

MAORI JUSTICE



Another Ugly Smith Yarn
of the
Australian Barrier Reefs

By

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KAMAKA HAD been the first to sight the strange schooner as it headed in toward the opening in the reef, and he had hastened at once to the bungalow to break the news to old man Stovall. He stood there now on the porch, head and shoulders above the old trader, his dark, oily skin glistening in the morning sunlight.

"See, Mr. Stovall, he lose mainmast. He come long way, eh? No storm now for two, maybe three weeks. What you think?"

"It looks to me like the *Wasp*—Captain Bowker's outfit," the trader answered. "What do you say, Ugly, ever seen her before?"

Ugly Smith, mate, steward, and sometimes even cook on Stovall's own schooner, the *Lalanai*, screwed his homely face into a puzzled frown and shook his head. "No, sir, can't say as I have. They had better have a care, though, or they'll be loosin' more than their stick."

"Not if it's Bull Bowker. See, he's got her in the channel already."

The disabled schooner rose on an oncoming swell, as Stovall spoke, and slid through the narrow channel like an outrigger in the hands of a native. The plunge of her anchor sent a ripple over the lagoon and then a long-boat that had been towing astern was hauled up amidships and a white man with two blacks climbed down into it.

Bowker had reason enough to be in a nasty mood on that particular morning, for his disreputable old schooner had come to anchor with her hull half-full of water and the main mast but a splintered stump. However, he selected a very poor time to indulge his humor.

Ugly, Kamaka, and two of the natives went down to the beach to meet him, as his long boat crossed the lagoon, and as it grounded in the shallow water they waded out to help drag it in. Why Bowker should have been standing carelessly in the bow the way he was no one knew, but there he stood and as the boat suddenly stopped he went sprawling head first into the water. He was on his feet again in an instant, cursing vilely, and then he caught sight of Kamaka who was roaring with laughter.

Without a word his fist shot out and he caught the big Maori square on the mouth. And then, before the astonished native could strike back, if such a thing had occurred to him, Bowker had him covered with his gun.

“Laugh at me, will you? Yah damn nigger!” he swore. “I’ll teach you to respect a white man!”

Ugly had been laughing, too, but in an instant his scrawny frame was tense. “Put up that gun, you white-livered bully!” he growled. “You deserve to be laughed at.”

Shooting a black and shooting a white man were two different things or Bowker, in his rage, might have killed them both. He waded out of the water, swearing as he went, the gun still held in his hairy fist.

“Put up that gun!” Ugly repeated, “or by cripes we’ll make you eat it!”

Bowker pocketed the gun but he took his time about it and there was a look of contempt on his dark, heavy features. That is, Ugly took it for contempt; Kamaka in his native shrewdness read something deeper.

Kamaka was a full-blooded Maori from back of the reefs. The son of a chief, he had said, and there was no reason to doubt him. What had brought him out to old man Stovall’s plantation and trading post, no one knew, but there he was and they were glad to have him. For all his breadth of chest and mighty arms he was the culmination of bland good humor and more than that he was strong as an ox and an excellent seaman.

Compared to the big-eared, pug-nosed Ugly Smith, Kamaka was a giant, and yet he never

questioned the smaller man’s orders. Had Ugly commanded him to seize the enraged Bowker and relieve him of his gun the Maori would have done so without hesitation, though it cost him his life. They were as different as God could make them, and yet they were the best of friends.

“Why he hit me?” Kamaka demanded, when Bowker had moved on up the beach toward the bungalow. “Damn fool, why he hit me?”

“Because he didn’t like your sense of humor,” Ugly replied. “Guess he thought we should have cried over him.”

“I fix him for that. Him fool—damn fool!”

Ugly was a bit surprised at the Maori’s anger, though he certainly did not blame him. “No you won’t,” he said. “You’ll forget it unless he starts something else. If he does you can wring his neck. But you’d better keep an eye on that gun if you ever try it.”

“I watch him,” Kamaka muttered, and his dark, burning eyes followed the swaggering form of the man who had hit him until he disappeared through the door of the bungalow. It was really not vengeance that had stirred the big native. It was simply that his pride, his feelings had been injured, and now he sensed some impending evil.



THE INCIDENT had cooled in Ugly’s mind when he was summoned to the house later in the day. Finding Bowker and his employer seated on the porch, a bottle and two glasses between them, he knew they had been talking business.

“Mr. Bowker wants to beach his schooner here and make some repairs,” Stovall explained, “and he wants help. I told him I thought you and Kamaka would be willing to give him a hand. There’s no one else here who’d be of much help to him.”

Ugly nodded. “You’re the boss. What’s got to be done to her?”

“She’s got an open seam,” Bowker spoke up, “and I’ve got to step a new mast. Stovall tells me he’s got a stick that will do until I get to Cooktown.”

“What have you got for cargo?”

“Shell, but it don’t make any difference about that. I won’t have to unload her to do the work.”

“You’ll never get her beached high enough out of water to get at her hull unless you do. Most of it will have to be moved before you can step the mast, anyway.”

"I'll take care of that," Bowker snapped. "You tend to the hull. If I wait to unload her she'll be at the bottom."

Ugly shrugged his shoulders. From what he had seen of the schooner, drifting sluggishly in the lagoon, he guessed the owner was about right. He still failed to see, though, how anything could be done with her as she was.

"Well, it's your wreck," he said. "Put your men in the long boat and tow her in."

"My men couldn't pull the long boat, leave alone that waterlogged hulk. They damn near gave out before we got here. Use some of these lazy niggers you're coddling here."

Ugly frowned. He resented the inference but he knew there would be money in the job for Stovall so he left them to finish the bottle while he rounded up a few of the natives.

"Which way he come this place?" Kamaka inquired, as they headed out for the schooner.

"From the south," Ugly replied. "Says he's headed for Cooktown."

"Funny he come from south," Kamaka grunted.

"Why, what's funny about that?"

"Where he come from—south?"

"How do I know? I didn't ask him."

"I no think he come from south—come maybe east," the Maori muttered, and would say no more.

Bowker came down from the bungalow, as the sweating natives towed the vessel broadside to the beach, and made known his presence by a string of unnecessary oaths and orders. Ugly paid no attention to him until that much of the job was finished and lines had been made fast to the nearby fringe of palms. The next thing was to bury an anchor opposite the two masts and heel the craft over with blocks and tackle. There was only one mast, however, and with the hull weighed down, Ugly knew the task would be impossible.

"Well, that's all I can do with her," he turned to Bowker. "The tide will fall a couple feet and that may show up the leak. If it don't you'll have to break out the cargo whether you want to or not."

"Those hatch covers are not going to move," the trader growled. "Drag out that old spar Stovall was talking about and put somebody to work squarin' off the stump of that mast there on the *Wasp*."

"Why do that?" Ugly was surprised.

"Why? Because I said so. I'm not going to step it. I'm going to splice it."

Such a thing was possible, but it was

unnecessary and very apt to prove unsatisfactory. It suddenly struck Ugly that there was something more to the unloading of that cargo than Bowker's stubbornness. Kamaka had said he had come from the east, and Ugly could not help wondering.

"Shell an' what else?" he asked, staring straight into the small, close-set eyes of the trader. "Rum or feathers?"

Bowker's face grew red beneath his ragged beard, and his short, blunt fingers opened and closed menacingly. "Shell!" he hissed, "and mind your own damn business!"

Ugly shrugged his skinny shoulders, as was his habit on such occasions, and walked away. He knew, however, that he had come mighty near the truth about the cargo.

The stump of a mast was trimmed off during the afternoon, and the new one was hauled on board. Work ceased then, that the hull might be examined as the tide reached low ebb. Ugly and Kamaka circled the vessel several times in a dinghy, Bowker following them in the long boat, but they found no sign of the leak. When the tide began to rise again, Ugly turned to the trader with an amused grin.

"Now what?" he inquired.

Bowker muttered an unintelligible answer and climbed aboard his schooner. He called his crew into the cabin a few minutes later, four nondescript blacks, and when they did not come out again, Ugly dismissed his own gang and went back to the bungalow with Kamaka.

"What he got in that boat?" the Maori asked.

Ugly eyed him sharply. "What do you think?"

"I no know. He say he come Bundaberg way—I think he come Caledonia. He say shell—I think he make 'nother lie, too."

"Well, since you've asked me, I'd say you were about right. It's none of our business, though; you'd better forget about it."

"Maybe not our business—maybe plenty our business."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I no know—little more we see."



NIGHT, SOFT and quiet, settled down over the lagoon after a glorious sunset and the few lights on shore threw their reflections out over the still water. Ugly's home was aboard the *Lalanai* and strolling aft to the schooner's stern he lit a pipe and gazed

shoreward to where another light glowed in the cabin of the *Wasp*. The occasional sound of a voice drifted across to him but there was no other disturbance so he stretched out in a hammock that swung beneath the boom and puffed contentedly. The pipe went out after a few minutes, slipped from his mouth, and he slept.

Had Ugly been of a malicious nature himself he would have thought twice before giving in to the drowsiness that crept over him. He awakened once, as a faint splash stirred the water, but the play of a fish was the only thought that came to him, and he dozed off again.

When next he awoke there was the muzzle of a gun pressed against his ribs and Bowker stood over him.

"Get up!" the man whispered hoarsely, "and if you make a sound I'll drill you through."

Ugly swung out of the hammock and found himself surrounded by Bowker's four natives. He glanced quickly about, wondering what had become of Kamaka, but the big Maori was not in sight.

"Lash him up!" Bowker ordered, "an' damn your hides, don't bungle it!"

Ugly was helpless. In an instant the four men had thrown him to the deck and bound him hand and foot.

"That cursed nigger, now," the bully ordered, "he's aboard here somewhere! Cut his greasy throat!"

Ugly listened to the slap of bare feet as the natives darted about the vessel, expecting each moment to hear the cries of struggle, but the search was unsuccessful. He had been afraid at first that they had surprised Kamaka, also, but now he knew better. In some way the native had eluded them, and the thought was a comforting one.

"Where is that damn nigger of yours?" Bowker demanded with a kick at his ribs that made him grunt.

"How do I know?" Ugly answered, and then in hopes of aiding Kamaka he declared that the Maori slept on shore.

"That's a lie. He came out here with you, and nobody has seen him leave."

"Been watching us, have you? Just what is your game, anyway?"

"That's my business. Where's that nigger?" Bowker repeated his brutal kick.

"I don't know," Ugly retorted. "And I wouldn't

tell you if I did."

"You wouldn't, eh? You do a lot of talking for a shrimp of your size. We'll see."

Bowker took a dirty rag from his pocket and tossed it to one of the men. "Gag him," he growled, "then take him up on the fo'c'stle."

Ugly clamped his jaw, determined to resist the gag, but it was no use. The native seized his head, a thumb just below each ear, and began to squeeze. The torture was too great. Ugly's mouth fell open and the rag was crammed into it.

"Forward with him!" Bowker snapped. "Tie him to the anchor chain and slip the anchor. No noise while you're at it, either."

Ugly was seized with horror. He was no coward; he had slipped through the devil's clutches more than once, but on those occasions he had at least had a foothold in the land of living—a fighting chance. He struggled frantically at his bonds but they held fast and the realization that there was nothing he could do all but drove him mad. By sheer strength the four natives lashed him to the anchor chain and let it slip over the side.

He hung there, half out of water, half in, waiting for the few remaining feet of chain to be dropped overboard, a thousand insane thoughts racing through his brain. He saw the long boat drift around the bow; saw a line handed down to it, then heard the heavy chain scraping across the deck. The next moment it let go and down he plunged to the bottom of the lagoon.

Even then Ugly did not cease to struggle. A broken wrist or even a dismembered hand would have been nothing could he have torn it loose. It seemed ages instead of seconds that he fought against breathing. His lungs were on the point of bursting; his brain was a mad jumble of terror. And then something brushed against him and he felt a hand at his back. It seized his arms, and the next moment his hands were free. The chain fell away from him and with all his strength he kicked against the bottom of the lagoon and shot to the surface.

At first Ugly thought of nothing but air for his straining lungs, then he made out the black, woolly head of Kamaka.

"Here, you cut rope on feet," the Maori ordered, and held out a knife that had been gripped in his teeth.

Ugly took the blade and when his feet were free he placed a hand on the big fellow's shoulder that

he might rest and regain his senses. "I won't forget that, Kamaka," he said weakly. "Never—"

"Too bad I no come more quick," the native replied. "I think this way more better. That devil have gun and four men with knives. I think more better this way."

"Then you saw it all? You knew what he was doing?"

"Sure, I tell you I watch that devil. I see many things. First I hear noise on beach and go for look see. I say before him got no shell. He got feathers, you savvy? Him bird poacher an' thievin' devil. I see."

"So, that's it. I had a pretty good hunch."

"Yeh, I see him men pile many bags on deck, then he take long boat and come out here very quiet. I know then he mean to steal Mr. Stovall's schooner—maybe kill you for keep still, so I swim back."

"Good Lord, Kamaka, the *Lalanai*! I'd forgotten!"

"No trouble. You can swim now. We catch 'em before he take schooner. First he unload feathers from his own boat."



THE WHITE hull of the *Lalanai* was just visible over by the shore, and striking out quietly they swam toward her. Bowker was bringing the vessel alongside his own grounded craft when they caught up with it and they saw the natives climb aboard and throw a section of hatch cover across the two bulwarks. Almost immediately they began passing across the bags filled with contraband feathers, the breasts of thousands of slaughtered birds.

"You go for Stovall and some of the men," Ugly spoke in a whisper. "I'll stay here. We'll trap 'em red-handed."

"This not Mr. Stovall's business any more," Kamaka replied. "Before, all right—now my business."

"Don't be a fool! That devil has got a gun!"

"I no afraid gun, my friend, now you all right. You stay here. I look see."

"Nothing doing. I'll have a look see myself. Whatever you do, I'm with you."

Kamaka grunted but he did not argue further. He began working his way around between the two hulls. The natives were outlined against the starlit sky, as they crossed back and forth over the hatch covers, and Bowker could be heard urging them to

hurry from somewhere on deck.

Paddling softly back to the *Lalanai*'s bow, the Maori took hold of a bobstay and pulled himself up. Ugly followed him and together they worked their way aft, clinging to the outside of the bulwarks. Opposite the forward shrouds Kamaka reached over and secured a belaying pin from the rail.

"You see him there?" he pointed to Bowker. "When hatch cover fall, you throw. You no hit him, more better you dive back into water."

Ugly's nod was not seen in the dark but the big black seemed to know that his friend had understood. He crept forward then, and Ugly waited for the boards to fall. He had no idea of how Kamaka intended to accomplish the task from his uncertain footing but he knew the strength in those powerful shoulders and he did not doubt that he would succeed.

Minutes passed while the men worked steadily with the bags, then a scream from one of them and an oath from Bowker suddenly broke the stillness of the lagoon. The cry, followed by the splash of water, told Ugly that a native had gone down along with the hatch cover. He knew then that Kamaka had been waiting for just the right moment.

Clutching the pin at the small end, Ugly leaped over the bulwark and crouched down in the shadow. Bowker was in plain view, peering into the water between the two schooners, and Ugly hurled his pin. A grunt and a string of oaths followed, then Kamaka landed on deck and seized the enraged poacher before he could recover his wits.

The suddenness of the attack, added to the blow from the heavy pin, had thrown him off guard. Ugly saw him reach for his gun and dashed forward to snatch it away. Kamaka, however, was quicker. He flung the man against the bulwark, twisted his arm behind him, and held it there until the weapon dropped into the water.

"Kill him! Kill him, you damn niggers!" Bowker yelled to his men, but there was no response. Only one of them was on board the *Lalanai* and he stood paralyzed with fright.

Ugly watched the struggling pair, wondering what the Maori would do, then he saw Bowker's feet slowly leave the deck. His thrashing arms and legs seemed suspended in midair a brief moment, then he disappeared over the side.

"Good work, Kamaka!" Ugly declared, but the Maori paid no attention. He climbed to the

bulwarks, poised there a minute peering down, then he dove.

Down there in the dark water between the two hulls there was a brief struggle, then all was quiet. One, two, three minutes Ugly waited, then the black, dripping head of Kamaka appeared above the rail.

“You all right now, my friend?” he inquired.

“Yes, I’m all right,” Ugly answered quietly.

“Other men, they no make trouble?”

“No, they never raised a hand.”

“They be good now,” the big fellow nodded. “That white devil, he make ‘em too bad. Funny ‘bout him, he no good that devil. He like drown you all same rat but he no like die himself. He fight like hell.”

Ugly did not answer. He knew it was the Maori’s idea of justice, and a good turn for a wrong done a friend, but somehow the thought made him shudder.