

Imperium

A FICTION OF THE SOUTH SEAS



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TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY DANIEL BOWLES

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Grave et religieux il reprend sa calme attitude:
il demeure—symbole qui grandit—et, penché
sur l'apparence du Monde, sent vaguement en lui,
résorbées, les générations humaines qui passent.

—André Gide

Naked people have little or no influence on society.

—Mark Twain

Beneath the long white clouds, beneath the resplendent sun, beneath the pale firmament could be heard, first, a prolonged tooting; then the ship's bell emphatically sounded the midday hour, and a Malaysian boy strode, gentle-footed and quiet, the length of the upper deck so as to wake with a circumspect squeeze of the shoulder those passengers who had drifted off to sleep again just after their lavish breakfast. Each morning, if one were traveling first class, Norddeutscher Lloyd, may God curse it, provided, through the skill of long-queued Chinese cooks, glorious Alphonso mangoes from Ceylon sliced open lengthwise and arranged artfully, fried eggs with bacon, along with chicken breast in a spicy marinade, prawns, aromatic rice, and a bold English porter beer. The very indulgence in the latter among those planters returning home, who—dressed in the white flannel of their guild—had slumped down onto the steamer chairs of the upper deck to sleep rather than retreating decorously to their beds, made for an exceedingly boorish, almost slovenly sight. The buttons of their trousers, open at the fly, dangled loosely; sauce stains

from saffron-yellow curries coated their vests. It was altogether insufferable. Sallow, bristly, vulgar Germans, resembling aardvarks, were lying there and waking slowly from their digestive naps: Germans at the global zenith of their influence.

Thus, or roughly so, ran the thoughts of young August Engelhardt as he crossed his thin legs, wiping a few imagined crumbs from his garb with the back of his hand and gazing out grimly over the bulwarks onto the oily, smooth sea. Frigate birds escorted the ship on the right and left; it was never farther from shore than a hundred nautical miles. Up and down they dove, these great, swallowtail-like hunters whose consummate play at flight and curious preying maneuvers every sailor in the South Seas loved. Engelhardt himself was enchanted by the birds of the Pacific Ocean, particularly by the New Zealand bellbird, *Anthornis melanura*. Once, as a boy, he had pored over them for hours upon hours in the folios, had studied them and their glorious, sweeping plumage, which shimmered in the blazing sun of his childhood imagination, tracing their beaks, their colorful feathers, with his little fingers. But now, as Engelhardt sailed under their flapping wings, he no longer had eyes for them, only for the burly planters who, having carried within themselves untreated tertiary syphilis for quite some time, were now returning to their plantations and had fallen asleep over the dryly and tediously written articles in the *Tropenpflanzer* or the *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung*, smacking their lips while dreaming of bare-breasted, dusky Negro girls.

The word *planter* didn't quite capture it, for this term presupposed dignity, a knowledgeable engagement with both nature and the august miracle of growth; nay, one had to speak of *custodians* in the literal sense, for they were precisely that:

custodians of putative progress, these Philistines with their trimmed mustaches, styled in the fashion of Berlin or Munich from three years ago, beneath spider-veined nostrils that, for their part, quivered with every exhalation, and fluttering, spongy lips underneath, from which bubbles of spittle hung as if they would drift off into the breeze of their own accord, could they be but liberated from their labial adherence, like floating soap bubbles from a child's game.

The planters, in turn, peeped out from under their eyelids and saw sitting there, a bit off to the side, a trembling, barely twenty-five-year-old bundle of nerves with the melancholy eyes of a salamander, thin, slight, long-haired, wearing a shapeless ecru robe, with a long beard, the end of which swept uneasily over the collarless tunic, and they perhaps wondered for a moment about the significance of this man who at every other breakfast, indeed at every lunch, sat in a corner of the second-class salon alone at a table with a glass of juice before him, studiously dissecting one-half of a tropical fruit, then for dessert opening a paper package from which he spooned into a water glass some brown, powdery dust that by all indications consisted of pulverized soil. And then proceeded to eat this very dirt pudding! How eccentric! Most probably a preacher, clearly anemic, unsuited to life. But still essentially uninteresting. And especially futile to give further thought to the matter. Mentally, one gave him a year in the Pacific, shook one's head, closed one's eyelids, and fell back asleep mumbling incomprehensibly.

Those distinctly audible, creaking snores accompanied the German ship past the American Philippines, through the Strait of Luzon (there was no approaching Manila, because it was uncertain whether the war that had gripped the colony

would still turn out well), through the waters of what seemed to be the infinitely large territory of the Dutch East Indies, and ultimately into the protectorate itself.

No, how he detested them. No, no, a thousand times no. Engelhardt opened and closed and reopened Schlickeysen's standard work *Fruit and Bread*, tried in vain to read a few paragraphs, and, with the stump of a pencil he perpetually carried with him in the pocket of his robe, jotted on the margin of a page a few notes that he himself could no longer decipher a moment later, despite having only just written them.

The ship rolled along calmly under a cloudless sky. At one point Engelhardt saw a pod of dolphins in the distance, but no sooner had he borrowed a pair of binoculars from the shipmaster than they had already plunged again into the unfathomable depths of the sea. Presently, the trim isle of Palau was reached, the mail sacks were delivered, and the island was left behind. At the next brief stop, in Yap, several outrigger canoes approached the great ship haltingly; there were offerings of half pigs and yams for sale, but neither the passengers nor the crew showed even the slightest interest in the peddled wares. Meanwhile, a canoe, while veering around, was seized by the eddy of the screws and pushed against the ship's side. The islander saved himself with a leap into the water, but the canoe split in twain, and the provisions, only moments ago raised aloft by brown hands toward the skies, now rolled about in the frothing water, and Engelhardt, leaning out far over the railing and looking down, clutching Schlickeysen's book with one hand, shuddered at the sight of a half pig that first floated, festooned with still-bleeding sinews on its flank, then sank down slowly into the indigo-blue ocean deep.

The *Prinz Waldemar* was a robust modern steamship of three thousand tons that traversed the Pacific Ocean toward Sydney, departing every twelve weeks from Hong Kong, and from there approached the German protectorate known as New Pomerania, then the Gazelle Peninsula, the new capital Herbertshöhe in Blanche Bay (and in that very place one of its two landing piers), whose easily navigable basin had been designated, in a fit of optimism, as a harbor.

Herbertshöhe was not Singapore; it essentially consisted of those two wooden jetties and a few intersecting broad boulevards where the trading posts of Forsayth, of HERNSHEIM & COMPANY, and of Burns Philp had been erected, which, depending on one's point of view, might be regarded as rather impressive or less so. Then there was another fairly large building, that of the Jaluit Society, which traded guano in Yap and Palau, a police station, a church and its thoroughly picturesque cemetery, the Hotel Fürst Bismarck, the rival Hotel Deutscher Hof, a harbormaster's office, two or three taverns, a Chinatown hardly worth mentioning, a German Club, a small clinic under the provident supervision of Doctors Wind and Hagen, and the office of the governor, slightly elevated above the city on a hill covered in green grass that shone in the afternoon with an otherworldly gleam. But it was an up-and-coming, orderly, German town, and if one referred to it as a *backwater*, then it was only in ridicule, or because it rained so heavily that one couldn't make out anything at all thirty feet ahead.

After the downpours at midday the sun invariably shone, at three o'clock sharp, and in the chiaroscuro of the tall grass gloriously multicolored birds paraded about and preened their dripping plumage. Then, in the puddles of the avenues, beneath