard the swish of satin on her bare calves. Suddenly he became aware of how he was gaping after her, mouth open, tongue loose, a throbbing in the jaw. He was ashamed, adjusted the pith helmet from a numb spot on his skull, went indecisively down the lane, and headed for the office up the creaking steps. He was far too early, no one was there. He stretched out on a hard bench, and felt calmer. Satin shimmered before his eyes, and broke against voluptuous flesh. He made a resolution, and slept until woken by others turning up.

That evening he sought out Boguvic’s villa. She leapt at him, was inexhaustible in her demands, and in the morning released him exuberant and happy. His weight stabilised, he sailed around the island in the cutter or a canoe, and ventured into the interior. Slowly he got used to the stiffness of the vegetation. Tree-plants grew as if on wires, like the fake Christmas trees outside shops in Europe. Big fruits clung short-stemmed to straight branches. Huge leaves sprang from the ground stemless, nested around a core like a giant cabbage. Coconuts sprouted roasted and hairy between spikes. Copra was steamed over distant fires. Hordes of half-naked calico-clad figures shinned up slender trunks, or crouched low over wide fields where nacreous water was impounded. Amid close-packed trees, structures climbed untidily like nests: the islanders’ houses, that preserved them from dreadful spring floods.

On every strict Catholic festival, of which there were many, a marine band on board the little warship moored at the quay performed on glass-shiny brass instruments. Here everyone gathered and strolled, a dark-speckled company, for among Europeans, Australians, Americans, among the khaki-clad colonial troops, were dark-skinned sailors and mechanics and propped-up dandified princes of the native population, with whose aid the Governor made policy. Daisy-chains of *civilised* folk swayed up in bright blouses, arms linked, laughing with big flowers in the hobgoblin hair.

The Governor proceeded along the promenade and was greeted with ponderous gestures. He was slim, elegant, the strong head was like the head on a coin, grey hair at the temples. There was gold braid on trousers and shoulders. His melancholy African eyes seemed good-humoured. But now he cocked his head under the canvas helmet and whistled to the police dog, a Dobermann, that went everywhere with him and leapt at any female person on whom its master rested his eyes. The Governor rescued the native girl from the perilous proximity of the lovely canine jaws and long intelligent muzzle, he cocked his bright-minted lordly head to one side, whistled, and rolled the whites of his big eyes in a quite unmelancholy manner. Raoul caught one of these looks, and was not pleasantly affected. He eyed the dog, and recognised the girl – he had encountered her alone one afternoon. The girl looked gratefully across to the great man who had saved her from the dog.

“A noble soul!” Raoul said to young Fowler, who was walking at his side.

“The police chief, he sees everything, knows everybody, knows everything,” Fowler explained His Excellency’s presence. “The dog is a symbol and a badge. Wicked rumours have it that the creature is connected somehow to the old man’s unofficial love affairs.” He went on to reveal to Raoul details of life in the colony, while the entire population thronged about the playa. Dusk was creeping rapidly in, and the band was grotesquely mutilating the latest Viennese operetta at a breathless pace suited to Iberian castanets.

WHEN the Governor made his monthly round of the bureaus, legal offices and government enterprises, certain derelictions came to light, as usual. Too much materiel was being wasted; the losses amounted almost to the cost, defrayed partly by an official subvention, of one of those solemn dinners in the officers’ mess. Dilatory management of enterprises was bringing in less than the desired income. The tennis court, construction of which had consumed state funds, lay unused; officers, instead of minding their duties, messed about on the sea and ignored the ban on use of the official cutter. The general standard of morality seemed, on closer inspection of the statistics, to be not very high; in addition, the increasing number of newcomers on the island had increased the risk of political gossip and intrigues; and the chief of the secret department, who no longer ran his office effectively, was sacked. In his place came a firmer hand, newly-arrived Captain Alvarez, previously diplomatic attaché in a Chilean coastal town.

And there was a scandal in Major da Cossilias’ agricultural department: money had gone missing. The poor man protested his innocence: part of the amount had been paid in foreign currency; he had deposited it in his wife’s housekeeping cash box, intending to convert it later on; he hadn’t a clue where the useless foreign banknotes had vanished to. He was saved once again by his wife’s blonde hair. He was among hidalgos skilled in courtly romance; he had to pay up, close acquaintances of the voluptuous blonde da Cossilias advanced the trivial sum, and he quit the island, next stop Morocco. Senhora da Cossilias remained behind on the arm of one of the creditors, as security for the loan, and waved her fragrant embroidered handkerchief at the departing steamer. Her gallant was a young Jewish lawyer, who had arrived with Captain Alvarez and hoped to become conversant with juridical problems in the South Seas.

Even Raoul de Donckhard was not spared. Files lay in heaps. He had submitted a request for more personnel! Had anyone on the island ever come up with such a notion? Given the general and necessary constraints, where would one find suitable candidates? Among the blacks, maybe? The *civilised*? Raoul must come closer under the Governor's eye; there was in his face something indefinable, something that spoke of non-official considerations, something niggling in his expression. He wandered about the quay in mufti, had a strange way of eyeing people up, made expeditions inland, was often away from the island when foreign steamers arrived and departed. He made unusual use of the hot hours after lunch; instead of lying in his hammock, did he not snoop on what might be going on in the shuttered villas? It was inadvisable to impose the same demands on him as on a regular Portuguese. On the other hand he was intelligent and shrewd; perhaps, under the right supervision, he could still be of value to Portugal. He was moved to a department under the immediate oversight of the Governor, and was to manage the government printing office.

The Governor was disarmingly friendly and confiding while the matter was being arranged. He introduced him personally to the business, and then left him to get on with it. Raoul inspected the composing machines and printing presses. He read the day's pronunciamientos, despatches to the Foreign Office in Lisbon about the island's development, corrected typos in the various documents to be printed. When he reached the folding section, one of several dark female faces stared at him. They both smiled in recognition. He asked her name. She was called Marianne. When he found that she spoke a naïve but not at all poor French, which she had learned in the monks' school, he made friendly remarks every time he passed by. Printed papers flew through her smooth pale fingers as she made smiling enthusiastic replies.

His visits to Boguovic ceased. He ventured inland and found himself together with Marianne. Her story was as elaborate as a European novel, but she told it as if the tragedies had left no lasting impression. Her birth name was Thli. She had acquired the other one at her baptism by French monks. Her lineage was royal. Big wars had been fought by her most distant forebears with men from another island, over a princess. She was fourteen years old and had been *civilised* for three years. Her father had died early, in a fight with drunken Melanesian sailors who came with a British steamer and got into an affray with adherents of the French monks over a single pearl. Her father was stabbed in the throat, the artery was severed and it killed him. Her older brother was called Tumri and he taught her to aim wooden lances, they're very light, at the throats of effigies. When the French, who everyone loved, had to leave and there was an uprising about it, it was Thli's hut among the trees that was hit by a shell fired from a ship. Her mother was not at home. It opened her sister's belly, she lay there so pretty, so pretty. Thli depicted with no change of expression the natural course of this dreadful event. All the island people came to see her sister until she died. For these primitive people there was nothing repulsive about human intestines, clearly they were quite used to the sight. But Tumri and Thli vomited after the explosion because of the gas and the shock. Tumri was deported to a big northern country; when he and other youths were brought back at the demand of the American consul, he died of an inflammation in the chest. Thli thought it came from the bad air in the "thunder stone", and often laid a hand on her breast and indicated where it hurt. But she stayed cheerful as she did so.

The youngest sister, a three year old infant, vanished without trace in the explosion. When the mother came back, she went mad, stayed for days in the rubble-filled crater, digging with bare hands for even a fragment of the child's bones. She found nothing. Then she recovered wonderfully, and believed the child had been protected by the gods and carried away unhurt in body and soul.

Thli expressed no opinion of her mother's interpretation. Raoul reminded her of what the monks had taught, which must have aroused many feelings in her. But he noticed only that at a certain limit her powers of thought – not inconsiderable within her comfort zone – broke off suddenly. The new conception of the world remained totally subordinate to the old one. Even the monks had been unable to inculcate in her a fundamental scepticism regarding this epiphany. In her young brain, the only changes had to do with religious counting and formulae.

All the more remarkable was the understanding Marianne brought to real contexts. Raoul was naïve enough to take her to the cinema that Auburn Fowler had brought over from San Francisco. He started the experiment, and followed it systematically through. Marianne followed the successive actions – to the extent they were not subject to technical prerequisites of which she could know nothing – like a clever child. And yet marvels that should have left her baffled in fact astonished her not in the least. She took them for granted, needing no further analysis. Erotic scenes captivated her, she snuggled up like a white girl. She grew used to the music, and could dance European dances.

When they were alone she threw herself at Raoul and kissed him, not on the mouth but on the nose and between the eyes. Staring down at his face she said: "Sweet. Rat. You eat me up with the face." He waited without any amorous feeling for the follow-on. But all her passion was expressed in the kisses, she had no concept of the complicated erotic moves of a Farouche, or the insatiable sensual needs of a Boguovic – which he put to the test immediately after. And yet he could read lust in her eyes when she tore the metal pin from his tie, and blood came. Trembling with excitement, she let him bite her. When he gave her his pocket knife, she tried to pierce the scars in her earlobes that had grown over during her civilised period, and pass the whole knife through.

Raoul made no attempt – though it would have been easy – to instruct her in European ways of love, but rather left her to figure them out. Once he saw her with her mother in the mirrored fields, her feet in the dampness that trickled like a landscape-wide cowpat slowly down from the terraces. She wore an orange sarong around her hips, and flowers in her hair. He recalled her from the island's southerly cape. Without being aware of it, he had after all taken up the personal task: so strong was the instinct imposed on him, the law of his world view. The short tight feature in the mobile part of the skull, the lower jaw, returned. It would pass down ineradicably to Raoul's descendants, his entire race.

Raoul compared what was permissible. Thli was astonished when she understood. Where she failed to understand she showed no astonishment, simply accepted it, she had no organ for it. The northerner has an organ of astonishment. Our faces are simply always dumbfounded. The more we know, the more dumbfounded we are. Some never emerge from it. They constantly rub the brow, and you can see it: the brow is wide, and has a lustre.

Raoul was astonished by Thli. It was reasonable to assume that he understood her. For all her awesomeness and ponderous simplicity she could not be otherwise than how he conceived her: lacking big secrets, simple, and a little monster, a primal human being.

ONE DAY the civilised female Marianne made signs to Captain de Donckhard. He summoned her formally to his office, locked the door, and looked at her. She turned around, tugged at her blue blouse, laughed, and immediately burst into tears. It wasn't crying, she howled like a grieving animal. Even though for Raoul she meant an experiment, she was a female, she had the full lithe body of an unspoiled female. He realised something momentous was happening, he sensed an onslaught of passion, he would have no defence if, in her anguish, she would suddenly seem more female than ever. He hugged her tight, but still kept control. She explained. She had been summoned to the pharmacy. They treated her harshly. They forbade her, without naming any names, to have any unusual relationships with officers, and threatened to lock her up in the quarantine station. She had to lie in a chair. What they did to her she could not say, she had suffered fear, sensed some pain, and felt herself being touched. They made her promise to tell no one.

Raoul understood at once. At first he was disgusted, he wanted to push her away, but then he was overcome by a quixotic spirit. He realised that for some reason they wanted to take away his girl, and he recalled with shame his first night with Boguvic. He embraced Marianne more passionately than ever, took her immodestly onto his lap, and proceeded without pretence. She tolerated without responding or resisting, her eyes wide. Now she was astonished, she knew; probably she simply could not imagine a white man in this situation.

Then a thought leapt up in Raoul; he shuddered at a very mundane peril. Maybe they had good reason to test her. At his urging she went to the door, unmolested. Her grieving-animal look aroused him again, he called her back, for the first time kissed her full on the mouth, squeezed her breasts, hesitated as he gazed down at her long smooth shoulder blades, and pushed her out of the door.

He went at once to the Governor. He was met in the lobby by the adjutant, Lieutenant Marquis Almagova. "Good that you've come! His Excellency was asking after you." The lieutenant gazed curiously into his eyes. "Dreadful case," he said with comradely sympathy. He urged his sword on Raoul, who had come unequipped for ceremony.

The adjutant reported his presence. Raoul went in. Don Calgareos had unbuckled his gold sword, and after a chilly bow in response to the younger man's military greeting, approached with Moorish grandeur. He said not a word, stared at Raoul's heels until he snapped them together. Raoul, who had come to demand an explanation, stood silently at attention. The Governor planted himself before him, his gaze was direct, superior, judicial, might be taken for sincere. His eyeballs were very round. Normally he addressed Raoul as "My dear captain". Today it was just "captain". Raoul stood, mute.

"You have here, Captain de Donckhard, a mission to fulfil which places on you, and you alone, a quite special responsibility. You represent Europe's verdict upon us, and also Europe's civilised ways in the face of all non-Europeans. Pardon me, captain, I am

speaking. Your character, captain, is known to me, your intelligence too. There can be no question here of frivolity, or let us say an inadequate awareness of your own actions. But your comportment does not correspond to the task for which you were recommended to us. To be lenient I might characterise it as a, a personal protest – do I have it right? – as an overestimation of your position here. Never in my official career have I come across such a matter. You visited the cinema with a civilised female, captain, in seats designated for officers and their ladies. Even if there can be no official objection to natives and civilised persons in government service visiting the cinema – I personally” he added resignedly, “am of a different opinion, but there is this new wind blowing from up there; so, even if natives are in principle permitted to visit, nevertheless distances must be respected. Never before has an officer had such a notion. And then, captain, what exactly made you lose your head over this girl ...?”

“Your Excellency, my head for this girl,” Raoul said fiercely, no longer at attention.

The Governor squinted down at Raoul’s legs but made no comment. He spoke sternly: “Captain, the girl does not suit you, apart from anything else. Take the advice of an old man with experience, who knows all about these things and is familiar with life in the Tropics. We are looking out for your interests. We shall save you, captain. I myself have had this girl watched, and have watched her myself ...” Here he faltered, and looked aside into the corner.

“Your Excellency,” said Raoul, storming into the breach; he set his right foot forward and placed his weight on the left knee.

“... She is a dear delightful little creature, but ...” the Governor suddenly burst out in a strange passion.

“I shall say nothing of the personal,” Raoul continued. “The international outlook that I represent here, and which has spread around the world in recent years, treats all human beings alike. This is not just a matter of conscience, a whim of the Christian faith ...” By the force of his words Raoul diverted the Governor’s gaze to the crucifix hanging above the desk; “... it can be proven to be justified as a matter of reason. Nature cannot have condemned the overwhelming majority of humankind to be second-class. However simple and outlandish dark persons are, there must be some higher connection between them and us!”

The Governor was taken aback by this turn in the conversation. But he felt flattered that he was considered capable of arriving at more profound judgements. His voice mellowed, it took on the princely gravitas of a man who is superior not only in rank. Such a transition from the official tone would, he hoped, arouse a sense of gratitude in his subordinate, hence his human shrewdness might well not be entirely innocent in this case. For his features were refined, and not without traces of spiritual things. He said good-humouredly:

“You are an idealist, captain. You are naïve. I almost overestimated how dangerous you are. But philosophically, one might say, you are in the wrong. Nature is not in the least bit rational. I grant nature no more than is her due. She is just as rational and irrational as the individual human. She too consists as much of surging emotions as of reason. She acts, if you like, as much out of calculation as out of fantasies: her cold, distancing,

categorising power is called culture. Reason in nature has become the same as in a mature human being, previously nothing made any sense. She had to protect herself against this primal time, against the primal human, had to tame him, keep him at a distance. She does so by means of our civilisational principles, just as every day she sets the human being against his own instincts.”

The Governor fell silent, his voice as strong as ever, out into the space into which he had orated; he envisaged a giant auditorium, an entire globe that he no longer understood, all of his opponents. His head seemed to soar way beyond the archipelago, the face was turned towards the great cultural nations of the north, from which new religions of humanity emerged. And he felt this, his sovereign head, as a setting star, in the still sleek noble body he felt the strain of a battle with a younger world. His gaze drew back over oceans to the island, to the room, to his eye. It encompassed, with the love of the victor for the vanquished, with the noblesse of the stronger who refrains from taking matters to the bitter end, the present focus of this new world: Raoul’s plebeian figure, a bony gymnastic elegance, the tense weary twitch in a clumsily chiselled face. The Governor smiled placidly, an old gentleman’s smile. He had shown that he was not a complete fool, and not merely an official. “Please, at ease, captain.”

Raoul made a slight bow. “Your Excellency, I am happily overwhelmed to meet with so much understanding.” Once they had both grasped the meaning of this, they laughed. “My dear captain,” he held out his hand, “promise me, let the girl be, she is not worth it to you. If you try to fathom the Melanesian soul, you’re heading into a maze. The soul here is as hard and random as nature. Here only a hard simple idea can create justice, form and growth.”

Raoul became gloomy. His tone was false as he begged the Governor, sensing that he was surrendering to the man’s graceful irresistibility: “Take care of the girl, Your Excellency, she is worth it!”

The Governor’s laugh was jubilant. “Yes, yes, that I will, you can rely on me, captain. And I shall prove to you that the girl was not worthy of you.”

The adjutant congratulated Raoul as he took back his sword, he had heard laughter.

Raoul wondered: prove? prove? He ran to Lovadel the pharmacologist to beg a favour. Lovadel eventually gave in. Once office hours were over they went to the police doctor’s surgery, to which Lovadel had a key. In the police report book they found:

Civilised female Marianne. 14 years old. Unmarried. Healthy. Virgo intacta.

WHAT could the Governor prove? Raoul was consumed all next day by a yearning for Thli, a fire he had never yet felt on the island. He was incapable of work, thought of putting himself in Boguvic’s hands, or seeking refuge in the arts of Mlle Farouche. But white bodies bored him. When evening came and a pigeon on the veranda cooed insistently, for the first time he received Thli, by arrangement, in his bungalow. She came like a cat across the veranda, on a path no one could anticipate. When he pulled her to him, the fever in him broke. He swayed, sank back. “Go!” he cried, “he can prove it, he’s going to prove it.” She ran aimlessly down the lane. He chased after her, trembling for her,

they came to the gardens. He fell, he was found next morning after a search, on a bed in a native hut, and was brought home.

He raved for ten days. He saw himself running down the lanes calling for Marianne, she had been lured away from him. Suddenly he thought he saw her come in on the arm of Captain Alvarez. One morning he was found in the lane by the officers' mess, leaning against a carved pillar outside a villa. He was standing on one leg, the other he held at a silly angle, revealing feverish imaginings. He must have crept over the veranda like a sleepwalker, the servants had noticed nothing.

A good island spirit watched over him. The pharmacist's medications did little good, the fever persisted. But somehow overnight some hand had smeared a paste around his mouth and navel, the fever had abated. Lovadel and the police doctor exchanged glances, shook their head, scolded the coloured attendants, and wiped off the paste. On another occasion symbolic twigs and hollowed animal bones, feather-light, were placed in mysterious constellations around his limbs. A fresh rat skin was nailed to the door. The police dog they brought in to put a stop to the ridiculous superstitions whimpered cowering under the veranda, and had to be taken back.

On the eleventh day Raoul awoke from a troubled sleep and stared into a frightful cow-face. Before he saw it he had been thinking of his girlfriend's cockroach-coloured shoes, the satin skirt swaying as he watched. Suddenly he grew aware of the power symbol over his brow, screamed as if his spine was being twisted by a cold fist, and lay back stiff as a corpse. His fever magnified visible objects. His enhanced sight had exaggerated the tiny insect mask, chomping jaws and slack baggy eyes to a room-filling existence. For three days he lay demonised. On the fourteenth day, he awoke recovered.

Cracking jokes, they showed him an ordinary colourful horned beetle, *communis insulae cervocephalus*, that one night had been suspended just above his nose.

He had visitors. He found them a chore. When Bogovic spoke to him from below the veranda, he pretended to be asleep. The Governor came. He was overflowing, victorious. "Congratulations. But now you need a change of climate, captain. You see, nature does not help herself, she needs the help of culture. We stuffed the fever full of quinine. The superstitious conjurations of your black friends would have made it quite painful for you."

Raoul's thank you was toneless.

AFTER the fever Raoul was weak, unable to tolerate the least burden, not even the lightest clothing; everything in him went on feathers, his senses had become melancholy dregs. He attended to nothing and nobody, just looked out from shadow into sunlight until he fell asleep. Eventually he asked after Marianne. She was seen just a few days earlier in the printing works, now she had apparently disappeared. Raoul was too exhausted to put two and two together. Meanwhile he was gently brought up to date on developments during his delirium. A telegram from Washington, signed off in Brussels, had ordered his immediate departure from the island.

Raoul de Donckhard had shown himself inadequate to the mission to which cultural humanity's officialdom had summoned him. A second uprising had broken out on the

island. The causes might have been similar to those of the earlier outbreak, but little was known for certain about these obscure events. The unrest had been put down within a few days. Undersized seal-shouldered men with protruding ball-joints, women among them, had tattooed themselves to evil effect, stuck feathers and ornaments in their hair, through nostrils and earlobes, and stolen the sacred lances from the crater field. They hurled themselves at a column that set out from the other end of the island. One of the Whites fell victim – the bold young American Auburn Fowler, who dashed barehanded into the screaming throng and at close quarters received one of the flint-tipped lances in the throat. It pierced the artery, blood welled like a dark growth, he died at once. The whole of North America was in a ferment.

Slowly Raoul began to make sense of the changed world into which he had awoken. He did not understand, and felt around for connections.

He departed on the next steamer. It took him to Australia. The island lay like gaping dentures on a shelf, the seashell of a bay was a blue arc of gum below. Then came the green-black forests of kelp. When they were far enough away that the quay and the colonial quarter were no longer visible to the naked eye, Raoul heard a long melodic cry, a whooping as from a child, rising from the island. He shook himself, lifted his head to the breeze to chase away this little fit of fever. It was the signal Thli used to give whenever he was to meet her inland. That was so long ago.

As soon as the fit passed he took up his spyglass. A bird rose up from the middle of the island, flew long and let itself down on the last cliff of the southern cape. It was a dove, like a European dove but smaller and brighter, with flecks of colour in the little crest, golden wheel-eyes, and – he remembered the bird – a trilling call.

Raoul panned from the southern cape to the colonial quarter. He intersected the sea's surface where a slope-shouldered diver with glittering eyes had emerged zig-zagging like an amphibian. His closed fist held sand, something black-green, shells. Raoul trained the spyglass away from the water to the harbour walls. He lit on a dark quadratic gorge where a channel debouched to the sea. Rats sped out of triangular shadows, tumbled over one another, gnawing at something more than a piece of refuse. Raoul ventured no higher with the spyglass, quickly he lowered it from his eye and forgot it.

Raoul de Donckhard spent four weeks in Sydney recuperating in the dry climate, which extended here even into the souls of people. One day he could stand it no longer, he had read all the reports of unrest on the island, he had no business contacts, the fog of words in this noisy meeting hall that the country seemed to be swallowed every deeper individual voice raised in it. Once again he boarded a steamer just as it was leaving, and crossed the quiet ocean through Polynesia and the dark archipelago on to South America.

He was completely composed, conscious of his adventure, his rights, but also his misjudgement. He passed by several islands which from a distance resembled his. They seemed to be under the care of peace and a steady regimen. Even their souls lay exposed, hard and aimless as nature. Here, only one strong simple idea can create justice, form and growth. He went over it all once again. The ambiguous Saracen descendant with the Hermes skull represented the productive understanding of these zones. The politics of these southlanders – and again he saw Don Calgareos before him – rested on long experience. The intelligence of forefathers who had been mathematicians expressed

itself in the sleekness and nobility of these South Sea buccaneers. The Governor had not been entirely wrong. One should not lightly seek to bridge a gap made by nature. But the personal task? The individual's urge to find the primal soul? It was the echo of screams from the primal body, which is still apprehended in education.

The experience of the mathematician-descendants melded easily with the material baseline of the Raoul-human, and implanted once again a deeper trait in his face and the faces of his children.

When the vessel crossed the equator, Raoul stared hard to the north and believed – but it was a vision – that he saw his island and the southern cliff with the girl. He created the girl for himself: a soul from the earth's volcanic innards, shortly after the eruption, with pure sheer surfaces. *The girl was of the cliff's race.*

He thought too that he could see the highest cone, the crater with the empty niches. The lances, to complete the saga, had gone wandering again out to sea. They were bought up by the Museum of Anthropology in Heidelberg.

In Valparaiso Raoul soon quit the modern German business quarter, and by a highly colourful detour found himself in the international hotel section of the port district. He looked for a house someone had recommended. It was of the better kind, for officers on leave from Polynesia either recuperating or just passing through.

In a sequence of overstuffed red-lit salons, women of every race and hue were assembled. Suddenly a voice called to him in German. It belonged to a big voluptuous blonde, dressed as a lady in street clothes, not like the others in their costumes. He recognised her at once, she hadn't changed a bit, was just a little slimmer: the pretty Bohemian from the island, wife of cuckolded da Cossilias. She was here on a Sunday visit, once she had earned her hotel bill and a new dress she would move on to some other island and marry a lawyer who had contrived a papal licence for her divorce. Her former husband had disappeared in Africa, he never wrote. Yes, sometimes gentlemen from the island show up here. A lot has changed over there; Calgareos has gone, with the Boguvic woman and the two daughters, who are both engaged. New monitoring officers have arrived from Sweden and Austria. And – oh yes, she hasn't mentioned the most important matter! There's a surprise awaiting him. Please ask Mademoiselle Marianne to present herself – this to an older person who ran errands for the salon ladies.

The name entered Raoul's consciousness. He asked after Marianne of the island, the island girl Thli, had she ever shown up? "She was seen with you as you lay ill. Then during the unrest, when everything was at sixes and sevens, she disappeared. Alvarez – you remember the 'new secret agent' – went looking for her, she turned up at once, next day she was in the quarantine station. Alvarez – he has lots of close contacts here – actually he treated her very nicely, he even – "

At that moment she came through the door: Marianne of the island, Thli, gaudy as a peacock, a bizarre dusky beauty.

When Raoul was alone with her, she kissed him like a stranger between the eyes. He could establish no closer contact, she was quite clueless, she stayed passive. He questioned her, but she was reluctant to speak of the past. He left her, unfulfilled and bewildered. Their temperaments were sundered by a chasm. She had laid a hand at her

breast and shown where it hurt. The air here and the island there are sucking at her. She will take the same path as her brother. A royal lineage was dying out; it would go unremarked in world history. The primal human, nature's unreason, planlessness, a race of dove-people with golden wheel-eyes was expiring. Grenades, tuberculosis, syphilis were working away. The first thing the fish-men with the gleaming scales introduced to the island was – rats.

Raoul travelled through the Panama Canal, his steamer would call at the Azores, from where he intended to report for duty in the Congo. On board he got to know an American diplomat, who passed on lots of South Sea scuttlebutt. From him he learned the following story:

The island was ruled by a Portuguese governor, who tolerated the usual southern mismanagement. A Belgian monitoring officer had been sent out; he was said to be a competent organiser. But as with so many northerners, the sultry zone soon put paid to his energy. The continental monitor tried to extricate himself from Portuguese intrigues, but it was beyond the Belgian's powers. The governor hooked him up with one of his ex-girlfriends, a hotblooded Serbian coquette famous throughout the archipelago for her temperament. The Belgian grew sick of the affair. So an island girl was introduced. When disease broke out among the native population, there was an uprising. A young promising American lost his life.

"Do you know for sure that this all happened?" Raoul de Donckhard asked the diplomat.

"Quite sure," the diplomat replied in the firm tone of the well-informed; he was a South Sea specialist. "We had an informant there, who up until – yes, it was actually that young American, the one who took a lance in the throat, a certain Fowler, he was our informant."

"A fine rats' nest," said Raoul. "Now, tell me. Was it not possible that the target of the governor's intrigues was this young Fowler chap? Hm?"

The diplomat stared at him. "Calgareos has retired. He lives in Paris!" he said softly, hesitantly. They entered the Gulf of Tampico.

"Then the Belgian would not have been the only guilty party!" Raoul declared.

"Guilty – oh look, flying fish!" the diplomat cried, and rushed to the rail.

THE END

Müller's own blurb to the 1919 edition:

The mechanics of all Robert Müller's books are utopistically balanced. They begin deliberately at the start of a cultural period, where the mental stock is already found in certain psycho-economically equipped individuals. ... The story The Island Maid shows how, out of the Cosmic, a landscape becomes Soul. Politics, the exotic, love, civilisation and civil conflicts which are always with us cannot conceal the developing characteristics of an eternally recurring elementary human, who tomorrow shall be the human of the most acute consciousness.

In Robert Müller *Parapolimena* (Hamburg: IGEL 2019, p.97)