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BIKMAUS

THE ECCLESIASTIC MOTUAN
Momoru Tabe Daera
IMAGES

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REVIEWS
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THE ECCLESIASTIC MOTUAN

by Momoru

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THE ECCLESIASTIC MOTUAN

by Momoru Tabe Daera

Deacon Mea Nao was a man who considered himself a very pious man; a man in perpetual divine favour; a righteous man, faithful to the alien christian religion. In fact he considered himself the perfect zionist. His staunch ecclesiastic involvement would have greatly appalled his heathen forebears who had displayed violent repugnance to the gospel-preaching white man, James Chalmers, during the 19th century. Indeed, they had not envisaged then that one descendant of theirs would become as religious as the white missionary.

As it was, the old deacon was esteemed for his sublime dedication to the church by ordinary laymen and top clergymen alike. The parish minister, Reverend Geno Iamo, liked and respected him. Three predecessors too had respected him and had respectively sent him as an evangelical emissary to the Western and Gulf district during the fifties and sixties. The 68 year old deacon had been selected as the first deacon of his clan in 1946 and since then had held the position, while his counterparts from other clans had come and gone. The old man attributed this long service to a certain leadership trait he had genetically inherited from his father, who until his death in 1927 had held the

eulogised position of village policeman during the times of the English and later the Australian administrations. It was this charisma, he would tell friends, that had seen him as the one and only deacon of his Adare clan for 32 consecutive years. He would also boast that this was also attributable to divine favoritism, though deep in his heart he doubted this; as God had not made it possible for him to impregnate his wife during their forty years of connubial life.

He even boasted that the Lord had surely attached a bond between him and the church and his retirement therefore would be out of the question. He'd say that he was probably the oldest serving churchman in the whole of Papua New Guinea, such piety he'd boast, was unprecedented in the religious history of the whole country and it was unlikely it ever would be emulated or superseded. For his unprovoked boasts, the educated younger generation would comment superciliously that Queen Elizabeth the Second of England would certainly have done Porebada a great favour by knighting one of her old son's, Mea Nao, for his 32 years of ardent ecclesiastic involvement.

His boasts, of course, brought about other things. For example, in the mid 1970s the younger generations had added to the Porebada parlance such similes as, 'as religious as deacon Nao' or 'as faithful as Mea Nao'. This pleased the old man to such an extent that he kept an ear open for such similes. If someone used them in his presence he would pat them gratefully on the back and when he got back home, he would pray asking the Lord to bless that particular person.

Indeed he seemed so pious that some people took it for granted that the Lord had surely allotted Mea a place in heaven regardless of the sins he would perpetrate in future. They also said that Old Mea had become a component part of the Porebada *Ekalesia* without whom the whole church would collapse.

When in 1975, someone rather superciliously assimilated him with the biblical prophet, Elijah, he had been so touched that he had broken down and wept to the

amusement of by-standers and passersby. After that he had grown almost a foot of beard which eventually became a favourite spot for lice and a dumping ground for bits of food, forcing him in the end to snip it all off and be content with an imperial.

He was also renowned as a free thinker, though the majority of the villagers regarded some of his dogmas with contempt, calling them unorthodox fantasies and anti-United Church tenets. One of his controversial opinions was that the end of the world would come at such time as when babies were born with pubic hair, and when six year olds would give birth. Of course the people accused him of heresy. Once in 1977 he caused a stir when he put it to a congregation that he believed that Jesus Christ had been married to one of the women who appeared throughout the Gospel; either Mary Magdalene or her sister. Of course, his critics branded him a degenerate Jehovah's Witness who needed psychiatric attention. Had there been such an entity as a religious court in existence, he certainly would have been a martyr as the people were very angry with him.

Despite his religious zeal, the old man was a bibulous man with a weakness for alcohol — something which his wife ceaselessly rebuked him for. According to her, alcohol was one of his loves, secondly only to his ecclesiastic duties. She would often warn him that the time would come when his love for the 'white man's fire-water would surpass his love for the church and all it stood for and there after jeopardise his standing in society. That would be the day, she'd say, the whole village would accuse him of sanctimony and defilement of his sacred deacon's position. To her, or for that matter anyone who dared reprove him, he would say that the consumption of alcohol was no sin because Jesus Christ himself had consumed this wonderful drink when he had walked the earth two thousand years before.

His wife's worries almost came true in 1969 when some members of the Porebada *Ekalesia* approached the then minister, Reverend Heau-Tau deploring the old man's drinking habit and telling him that the old

man should retire as he was past the stage of senility and was feeble in his duties. They said his drinking habit was past the stage of no return that he was already hooked to the habit. The old man's drinking habits had caused him to back slide through the years, they said. The minister did nothing. In 1977, some people from his clan again approached the relatively new minister Reverend Geno Iamo, seeking old Mea's retirement again putting forward the old man's bibulous bent as a suitable reason to justify their purpose.

However, Reverend Iamo turned them away saying that he esteemed the old deacon so much that he considered it a sin to force him to retire. Also he respected the old man for his long service to the church and respected the old man for his intrinsic seniority. He also had a soft spot for the old man, who reminded him so much of his own dear father, Iamo Rawali, who had died while he had still been a student at Rarongo Theological College, Rabaul back in 1968.

The old deacon had a drinking record that went back to 1961, the year in which the ordinance banning Papuan natives from consuming alcoholic beverages was finally rescinded. He in fact had been one of the first Papuans to taste the *tau kuorokuro's* (white man's) strong drink. Since then, he had regularly at a moderate rate, consumed it, cleverly planning the times of his drinking and his religious duties to avoid clashes.

One Friday in May, 1978, his wife told him to consider doing away with the habit altogether, this time for health reasons. The next day the old man partook in a drinking party that usually follows the payment of a bride price where he drank himself into a coma and had to be carried home. The following day he suffered the worst hangover he had experienced in his seventeen years of drinking. He lost his appetite for three days and lay convalescing for about a week, his wife telling him repeatedly that it was divine punishment he was undergoing. This incident again prompted ambitious young men from his clan to approach the minister to reconsider the old man's retirement. However, like before, Reverend Iamo turned them away. Even the presence of the

pastor, Reverend Hiagi Ga accompanied them could not change his mind.

That incident, did not cause any trouble as the one which took place in 1977 which culminated in the old deacon's death. This time the old man's bibulous bent was too far — too far for any of his christian or any of his enemies to be unaccounted for. It all began on the fourth of November, while old Mea and his colleagues were preparing the wine for the Holy Communion in his house.

When the other deacons had their backs turned, old Mea took a glass of precious wine and avariciously drank the whole two pints of it in one go. Of course, his colleagues never saw him. He noticed the disappearance of the wine afterwards. In his mind he begged forgiveness for taking a bit of his wine. He said about the matter. It was the most serious and degrading act any spying deacon and a devout christian could hope to get away with. An act one would deem possible only in fantasy. And it was a sight against him, would have paid hands to witness. Indeed such an act perpetrated by a devout christian was unbelievable. According to village law it was not an instance of petty trivial religious misdemeanour but a serious sin. The ultimate of sins. The intended blood of Christ was spilled. A punishable profanity, punishable by the ultimate in divine sanctions. If the act did not bug the old man's conscience, he regarded it as a triviality. He thought that wine was nothing more than an act of quenching one's thirst. It was as satisfying one's hunger. For a pious man who had vowed on taken orders to respect anything for the church's use, whether it be a glass or a flower vase, this was indeed a venous and contradictory. It was despite his religious seasoning, he knew that the wine intended for Holy Communion is symbolic of Christ.

pastor, Reverend Hiagi Gau, who had accompanied them could not change his mind.

That incident, did not cause so big a stir as the one which took place in 1979 — one which culminated in the old deacon's death. This time the old man's bibulous bent went too far — too far for any perspicacious christian or any of his enemies to leave unaccounted for. It all began on Sunday, the fourth of November, while old Mea and his colleagues were preparing the bread and the wine for the Holy Communion at the pastor's house.

When the other deacons had had their backs turned, old Mea took a bowl of the precious wine and avariciously downed the whole two pints of it in one great gulp. Of course, his colleagues never saw the act nor noticed the disappearance of the wine afterwards. In his mind he begged God's forgiveness for taking a bit of his wine and forgot about the matter. It was the most disgusting and degrading act any spying teetotaler or a devout christian could hope to see. It was an act one would deem possible only in fantasy. And it was a sight ambitious men from his clan, or anyone with a grudge against him, would have paid their right hands to witness. Indeed such an outrageous act perpetrated by a devout christian was unbelievable. According to village beliefs, it was not an instance of petty theft or just a trivial religious misdemeanour, but a sin of sins. The ultimate of sins. To steal the intended blood of Christ was an unforgivable profanity, punishable only by the ultimate in divine sanctions. However, the act did not bug the old man's conscience and he regarded it as a triviality. His drinking of that wine was nothing more than the natural act of quenching one's thirst. It was as natural as satisfying one's hunger. For a eulogised pious man who had vowed on the day he had taken orders to respect anything intended for the church's use, whether it be a chair, a pew or a flower vase, this was indeed contravenous and contradictory. It appeared that despite his religious seasoning, he still did not know that the wine intended for a Holy Communion is symbolic of Christ's blood

and as such is holy and stealing it or consuming it outside of proper rituals constitutes a profanity. At least that is invariably the opinion of most Motuan clergymen. Old Mea comforted himself also with the thought that as a man of God he was entitled to the wine either in it's sanctified state or otherwise. He however, had overlooked the fact that he had taken the wine not in an sincere outward and open manner but in a manner alien to honesty — furtively.

Had he looked under the table after the act, his assumption that his act had gone unnoticed would have been rudely negated, for the pastor's little daughter, Kori Keagi, happened to have seen him perpetrate his act. This knowledge would have come to him earlier had he not been an obstinate and habitual procrastinator in matters he deemed trivial or secular.

That night as he lay on the pandanus net reading the Motu translation of the Holy Bible, his wife Geua Vagi, who had learnt of his act from her sister Vaburi earlier in the evening, approached him with a worried expression. She sat cross legged beside him, totally unobserved by her husband who incidentally was slightly deaf in one ear.

"Mea," she said almost in a whisper not wanting to startle him. "Can I have a word with you?"

He made no sign of having heard her, so to get his attention she touched him lightly on the forehead just below his receding hairline. He started slightly, nearly scorching his arm on the blazing Coleman pressure lantern beside him.

"What.., what is it?" he exclaimed.

When he saw his wife who was amused by his fidgetness, he became annoyed.

"What on earth do you mean by startling the hell out of me? Have you anything better to do than indulge in childish endeavours? You know that I hate disruptions while I am reading the Lord's bible. Anyway what do you want?"

Putting on an expression that one puts on his face when one does not want to be troubled, he returned to his reading. In a pitch that she thought would be amply picked up by his partly deaf ears, she again uttered his name.

No response. Old Mea kept on reading, probably having assumed his troublesome wife had retreated some place else. She felt inclined to call the matter off but what she intended to talk about was of a very important nature so she decided to try one more time. Again she touched him lightly on his forehead and the result was far more resounding than the earlier one. He sat up in a bolt, clutching the bible to his chest, looking as if the world was about to fall on him. This time he was too agitated to be furious.

"What do you want? What's the meaning of starting and pestering me? Now what do you want?" he asked this in a tone that implicitly told Geua that what she intended to talk about had better be a sensible subject or else he'd resume reading after her first sentence. And even as he spoke, he glanced at the open bible in his hand putting a finger in to mark where he had left off.

"Well," she began, "I know you've heard this many times before, but please listen just this once because this is very important. You know I have warned you many times to cut down or quit altogether on your drinking for health reasons and ..."

"Ah that," he gave a low heartless laugh, "forget that. You know I'm as healthy as a plump toddler. And I intend to stay so for a good many years more. Now be good enough and go away."

He resumed reading. She still insisted on having his audience.

"But Mea, you just got to listen to what I have got to say."

Usually Geua succumbed to such irksome tenacity but this matter at hand was crucial and stubbornness was not discouraging her from getting his audience.

"This matter is very important especially for you. I'm going to sit here all night long. Unless I get an audience, I'm going to do just that. Now something is at stake ..."

Without taking his eyes off the bible, Old Mea said, "Nothing is at stake so far as my health is concerned. The Lord sees to it that one of his temples is not torn down by mundane diseases. Now take your groundless worries elsewhere."

"I will leave you alone only after I have told you what I have to say. Now Mea, when I say something is at stake I do not refer to your health. Rather, it is your reputation, your social standing that is at stake. That is because of some outrageous act you perpetrated at Reverend Heagi's house today before the Holy Communion. You yourself know what exactly happened, so I'll leave the rest to you. Thank you so much for your attention. Now I will certainly go elsewhere."

With that she rose to leave. She took a couple of steps only to be pulled back by old Mea, who had flung himself up at her with precision, agility and speed that normally cannot be expected from a man his age.

"Now wait a minute Geua. What's all this? How do you mean my reputation is at stake? And what's this about my perpetration of something?"

Her little struggles and pulls were in vain so she succumbed to his restraining pulls. When he sat down again, she began.

"Well to begin, let me ask you a question. Is it true that you surreptitiously drank the intended blood of Christ before the holy communion today?"

Taken aback by such a blunt and penetrating question, Mea could only sit and stare open mouthed at her. Any bold and adventurous house fly could have flown into his mouth, down his esophagus, inspected his interior and flown out again with no danger of his camping down his mouth. Quite alarmed by his somewhat subliminal state, she gently shook him and asked him if he were all right. Almost a minute passed before he replied in a subdued voice, "I ... I'm all right. Just leave me alone please Geua." He slumped wearily back onto the pillow with a sigh and thoughtfully contemplated the unceilinged roof without blinking an eyelid. Again Geua asked him in a rather maternal manner if he were all right and he said in a diminutive voice tone that he was all right and that there was no need for alarm.

"Really Geua I'm all right. I just want to be alone. Let's drop the subject for the time being. He closed his eyes and inhaled

much too deeply for a diminutive man. Grasping his tone of finality, his procrastination, she left him from past experience that it would leave the matter there for a while until such time as Mea him up again.

She did not raise the subject for the next couple of days which was not the fact that she had a poor matter was brought to the almost a week later, Friday the 13th. Both were out on the deck chair on that sunny day when rather unusually Mea brought up the matter. His introduction was barely in an effort to lessen the agitation he'd feel when he precisely talked about the matter.

"Geua?" he said after clearing his throat which sounded like the sound of metal scraping on a file.

"Huh?" she glanced up from her brooding.

"How did you know?" he asked in a sound offhanded and casual tone, trying to avoid Geua's eyes. I don't augment his schemes with a snarl, he decided against it. In any case, he was in an amused mood and any argument would have resulted in a croak.

"How do you know what?" he shouted out of annoyance. As for her, she was pretending and was an uninformed one. For that he had to scold her but for now he had to be operative to get her to tell him what she knew about the wine.

"How do I know what?" she asked, echoing him.

"Honest, I don't get what you're saying." Geua's face grimaced into a sincere frown as she contemplated the matter almost a minute, the old deaconess in his mind what best to do and she decided to let her grasp his meaning but he was not explicit. He considered the matter but just could not get himself to

much too deeply for a diminutive man. He took the open bible and covered his face. Grasping his tone of finality and so used to his procrastination, she left him. She knew from past experience that it was better to leave the matter there for the time being until such time as Mea himself brought it up again.

She did not raise the subject up again for next couple of days which was largely due to the fact that she had a poor memory. The matter was brought to the surface again almost a week later, Friday the tenth to be precise. Both were out on a home-made deck chair on that sunny Papuan morning when rather unusually Mea brought up the matter. His introduction was implicit, probably in an effort to lessen the guilt and agitation he'd feel when his own mouth precisely talked about the matter.

"Geua?" he said after unnecessarily clearing his throat which sounded more like the sound of metal scraping against a rasp file.

"Huh?" she glanced up from her own brooding.

"How did you know?" he made himself sound offhanded and casual as possible trying to avoid Geua's eyes. He wanted to augment his schemes with a small laugh, but decided against it. In any case, he was not in an amused mood and any attempt would only have resulted in a croak.

"How do you know what?" He almost shouted out of annoyance. As far as he could see she was pretending and playing the uninformed one. For that he would later scold her but for now he had to be co-operative to get her to tell him how she had come into the knowledge of that incident involving the wine.

"How do I know what?" she quizically echoed him.

"Honest, I don't get what you mean." Geua's face grimaced into a sincerely puzzled frown as she contemplated old Mea for almost a minute, the old deacon debated in his mind what best to do and say. Whether to let her grasp his meaning herself or just be explicit. He considered the latter but he just could not get himself to gather his

courage and speak of that disgraceful and profane deed of his. He doubted if he would stand the embarrassment that was sure to crop up after or when he had elucidated his meaning. He sat motionless and quiet for a long while that Geua inquired as to what was the matter. He made no vocal reply but gave his habitual negative headshaking. Luckily for him, she finally grasped what he meant.

She asked if he was referring to the wine incident and the subdued Mea gave his habitual affirmative raising of eyebrows, staring at the fixedly at the sun-beaten, windswept hills to the north. All at once the redness of his face and ears subsided, much to the relief of his wife. Then she related in detail what her sister Vaburi had told her. She told of how the four year old Kori had espied him from under the table taking the bowl with extra-ordinary slight of hand and in the same deft manner downing the contents, how she had been envious when she had seen him drink the people's lolly water in one great, all consuming gulp, how she had been tempted to come out of her hideout and help herself to the lolly water in the bowl. The little girl had then come out of her hiding place, run to her mother in the next room bathing in puerile excitement and had asked her mother why old uncle Mea had acted naughty and drank the people's wine while the others were not looking. She had told her surprised mother how she would like to punch old uncle Mea in the face for being greedy.

As she spoke, the redness once again accumulated on old Mea's face. His eyes too had become bloodshot, his pride, self respect and dignity plunged lower as she spoke, and how he sweated. His sweat glands secreted their contents and when the pores were inundated, great slobes of sweat streamed down in rivulets down his chest and accumulated in pools among the folds and nooks in his abdomen. He didn't take the trouble to wipe them off and in any case, he was much too troubled to do such insignificant and trivial things. That would not contribute in any way toward the alleviation of his agitation. Geua spoke on.

"When her mother heard everything she instructed her not to mention anything to anyone else or her daddy would give her the beating of her life." Geua paused, bent over and spat red spittle through the cracks in the floorboards. She straightened up again. "Yes like I said, Vaburi warned her not to tell on you or she'd be spanked. Vaburi told me everything that same night. And when I came home I approached you but you were unco-operative at first. Of course, her father Reverend Heagi Gau, does not know so it's a secret between Vaburi, her little Kori and you and me."

Then she went on about beseeching the Lord's forgiveness. The little girl's mother, Vaburi incidentally is Geua's kids sister and so it was natural that Geua be the first person Vaburi had to approach about the incident. Moreover, Geua was the wife of the man who had perpetrated that outrageously impious deed.

Vaburi's advice, which was to be passed by Geua onto her husband, was that such an outrageous act should not happen again whatever the circumstances. It was a profanity. He had drunk that expensive wine at the expense of the church and it was nothing less than stealing from God and more importantly illegally drinking Christ's intended blood. If such a thing happened again, she would forget that old Mea was her brother-in-law and report it to her husband, Reverend Heagi. The deed being of a very serious nature, it was then crucial that necessary steps had to be taken to appease God. That would be done sufficiently, she had advised, by praying for forgiveness as soon as possible to keep *Nakimi* (brother-in-law) Mea's record in the eyes of the impeccable one.

Being Mea's wife, Geua naturally had been greatly embarrassed when her kid sister had divulged the secret. And Geua had been particularly grateful that her sister was prepared to partake in the complicity, at the risk of her reputation as a honest and religious woman. Geua had it in mind that it was indubitable, that she would share her husband's humiliation when or if this shameful affair became public knowledge or worse

still, she might even suffer the full brunt of the people's jeers and general ostracism. But such mundane castigations were mere trivialities compared to the imminent wrath of Jehovah Sabaoth. So it then was of paramount importance that he who made heaven and earth be appeased as soon as possible before this great religious misdemeanor was written in his great book of sins, irrevocably and in indelible ink at that. And what better time to beseech the Lord for forgiveness than today.

Mea lay quietly, head bent for a long while after Geua had finished speaking. He was probably waiting for the redness of his face to disappear or just waiting for his ability of speech to return. After a while, he set the hammock in a gentle swaying motion and spoke.

"I ... I guess we had better do what she advised and beseech the Lord's forgiveness. I asked God's forgiveness after I drank that wine but I guess that was a half hearted and informal one and I doubt if he accepted or even heard it. I suppose he will hear and accept a second and formal one."

"He sure will. You can be assured of that." She gave him that maternal smile of encouragement. "When do we pray? Now?"

Old Mea thought this over and then said, "I guess so but we can't pray here in our house. It's not what I call a sanctified place. There is only one sanctified place here in the village and that is the church."

"But Mea, we can't go into the church to pray at this time of the day. And today's not Sunday mind you. People will call us show-offs or hypocrites and superficial christians like those referred to in the bible ..."

"I didn't say we are going now in broad daylight. I said ..."

"Right, we'll make it tonight. Midnight perhaps."

"Yes, yes Geua my love. Tonight at midnight." Old Mea was at his most obsequious, evidently anxious to get everything over with. He sat up on the hammock excited. Had Geua not stood up to go into the house, he certainly would have pounced on her, he could dance a jig with her in thankfulness for her unusually good memory and

thoughtfulness. During incident had been nagging but now, tonight, his conscience clear again. Tonight after for forgiveness he would. Thank God for a wonderful wife. He smiled and settled on the hammock.

That night past midnight, sure the whole village had they took their hurricane house, which is at the north the village three or four miles the church and made their way. They made their way along which was brightly illuminate street lights, keeping their eyes bold member of the villages tion who were barking furiously.

A turbulent *Laurabada* was ruffling the single tree and palms near the pastor's residence for the noise, the two not discouraged by croaking frog chirping crickets and cries of nocturnal creatures which in the hinterlands of the grass the north, for despite their christian nurturing, some had their hearts harboured the (black magic) and the fear of unknown and the occult. To of security or courage they held walked on.

Not until they reached the of the churchyard did they feel secure. Finding the north-locked, they detoured the came to the south-eastern gate discovered that it was open, to it to divine power. They debated to go in or just abandon everything old Mea said that he was sure of the gate being readily of divine welcome. Geua agreed servedly.

Filled with wonder and trepid entered the enclosure, treading they ascended the concrete

thoughtfulness. During the week the incident had been nagging his conscience but now, tonight, his conscience would be clear again. Tonight after he had prayed for forgiveness he would be in the clear. Thank God for a wonderful and thoughtful wife. He smiled and settled luxuriously back on the hammock.

That night past midnight, when they were sure the whole village had gone to sleep, they took their hurricane lamp, left their house, which is at the north-western end of the village three or four minutes walk from the church and made their way to the church. They made their way along the sandy street which was brightly illuminated by fluorescent street lights, keeping their eyes open for any bold member of the village canine population who were barking furiously at them.

A turbulent *Laurabada* was blowing noisily ruffling the single tree and two coconut palms near the pastor's residence. Had it not been for the noise, the two might have been discouraged by croaking frogs, hooting owls, chirping crickets and cries of a host of other nocturnal creatures which were prevalent in the hinterlands of the grassy savannah to the north, for despite their more or less christian nurturing, some hidden corner in their hearts harboured the belief in *Vada* (black magic) and the fear of the dark, the unknown and the occult. To get some form of security or courage they held hands as they walked on.

Not until they reached the wire enclosure of the churchyard did they feel completely secure. Finding the north-western gate locked, they detoured the enclosure and came to the south-eastern gate. When they discovered that it was open, they attributed it to divine power. They debated whether to go in or just abandon everything but then old Mea said that he was sure that the fact of the gate being readily open indicated divine welcome. Geua agreed quite reservedly.

Filled with wonder and trepidation, they entered the enclosure, treading lightly as they ascended the concrete stair. Their

wonder increased on the discovery that the main door was ajar and old Mea whispered that the Lord was indeed with them and wanted them to enter and go on with what they had come for. They also took the opportunity to look around the deserted street in case they were being observed by late night strollers but they found nothing to this effect. Old Mea turned down the wick of the lamp and placed it on the threshold to make it all the more easier for them to pick up on their return. They entered and for a moment stood quietly scrutinising the all too familiar interior, well lit by fluorescent bulbs.

In contrast to the outside, the interior was deathly quiet — too frighteningly quiet for their liking. The silence was broken at short intervals by the somewhat melancholy ticking of the clock on the wall to their right. They strained their ears and caught another sound which sounded like something rubbing against the floor and it came from the front. The Porebada church is a cross-shaped building. Mea whispered that the sound was coming from the transept section of the church and that it was probably a rodent gnawing at some poor timber. Thinking all was well, they advanced forward along the aisle, slitting their eyes to counter the glare of the polished pews. The hissing sound of their dusty feet on the rug, drowned the ticking of the clock and even the rubbing sound they had attributed to a rodent. When they reached the raised altar, they nodded encouragement at each other and knelt down on their knees ready for their orison.

Now as fate would have it, the janitor and general cleaner, Seri Vagi, a middle aged man nicknamed 'Mr Vagi' and a mental retardate happened to be behind the altar deeply engrossed in mopping the floor. His mopping thus explained the faint rubbing noise old Mea had attributed to a rodent. The mental retardate had decided to work late cleaning out the mess left by the religious youth organisation, the Porebada *Tosi Beara* (Torch Bearers) who had used the transept area earlier in the evening to rehearse on the play on the birth of Christ in preparation for Christmas Day.

As it was, each party was unaware of the other's presence and so when old Mea in sing-song fashion chanted loudly, "Oh Lord, Almighty in Heaven," to begin his prayer, the mental retardate dropped the mop and stared wildly around expecting to see a divine messenger. Fear clutched his heart and he began whispering, "Oh Lord, not me ... not me ... please Lord." And when the wooden handle of the mop hit the cement floor, he lost all ability of reasoning that his diseased mind was capable of, screamed for help and unhesitatingly dived headlong through an open window and all at once all hell broke loose inside.

Mea and Geua simultaneously opened their eyes in mid prayer and fearfully looked at each other probably debating through telepathy whether to remain or flee. And when the janitor's scream pierced the air, they too lost their scruples and fled jostling, stumbling and falling over each other as they went, not caring to retrieve the hurricane lamp. They paid no heed to the barking canines that charged at them and it was doubtful if they ever were aware of the increasingly number of flashlights that were being shone at them from distant houses. They did not stop until they were safe inside their home where they both collapsed in the centre of the room, panting and gasping for breath like two runners who had just completed a gruelling marathon.

The effects of their 300 metres dash from the churchyard augmented by the bumps they received in falls was more than enough for their senile bodies to contain so they went to sleep where they had collapsed, too fatigued to even crawl to their sleeping mats which were not more than five metres from them. The sight was enough to make the cruellest of hearts have pity.

The citizens of the Porebada community are by nature an inquisitive and gossipy lot. At least that is the opinion of the people of neighbouring villages of Kouderika and Boera. This fact has brought about the introduction of the similes 'a case of Porebada inquisitiveness' and 'as gossipy as a Porebadan'. The Porebadans are also reputed to gather in large numbers over any

event whether it be one as insignificant as when someone accidentally cuts a foot on a broken piece of glass.

So it was no wonder that all the talk in the village the next morning be about a commotion that had woken a lot of people last night. The villagers had gathered in crowds in the street inquiring as to what had caused that commotion. There were speculations that it had been caused by young rascals with the sole intention of waking the whole village up for no good reason. Some, who had been woken earlier and saw the old deacon and his spouse running out of the church speculated that it had been caused by furniture thieves in the church. They even emphasised that they had seen the thieves fleeing to the north-western end of the village. Oddly enough, no-one even had the idea of investigating the church. In their excitement it was doubtful if they ever noticed that the main gate was ajar. There were those who were so sensational as to attribute the commotion to the activities of the *Vada*. To sum it up the whole village was excited or in an uproar over the commotion that the janitor, Seri Vagi, old Mea and his wife had caused. Seri Vagi refused to come out in the open and confess that he had been a contributing factor to the commotion. He had received no serious injuries in his headlong dive through the window, except for cutaneous scratches and bruises he had sustained on contact with the security wiring around the church. His diving through the open window to the ground, a height of four metres, is indeed a feat for even the boldest of stuntmen would have shied away from. Luckily for him he had a serious case of sipoma, which seemed to thrive despite regular embrocation with the green medication the aid post orderly had supplied him with. It certainly would have been impossible for any amateur sleuth to differentiate between the scratches and the rest of his scaly body. They were so cleverly camouflaged that no-one would have guessed their existence, provided that person knew beforehand that Seri Vagi had in actual fact contributed to the commotion.

As for the old deacon and his wife, they were still feeling the effects of their sprint,

particularly in the muscle and their bodies. They elected to spend the day in the house and not even go to the porch or down to the street. If someone might, with uneasiness, connect them to the commotion, it was an ably justifiable fear as they learnt from Henao Igo, the young woman from the neighbouring house, called in to get a coconut scraper, they learnt from the whole village was in an uproar over the commotion last night. She told them some furniture thieves had been in the church but had been routed by the dogs. And the wretched thieves had fled this side of the village. To this, the deacon and wife exchanged glances and they both sequiously agreed.

When she left their abode, Mea and Geua relief said that evidently no-one in the neighbourhood had seen the thieves or recognised them. The words of the woman Henao Igo, testified to the unhappiness of Geua.

For the whole morning period Mea and Geua were engrossed in asking the Lord to forgive them for their presence. They would not see him again if ever another chance came at this point of time, they were full that the noise they had heard in the night had come from a celestial source. Seri Vagi too spent a lot of time in beseeching forgiveness and for once his retarded mind was capable of something.

Sometime after twelve noon Mea was thrown on the matter when the hurricane lamp which was still burning, was extinguished by Reverend Heagi Gau while he was investigating why the main gate had been left ajar over night. He had a bucket of water and the mop and broom. He had a hunch that these were something to do with the commotion.

Naturally Segi Vagi was the first to approach him about these things. He could not have chosen a more appropriate time to call in on Seri Vagi than when the janitor was deeply engrossed in his many forgiveness beseechings. As it was the janitor was on his

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particularly in the muscle and joint areas of their bodies. They elected to spend the whole day in the house and not even venturing to the porch or down to the street for fear that someone might, with unearthly ability, connect them to the commotion. A reasonably justifiable fear as they learnt later. When Henao Igo, the young woman from the neighbouring house, called in to borrow their coconut scraper, they learnt from her that the whole village was in an uproar over a commotion last night. She told them that some furniture thieves had entered the church but had been routed by the village dogs. And the wretched thieves had fled to this side of the village. To this, both husband and wife exchanged glances and most obsequiously agreed.

When she left their abode, Mea with some relief said that evidently no-one from the neighbourhood had seen them both and recognised them. The words of the young woman Henao Igo, testified to this, he told the unhappy Geua.

For the whole morning period up till noon, Mea and Geua were engrossed in prayers asking the Lord to forgive them for cringing from his presence. They would not flee from him again if ever another chance arose. At this point of time, they were fully convinced that the noise they had heard in the church had come from a celestial source. Incidentally, Seri Vagi too spent a lot of time in prayer beseeching forgiveness and for other reasons his retarded mind was capable of contriving.

Sometime after twelve noon, some light was thrown on the matter when the hurricane lamp which was still burning, was discovered by Reverend Heagi Gau while he had been investigating why the main gate and door had been left ajar over night. He also found a bucket of water and the mop behind the altar. He had a hunch that these things had something to do with the commotion.

Naturally Segi Vagi was the only person to approach him about these things. And he could not have chosen a more unsuitable time to call in on Seri Vagi than at a time when the janitor was deeply engrossed in one of his many forgiveness beseeching prayers. As it was the janitor was on his knees when

the pastor, a slight man almost six stone in weight, walked silently and bawled out, "Mr Vagi" into the dark interior of the house. Seri Vagi broke off his prayer and yelled, "Lord have mercy on me," and fell flat on his stomach, his hands shielding his head as if he were receiving some unseen blows. The pastor, caught unawares, jumped simultaneously backward through the door very much startled and had his brain not recognised the janitor's voice, he certainly would have fled. He re-entered the door, paused at the threshold and waited for his eyes to become accustomed to the pitch blackness of the interior. Then he advanced inside and found the janitor who was still in his cowering position, mumbling unintelligently and shaking his head in a paroxysm of terror. He called his name but when this brought no good result, he began shaking him roughly to get him out of his shock. His shaking brought the janitor out of the entranced state and Seri Vagi stood up shakily and unsurely, his palms covering his eyes. If the person who was beside him was an angel, he was going to flee out of the house. He slowly lowered his hands, holding his breath. When he saw that it was none other than the village pastor, he shamefully bent his head and stared at the floor.

The perplexed pastor asked him what had happened but he gave no reply. After a long while, in which time Seri Vagi had regained his countenance and ability of speech, he explained that he had been begging God's forgiveness for a small sin, when he had been startled. Then the pastor told him his reasons for calling in on him. He wanted to know if Seri Vagi knew anything about the lamp he had found at the threshold of the church.

"A lamp?" the janitor asked his face grimacing into a frowning mask, his fingers scratching at the white map like designs on his barren pate. The rest of his green painted body itched and he felt like scratching but he was ashamed of the deep rasping sound that would result. He would later mercilessly scratch at those prominently itchy places after the pastor had gone.

"Hmmm, I found it still burning at the

door. Do you have any explanations for that?"

"But I do not use a lamp to do my duties Pastor. The church is well lit by the white man's glowing tubes. Why would I need one? A somewhat triumphant look came over his face. Indeed he had a point there.

"You're right there but let's leave that matter. I want to know why you left the main gate and door open over night. And why you left the mopping unfinished. Most importantly, do all these things have anything to do with that commotion last night? By the look of things there, I could see that you were interrupted by something. Have you anything to say on these matters?"

At this a fearful and haunted look came over the janitor's face and he refused to speak, his attention was on a piece of areca nut husk his big toe was fiddling with on the floor. In his mind's eye he saw himself being handcuffed and bundled into a police van. He was sure that the pastor was investigating for the Port Moresby police. Something precious had been stolen from the church and he was being interrogated. For this reason he refused to speak. As if he had read the janitor's mind, the pastor told him that there was nothing to be scared of, that this was not a matter for the police.

"And besides if you do not co-operate you will be fired. Someone else will replace you. Come on now, I want an explanation."

Only then did the janitor break his reticence.

"But pastor, what I have to say is ineffable. It's too sacred to be spoken of, especially in this wretched lowly abode of mine. I dare not speak about it."

Again he sank into a entranced state. The pastor nagged him; all to no avail. His patience was getting short. As a last resort, he warned the janitor that if he did not speak, the God in heaven who made all things would be greatly angered and probably put an end to his life. Only then did the alarmed Seri Vagi speak. Passionately he related how the Lord had spoken to him last night while he had been mopping the floor and how he, on getting terrified, had dropped the mop, dived through a window and run home exciting the village dogs in the act. The

commotion that had been heard by some villagers had been caused by the barking dogs and a host of other unearthly noises from the church. When he finished the pastor questioned the substance of his allegations.

"God's truth pastor. I heard that booming, commanding and authoritative voice and looked around but saw nobody. Terrified, I turned and dived out of the window!" He passed and during that time his diseased mind worked.

If the pastor was genuinely interested, then he Seri Vagi of Gunina clan was on the threshold of something big. Something religiously big. Already he saw himself as an evangelist on a religious mission to the Aroma or Kerema regions, preaching the Gospel, all because he had been fortunate enough to have seen a vision. He knew of people who had seen visions or had been in divine presence, who subsequently had been sent on evangelical missions. One such person was that haughty old deacon, Mea Nao, but he had been sent on such missions not because he had seen a vision or anything of that nature. If this story was believed he would surpass the old deacon in every way. If he made his story colourful, then surely it would be given top priority in the next synod. And if the pastor believed his story, then there was no reason why the top brass in the whole United Church entity would reject his story. That was because Reverend Heagi Gau was much esteemed by the prelacy in Port Moresby. When his dreams came true, he would surely denounce Mea Nao the contumelious, haughty and arrogant deacon who was just short of deifying himself. He would make him crawl on all fours for his part in laughing at him while he, Seri Vagi, had been in the lowly position of janitor and general cleaner. That would come about only when his story was accepted and acceptance depended on his artistic and eloquent ability. Thus Seri Vagi, rather too cleverly for a retardate, painted his story.

He had been, as he'd said before, terrified when he had heard that divine voice. He had seen nobody on looking around but he had noticed something like an illuminated cloud hovering over the altar but had not paused to take a good look. Then he had dived

through the window screaming and paused to scratch at his stomach as the commotion continued.

"As I sailed through the air I heard unearthly sounds behind me. It sounded like a storm was in progress and how wonderful those sounds were. I should have been to see those angels," he regretted the back of his head. "The fool I was when I dived it was as if I was falling pastor. It was as if I was delivered to the ground by those dogs attacked me. I did not seem to get within a halo. They seemed to have been an unseen halo of unearthly energy anatomy. Ah pastor it was a strange experience. You can imagine."

"That's enough Mr Vagi," he said in a dry voice. I must go. Everything will become clear. The owner of this lamp is established. No doubt. Thank you for your story. Reverend Heagi Gau walked out leaving Seri Vagi shaking his head in a disappointed manner and his tongue in disbelief. In his mind his evangelical dreams falling stars to their pointless nadirs.

By Sunday old Mea and slightly recuperated from their pains. They attended the service they were so fidgety about. Another deacon accidentally Mea during prayer, he almost and screamed. They even availed at the spot they had knelt down. Old Mea was told to conduct prayer, he walked to the front not to tread on that particular when they filed out, they opted to exit by the back door. Only when out of the churchyard did they feel more at ease.

Also by Sunday almost every village had heard of the janitor's encounter with divine presence. The retardate seemed to get pleasure from the same thing to the people.

through the window screaming for help. He paused to scratch at his stomach and then continued.

"As I sailed through the air to the ground I heard unearthly sounds coming from behind me. It sounded like a heavenly choir was in progress and how wonderfully sweet those sounds were. I should have lingered to see those angels," he regretfully slapped the back of his head. "The fool I am. Anyway when I dived it was as if I was floating and not falling pastor. It was as if I was being safely delivered to the ground by an angel. And when those dogs attacked me as I ran, they did not seem to get within a metre of me. They seemed to have been repelled by an unseen halo of unearthly energy around my anatomy. Ah pastor it was indeed a very strange experience. You can imagine ..."

"That's enough Mr Vagi," the pastor cut him off in a dry voice. I must be off now. Everything will become clear when the owner of this lamp is established beyond doubt. Thank you for your co-operation." Reverend Heagi Gau walked out of the room leaving Seri Vagi shaking his head in a disappointed manner and clicking his tongue in disbelief. In his mind's eye he saw his evangelical dreams falling like shooting stars to their pointless nadirs.

By Sunday old Mea and his wife had slightly recuperated from their aches and pains. They attended the service. During the service they were so fidgety, that when another deacon accidentally elbowed old Mea during prayer, he almost jumped up and screamed. They even avoided looking at the spot they had knelt down on and when old Mea was told to conduct the concluding prayer, he walked to the front making sure not to tread on that particular spot. And when they filed out, they opted to make their exit by the back door. Only when they were out of the churchyard did they feel once more at ease.

Also by Sunday almost everybody in the village had heard of the janitors alleged encounter with divine presence. The retardate seemed to get pleasure from telling the same thing to the people over and over

again. For confirmation of his story, they went to the pastor who for his very own special reasons, told them that it was true. He however, did not tell anyone about the discovery of the hurricane lamp. Seri Vagi's allegation was treated with contempt by some who said it was all a fallacy. Had he, Mr Vagi, been right in the head they might have believed it. That authoritative voice he had allegedly heard belonged to a furniture thief or probably an unscrupulous young man who has come into the church to frighten the daylights out of Seri Vagi, they said.

There were others who thought otherwise and regarded the janitor's allegation as credible. This minority group contended that it was not impossible for physically and mentally handicapped people to see heavenly visions or encounter divine presence. They said the handicapped people were automatic citizens of heaven and bearing that fact alone in mind, intercommunication between them and divinity was possible if not natural. As for the two people who had been spotted running from the church to the north-western end of the village, they were just furniture thieves who had come of their own accord and had been frightened by the commotion in the church, they said.

Surprisingly the news of the janitor's alleged vision came to the old couple just after they returned from the church service. Before that they had not heard of it because they had not cared to participate in gossip that was the order of the day, especially the day before, Saturday. Had they partaken in such gossiping gatherings, they might have learnt that the scream they had thought had come from an unknown source, was no more than a human scream.

Both were preparing a belated lunch when Morea Tauna, a cousin of old Mea who had the habit of visiting them before meals, dropped in.

"Good afternoon to you both," he greeted them in his excessively loud voice as he entered.

They both started slightly and then on recognising him, reciprocated his greeting. Leaving Geua to do the work alone, old Mea went over to his cousin. Morea Tauna said most regretfully that he was sorry to

have dropped in at such a busy moment.

"Ah not to worry my brother," old Mea said. "Your sister-in-law can manage efficiently on her own." He sat cross legged before his cousin on a pandanus mat. On his orders, his wife brought him their *vaina* (string bag) and soon the two aged cousins were busy chewing areca nuts and puffed contentedly away at their overly elongated, newspaper rolled cigars. It was then that Morea Tauna brought up the matter of Seri Vagi's alleged vision.

"Ah my mother, have you heard of Mr Vagi's alleged vision?"

"Mr Vagi's vision? Of what?"

"Oh, haven't you heard?" Morea Tauna was mildly incredulous. "The whole village is in an uproar over the mental retardate's allegations of seeing a vision." He laughed softly, his eyes on an inviting piece of areca nut before old Mea.

"I only know of a commotion last Friday night purportedly caused by furniture thieves or young rascals. What you said are fairly trivial things. That would not contribute in any way toward new knowledge to me. When did it happen? Mr Vagi's vision I mean?"

Morea Tauna gathered his courage, reached forward and took the inviting piece of areca nut. Then he said.

"On the same night that commotion was heard." He took the lime pot, a piece of pepper fruit and began chewing, while old Mea sat, fingers straightening his imperial obviously quite annoyed at being kept waiting by someone religiously inferior.

After the mixture in his mouth had attained the desired dark red colour, Morea Tauna replaced the lime pot and spoke. He told of Seri Vagi's alleged vision. Husband and wife at intervals exchanged puzzled looks at Morea Tauna spoke of how Mr Vagi on hearing a strange voice and seeing a glowing cloud over the altar had been terrified, how he had heard a heavenly choir and how the village dogs had been prevented from biting him by some strange power. Both old Mea and Geua clicked their tongues as what they took as the truth of the circumstances dawned on them.

"At what time did that happen?" Geua who had come a little closer asked.

"Late Friday night. Sometime after midnight I would say before the commotion. Ah, that reminds me, that commotion according to Mr Vagi was caused by the village dogs and that heavenly choir in the church and not thieves or *Vada* as some people say. Myself, I did not hear that noise being a heavy sleeper. Also if I were not, I'd still not have heard it as my house is on the windward side of the village." He picked up his cigar and took some puffs while old Mea and Geua stared at each other, then back at him. The latter did not seem to notice the worried and puzzled countenances of old Mea and his wife. He exhaled a lungful of smoke luxuriously and spoke on. "What puzzles me is the discovery yesterday afternoon of a still burning hurricane lamp in the church by Reverend Heagi Gau. If I am not wrong, the poor soul Mr Vagi never used one, the church as we all know being well lit by electric lights. Of course no-one else knows about the discovery of that hurricane lamp."

"How did you come by that knowledge?" old Mea asked.

"Well I happened to be passing by when I saw the pastor bend over, pick up and examine that lamp. I did not have to be told that he had not brought that lamp with him from his house."

"Where is it now? The lamp," old Mea asked.

"Oh, he took it with him when he went back to his house. Search me what good it'll do him." A pause. "Ah, about that lamp. My hunch is that the lamp belongs to the two people who were seen running out of the church by some people during the commotion. Thieves they were. There's no doubt about that. Oh, and it's said that they fled to this part of the village." Again an exchange of looks by the old couple.

"My hunch," Morea Tauna continued, "Is that these wretched thieves crept in just at the same time Mr Vagi heard and saw what he heard and saw. Pure coincidence I would call it. When Mr Vagi screamed and fled those wretched God-forsaken thieves took

fright and fled too, leaving God curse them whoever they

At this a look of anger and together came over Mea's uttered an inaudible oath.

Morea went on.

"And let's hope these punished amply by God now die. Lucky for them I did not see them there. Had that been so, I'd have had both thieving bastards to carry their corpses for manure. You know to Mr Vagi's vision, one does not tell that it has serious implications. People are saying that it is a calamity is imminent in the village. A boding or an augur, one of those usually precedes a catastrophe, a famine or a drought. You know those wretched thieves die if they come," Morea Tauna paused.

Old Mea was fuming inside. Somehow dawned on his mind that Morea Tauna probably knew something about the connections with all the events of the night. His sincere and naive belief was not fooling him. He decided in the event of Morea Tauna's story that they were those alleged thieves. He did not hesitate in punching him in the nose and then man handling him out of the house. And if he referred to those wretched thieves with more vituperative words, he would simply tell him to leave at once to avoid belligerent consequences. He decided what the action would bring. He had had enough of his cousin. He clenched a fist and waited for a moment to resume speaking. Geua returned to the kitchen area.

"The matter should be brought to the notice of the bishop in Port Moresby. He views Mr Vagi's allegation as a serious matter. He should call together all our people in a bid to find probable cause for his imminent catastrophe. Do you agree?"

Old Mea nodded his half agreement and unclenched his fist. Morea Tauna bragged on about the matter and backsliding of the pe-

fright and fled too, leaving the lamp. May God curse them whoever they are!"

At this a look of anger and shame mingled together came over Mea's face and he uttered an inaudible oath.

Morea went on.

"And let's hope these wretches are punished amply by God now and after they die. Lucky for them I did not happen to be there. Had that been so, I'd have strangled both thieving bastards to death and used their corpses for manure. Yes, going back to Mr Vagi's vision, one does not have to be told that it has serious implications. Some people are saying that it is a sign that a calamity is imminent in the village. A foreboding or an augur, one of the kind that usually precedes a catastrophic event like a famine or a drought. You know I hope those wretched thieves die when that time comes," Morea Tauna paused.

Old Mea was fuming inside now. It had somehow dawned on his numb brain that Morea Tauna probably knew all about their connections with all the events of Friday night. His sincere and naive countenance was not fooling him. He decided firmly that in the event of Morea Tauna explicitly saying they were those alleged thieves, he would not hesitate in punching him in the mouth and then man handling him out of the house. And if he referred to those alleged thieves with more vituperative words, he would simply tell him to leave at once or face belligerent consequences. He didn't care what the action would bring about later. He had had enough of his cousin's curses. He clenched a fist and waited for his cousin to resume speaking. Geua had already returned to the kitchen area.

"The matter should be brought to the notice of the bishop in Port Moresby. If he views Mr Vagi's allegation as true, then he should call together all our top clergymen in a bid to find probable causes, if not avert his imminent catastrophe. Don't you think so?"

Old Mea nodded his half hearted agreement and unclenched his fist. Then Morea Tauna bragged on about the general sinfulness and backsliding of the people and other

probable causes for the coming catastrophe. He was about to mention something about the increase in the consumption of alcohol when he thought better and stopped. Geua laid the dishes for lunch while the two men talked of other things. After lunch and another piece of areca nut, Morea Tauna thanked them both and departed.

A pregnant silence prevailed for a couple of minutes after he left. Then Geua broke the silence with, "So all our aches, pains, efforts and prayers were all for nothing."

"It was that useless mental retardate we mistook for the Lord. What if one of us had been seriously injured during our flight?"

An amused look came over her face. It left her when she saw her husband scowling at her.

"This is not a matter to be amused about. What's so funny anyway? Don't you realise that this could develop into a major complication?" Old Mea wore his most serious countenance.

"What! There's nothing to be alarmed about as far as I..."

"The fool you are Geua. Sooner or later the people will be alarmed and disturbed. Didn't you hear what Morea Tauna said? The bishop will be informed and God knows who else. The Government perhaps and we will have more than a handful on our hands. The people are believing Mr Vagi's story. All except us. We both know that it was my voice he mistook for the Lords. And besides, and most importantly my reputation is at stake."

"How?"

"How?" old Mea echoed her incredulously. "You must be a fool. Don't you realise that when someone carefully examines that hurricane lamp he'll find that it belongs to us. And when this becomes public knowledge, we, ah not we, I, will become the laughing stock of the village. Can't your thickhead see that?"

"Yes, I can see now, but there was no need to call me a thickhead. You know I'm not..."

"Forget that!" he said very loudly. He bent forward, rested his chin on his palms, covered his closed eyes with his fingers and was soon deep in thought. He looked so

woe-be-gone, that Geua took pity on him. Being childless, she had often regarded and fantasized that he was her child, especially at times when he was down hearted. The present was such a time and she put an arm around him as if he were that imaginary child of hers needing maternal comfort. Old Mea shrugged her arm off and chided her.

"I'm not a child so keep your motherly affections to yourself. Go clear away the dishes."

She left him and busied herself clearing the place. After she had taken all the utensils to the kitchen, she returned, took the *vaina*, found herself an areca nut and began chewing. Old Mea was still seated in his former place brooding. After a while Geua said quite absentmindedly, "So it was Mr Vagi after all. I knew that scream came from a human source when it came that time, but you lost your reasoning and fled. I know a human scream when I hear one." She clicked her tongue and shook her head, her greying straight hair moving with the motion. Then she reproached him about his running away without first checking the place after they had heard Mr Vagi's scream. "I'd have stayed had you not run Mea. Really I would have."

"You ran first," Mea recriminated her, straightening up from his bending position.

"I never did run first Mea Nao, you did." She pointed an accusing finger at him.

"You ran first Geua and now it's your responsibility to retrieve that lamp." Old Mea's face brightened up. "Yes, Geua you must get that lamp back."

"I never did run first Mea Nao and you can get that lamp if you are missing it so much. In any case it was rather too rusty for my liking. And we can always buy another one." She gave a low laugh. Old Mea stared incredulously at her.

"But we must get this one back. My reputation is at stake while it is in their hands. It is the only connection between us and that commotion and Mr Vagi's story. We must get it back. You could go to the pastor's house under the pretense of visiting your sister and take it."

Geua only smiled the more.

"What's all this worry for Mea Nao? They wouldn't know who it belongs to even if they spent a hundred years examining it. Many people own lamps like that too. Don't tell me that lamp will grow a mouth of it's own and tell Reverend Heagi Gau that it belongs to deacon Mea Nao and his wife of Adare clan. As far as I can see we are in the clear. What we should be worrying about is how to tell the alarmed people that Mr Vagi's tale is not true, that he heard was your voice. We are in the clear lamp wise."

"In the clear?" Mea asked, incredulity in his tone. "You are a fool. Do you consider that we are in the clear when my initials are scratched on that lamp? Do you remember the time I scratched my initials on the lamp to improve my writing? Huh?"

Geua reminisced for a while and the truth of his words dawned on her. Indeed he had scratched his initial ... no! No, he had only scratched the letter 'N' that time. As far as she knew they were still safe.

"Of course Mea Nao I remember clearly. But I can only remember your writing only, I repeat only, the letter 'M'. You never included the initial of your second name. And even if you had written both letters 'M' and 'N' they still would not have connected you to the lamp. There are many people with the initials, 'MN'. Morea Naime, Mauri Nou, Michael Noga, Mere Naoani and the rest of them. See!"

"She tilted her head slightly to one side, grinning in a school-ma'amishway.

Old Mea opened his mouth to speak then shut it. He considered her words and nodded slowly.

"Yes, I can see now. But you don't have to contemplate me in that way. I don't like it one little bit."

Yes, she was right, he decided, but deep in his mind he had a feeling that someone was bound to find out that the lamp belonged to him. If that happened, then he was going to hold Geua responsible. He said, "Right, you can go now and wash those dishes and don't ever look at me in that annoying way again."

The hurricane lamp in the meantime was sitting on a shelf in the little drawing room

that was exclusively used as religious meetings. Reverend kept constant guard of the room at night because he had a hunch the owner of the lamp was, all of a sudden, to be engaged in a clandestine scheme to retrieve the lamp. If that person happened or indentified, then the disturbing villagers would once again be at ease. He, for one, believed a little bit of Mr Vagi's tale but he had no way of knowing the owner of the lamp just then. The services on Sunday, a lot of people approached him saying they were worried by Mr. Vagi's allegations. It was a common story they had told him. One of the menas that usually preceded a storm. With all this over drinking, comment of the Lord's day and gossiping, anything along those lines was possible. If his plan to identify the owner of the lamp failed, then the judgement would be true and there would be an alarm. He did not rule out the possibility that the lamp belonged to furniture that would prove correct, then, well, provided of course, that the story was not true.

On Tuesday, the second day out to apprehend the owner of the lamp, sitting at his table in the little drawing room his little daughter, Kori, came crying.

"Daddy, I want lolly water. Please."

Obviously she had seen one of her mates with some and had decided to ask her father if she could have some. She went to his side and looked imploringly at him. Reverend Heagi Gau looked up from his work and said, "Hush Kori, we don't have any in the fridge. Mama will buy you this afternoon. Now go back to your room."

"But daddy, we have some in the plastic bags."

The pastor realised she was referring to wine bags in the refrigerator in the kitchen.

"Ah little Kori, that's strong drink, not fit for drinking."

"Then why did old uncle Mea drink it last time? He was greedy and drank a cupful of it while I was spying on him the ..."

that was exclusively used as a venue for religious meetings. Reverend Heagi Gau kept constant guard of the room, especially at night because he had a hunch that the owner of the lamp was, all odds on, bound to be engaged in a clandestine endeavour to retrieve the lamp. If that person was apprehended or indentified, then Mr Vagi's disturbing villagers would once more be at ease. He, for one, believed not one little bit of Mr Vagi's tale but he had to identify the owner of the lamp just the same. After the services on Sunday, a lot of people had approached him saying they were alarmed by Mr. Vagi's allegations. It was a foreboding story they had told him. One of those phenomena that usually preceded a catastrophe. With all this over drinking, constant defilement of the Lord's day and general black-sliding, anything along those lines was possible. If his plan to identify the owner of the lamp failed, then the janitor's story would be true and there would be reason for alarm. He did not rule out the possibility that the lamp belonged to furniture thieves. If that would prove correct, then all would be well, provided of course, that Mr Vagi's story was not true.

On Tuesday, the second day of his attempt to apprehend the owner of the lamp, he was sitting at his table in the little study when his little daughter, Kori, came barging in crying.

"Daddy, I want lolly water. Please daddy."

Obviously she had seen one of her playmates with some and had decided to ask her father if she could have some. She stood at his side and looked imploringly at her father. Reverend Heagi Gau looked up from his work and said, "Hush Kori, we do not have any in the fridge. Mama will buy some for you this afternoon. Now go back and play."

"But daddy, we have some in the icebox. In those plastic bags."

The pastor realised she was referring to the wine bags in the refrigerator in the kitchen.

"Ah little Kori, that's strong drink and is not fit for drinking."

"Then why did old uncle Mea Nao drink it last time? He was greedy and drank a whole cupful of it while I was spying from under the ..."

She stopped when her mother's threats came to her mind.

"When did you see him little Kori?" the pastor rose slowly from the chair, staring fixedly at his daughter. Her repeated the question but the child had sunk into a taciturn mood, staring at her father with something like fright. During the four or five minutes that elapsed, he promised her two bottles of soft drink, sweets, cakes and other sweet foods she loved but she refused to talk. Seeing that the promises were all to no avail, he resorted to threats. He warned her that if she did not tell on old uncle Mea, he would beat her like never before and then leave her outside tonight for the *Koboni* (evil imp-like characters in Motu folklore) to take. Only then did she speak.

"But daddy, mommy will spank me if I tell on old uncle Mea. She said so."

"She won't Kori. I'll see to that. Now be a good little girl and tell me about old uncle Mea. What exactly did he do?"

He listened with interest as Kori related her story from the beginning to the stage where her mother warned her about her telling anyone else. She even told her father how her mother had instructed old aunty Geua to pray for forgiveness with old uncle Mea. That had been on the night old uncle Mea had drunk the people's lolly water, she concluded. When she had finished, her father gave her a reward of forty toea and she happily screeched out of the study on her way to the nearest trade store.

The pastor too hurried out of the study to the kitchen where his wife Vaburi was busy scraping a coconut on a coconut scraper. He went straight to the point and asked her confirmation on what their daughter had told him. At first she thought of denying any knowledge of the matter but when she learnt that her husband had been amply informed about the matter, she told him everything she knew including her advice to Geua and her husband Mea. When she had finished, she begged him not to tell anyone else about the wine affair as it would greatly affect her sister; old Geua whom she was affectionately attached to. Reverend Heagi Gau promised to do so and left her. It was doubtless in his mind that old Mea, that old pious man who

had been acting and was still acting as if he were his protege and teacher, was connected to the commotion of Friday night and Mr Vagi's alleged vision. He must have gone into the church to beg forgiveness for stealing that wine. Could he be the owner of the hurricane lamp? Excited by these thoughts, he ran like a child into the drawing room not taking the trouble to replace the flower vases he knocked down from their perches on the walls of the corridor. He took the lamp down from the shelf, put it on the table and began examining it. His heart gave a lurch when he saw the faintly scratched letter 'M' just below the mouth of the kerosene tank. He pondered over what it could stand for. Morea? Maria? Mere? Moale? Mataio? Mea? He considered the latter. If the initial stood for Mea, then what he had always dreamt of doing would eventuate. There was only one Mea, as far as he knew, who had reasonable cause to go into the church that night. If it was Mea Nao, then his task of getting rid of him was going to be easier. Already he had one weapon to force the adamant old man's retirement. And that was the wine affair. If he could prove the letter 'M' on the lamp stood for Mea, then he had another weapon. Again his heart gave a lurch. If old Mea declined to retire, then he would not hesitate in exposing him over the 'wine affair' and his part in the janitor's alleged vision. Blackmail, or whatever, he was going to do it. The old man had had this time and now it was time for a younger man to take over. Down with his long service! And down with his experience! He had been only a child when the old man had taken the deacon's post. Reverend Heagi Gau considered the old man's vices and recent shortcomings. He had an incurable addiction to alcohol. That as a weapon had failed in 1969 and later in 1978 last year. Old age too had crept up on the old man and he was often feeble and forgetful in the execution of his duties. Once last year he had mistaken an important sermon paper for a piece of newspaper and had rolled a cigar out of it. A service had to be called off as a result. And when he was to conduct services, he stuttered a lot, not

to mention the many pauses in his bible readings and general tedium of his prayers and sermons. Once while he had been reading a chapter before a full congregation, he had paused for as long as two minutes before an impatient man's snigger forced him to resume reading at the wrong verse. His prayers were lengthy and garrulous and one of them had actually taken about ten minutes. A lot of people had stalked quietly out during that prayer and by the time it had ended almost a quarter of the congregation had left. On another occasion he had been rudely shouted out of prayer by some irate members of a congregation. But his earlier attempts to bring about the old man's retirement on these grounds had been fruitless. The present minister, Reverend Iamo and his predecessor, Reverend Heau Tau had more or less defended the old man. Coupled with these reasons was another one which he did not tell anyone. The old man had once called him a novice christian just after he had come out of Harongo. He had been embarrassed then. The old man also put an air of arrogance and haughtiness around him whenever he talked to him. The present day was no exception. If he proved that old Mea was the owner of the lamp, then his dreams of paying back for his past and present censorious attitude would become a reality. Even if his attempt to prove anything failed he would still have the first weapon — the 'wine affair'. It was with these thoughts that Reverend Heagi Gau replaced the lamp on the shelf. Then he decided that he would have to pay the minister a visit.

So the afternoon, he went to the minister's residence, which is perched on a little mount in the savannah just on the outskirts of Porebada, five minutes walk from the centre of the village. He found his superior in his study and told him his reasons for calling in. He told him about the janitor's alleged vision. The minister expressed surprise at this. No-one had informed him of the matter. Reverend Heagi told him that the whole village was quite disturbed by this, that he

was sure that the alleged vision had serious implications. He told him the whole version as he had heard it and the minister was intrigued. The pastor told the council of clergy men would have to talk about the matter. They decided to talk with enthusiasm. They decided the meeting have to be held on the morrow. The talk on the matter ended. Reverend Iamo brought up the matter of old Mea's retirement. In his opinion old Mea was not doing his duties. He was slow and forgetful of things he did. Reverend Iamo noticed too, hadn't he? The minister was not with much enthusiasm though the pastor put it that he was of the opinion the vision of the janitor was not true. The Lord wanted old Mea's retirement. The minister brightened up and said it was possible. Luxuriously the minister told the Lord's father that Mea Nao, deserved a rest. So the minister told him to include it on the agenda for tomorrow. When the pastor returned to his room he did just that.

That night he systematically went through his plans of bringing out the lamp into the open. He was sure the owner would be among those who would attend the meeting tomorrow. He also be on the lookout for anyone who might, with the minister's permission, assume a spectator status. At the meeting he would scrutinize the minister included for any peculiarities or irregularities in their behaviour and composure. If anyone so much as looked him in the eye, or spoke to him in a particular manner, particular attention would be paid to him. Anyone who might furtively touch the lamp on the shelf would be under a special guard. To this end he would keep an eye peeled during prayer time and take advantage of the lamp owner would take advantage of prayer time and take furtive glances at the lamp was very likely.

If any of these plans did not produce positive results, he would then resort to another tactic. This was that at the meeting he would feign somnolence.

was sure that the alleged visions had serious implications. He told him the janitor's version as he had heard it and the minister was intrigued. The pastor told him that a council of clergy man would have to be called to talk about the matter. The minister agreed with enthusiasm. They decided that it would have to be held on the morrow. When the talk on the matter ended, Reverend Heagi brought up the matter of old Mea's retirement. In his opinion old Mea was too old for his duties. He was slow and feeble in everything he did. Reverend Iamo surely had noticed too, hadn't he? The minister nodded not with much enthusiasm though. When the pastor put it that he was of the opinion that the vision of the janitor was a sign that the Lord wanted old Mea's retirement, the minister brightened up and said anything was possible. Luxuriously the pastor told the minister that the Lord's faithful servant, Mea Nao, deserved a rest. So it was that the minister told him to include that matter too on the agenda for tomorrow's meeting. When the pastor returned to his house, he did just that.

That night he systematically devised his plans of bringing out the owner of the lamp into the open. He was sure that the owner would be among those who would attend the meeting tomorrow. He would also be on the lookout for any one deacon who might, with the ministers permission, assume a spectator status. During the meeting he would scrutinize everyone, the minister included for any peculiarities or irregularities in their behaviour and outward composure. If anyone so much as avoided looking him in the eye, or spoke in a nervous manner, particular attention would be given him. Anyone who might furtively glance at the lamp on the shelf would also be under special guard. To this end he would have to keep an eye peeled during prayer. That the lamp owner would take advantage of the prayer time and take furtive glances at the lamp was very likely.

If any of these plans did not register any positive results, he would then have to resort to another tactic. This was that after the meeting he would feign somnolency, tell the

others he was going to bed early and then go into the bedroom and wait. After, he'd make sure the others had gone, he'd steal back into the meeting room, hide behind the door and wait for the lamp's owner to come back to take the lamp. The success of this scheme depended on how light or dark it would be when the meeting ended.

If in the event of the lamp disappearing before he had taken his position behind the door, or any time in the coming days without his knowledge, he would as a last resort, visit everyone attending the meeting on the pretense of asking ecclesiastic queries and other matters. That would have to be in the coming days. If that was to be the case, then he would have to put on a re-identification mark on the lamp. The letter 'M' in itself was inadequate and unreliable as the owners could easily scrape it out of existence. And the partly cracked glass encasement also was unreliable as it could be replaced with a new one. Something reasonably indelible would have to be used. Paint would be fine. Obtaining it was no problem because he had a couple of tins of Walpamur paint among the trash he accumulated in the little shed under the house.

Reverend Heagi Gau told himself that he would have to play along with the others into believing the mental retardate's alleged vision because the eventual success of identifying the lamp's owner had some reliance on this. He doubted the janitor's story, the pastor reassured himself. However, at no stage of the meeting, or after it, would he say or even imply that he regarded the allegation as fallacious. Or even say that the lamp would be under his guard at all times. That would only arouse suspicion in the owner's mind and discourage him from retrieving the lamp. To augment the owner's confidence, he would say that the lamp would stay on the shelf until such time as he saw fit to discard it.

After he had thought all this over. Reverend Heagi Gau went, took the lamp from the shelf, went to the little shed under the house and painted a little re-identification mark at the base of the lamp where it would most likely escape the notice of the owner.

The next morning the pastor visited all deacons, including old Mea informing them of the meeting which was scheduled to begin at half past three at his home. He also informed the janitor, Seri Vagi. When the believers of the janitor's story heard this news, they praised the pastor for this thoughtfulness. They said such a meeting would avert or prevent the imminent catastrophe, for indeed the janitor's vision was a premonition of such thing. Those who doubted the janitor's story however, said that the deacons were only wasting their time over nothing. And if the janitor's story was true, then holding a meeting to prevent anything like a heaven oriented catastrophe would have been futile. The matter would have been amply handled by the prelacy and not by any small time pastor, let alone a deacon.

As an ecclesiastic, and a senior one at that, old Mea had to attend the meeting. This posed a problem for old Mea who had the tendency to malingering. Ever since receiving the news that there was to be a meeting he had argued that such a meeting was over nothing because the janitor's allegations were not true. Geua countered this by saying that it was natural that he attend as all his colleagues would be. Old Mea however, had been adamant. Geua had then asked him what reason he would give for absenting himself and the old deacon, with no hesitation, had put forward the subterfuge of illness. She had left the matter there.

However, at a quarter to three in the afternoon, she brought up the matter again.

"Really Mea Nao, you should go. They expect you to. If you don't then they'll have funny ideas and wonder if your absence by any chance, which it has, has anything to do with Friday night's events. And that must, strictly speaking, not be ruled out as they know that two people seen coming out of the church that night fled to this part of the village. So if you make yourself absent from the meeting for no obviously justifiable reason, they'll add one and one and you know the rest. And remember they're all shrewd and sagacious ones, those young deacons."

The old deacon was lying on the mat. He pondered over her words and then said,

"You forget, I can feign illness. They all know that I am old and prone to illness. They know also that I am an asthmatic. They wouldn't know if I am feigning or not and ..."

"Someone will, on the contrary. And you know that someone I mean." Old Geua flicked a thumb heavenwards. "Remember that meeting is part of his work and you as a respected deacon must ..."

"His work? Tak, tak, tak Geua, you are the dumbhead that you are. Do you call that completely vain meeting part of the Lord's work? The Lord knows that that meeting is a waste of time for he knows that the janitor's story is entirely untrue. You yourself know that what he heard was my voice, and not the Lords."

"Okay, okay Mea Nao. I get your point. No need to shout. Someone might overhear your shouting. Now my point is that you must, I repeat, *must* attend. They expect your presence as you are a deacon and that meeting is a council of deacons. It doesn't matter if you think the purpose of that meeting is a futile endeavour. You must attend. It is your duty as a deacon to attend. That is my point Mea Nao and who knows, there might be some other important ecclesiastical matters on the agenda."

"You don't have to lecture me like that. I can perceive no other item on the agenda besides that vision thing Geua."

Geua was about to say something but then decided against it. She contemplated her smiling husband for sometime. Then her face brightened up.

"And Mea Nao malingering won't do you any good. Do you not perceive the idea that they might take it that old age is taking its toll on you and deliberate on the possibility of your retirement? You don't want some inexperienced youngster, as you would put it, to replace you do you?"

A lopsided smile played on her lips. Then slowly, rather unintentionally, she tilted her head to one side until her posture was none other than the same old school ma'amish way she had given him the other day; the one he had warned her never to repeat. Her words did it. His mind just could not contain the thought of some inexperienced, sanctimonious and ambitious young pedant

replacing him — he who had stood for indelibly in his brain. He had vowed many years ago that he would be a deacon for life and any such related thing would be at his death. And only at his death. No-one was going to order him to retire. And no young one would replace him. If any person dared he would even go to the le prominent *Vada* friends in the or Mekeo areas to expurgate his name from the book of the living. He then decided to attend the meeting. Then there was the lamp. He thought that someone would eventually replace him. He would be at ease once the lamp was safe in his hands.

He glanced up at his wife and said, "I'll go. This will be a chance to go. If I don't succeed, then you go and visit your sister."

"I knew you would finally go. I just knew it ..."

"Aw shut up! And I think I should sometime ago never to look at that irksome school ma'amish way of stop it!"

When old Mea entered the church he saw that all the deacons were all seated around the long, rectangular table with the minister at the head. He abandoned his conversation with Heagi Gau and greeted him at one of the two vacant chairs from the end. Old Mea paused, reciprocated and all at once the thought of his coming to his mind with him as the traitor. The thought disturbed him so much that he misperceived the position of the seat of the chair, fell back on the empty space and fell backwards landing on his buttocks with a thud. It seemed his bottom hit the floor when the others were

Getting him into a prone position with his head on someone's cupped hands. He began asking him all at the same time. He was all right. He pushed the hands away and got into a sitting position again, one hand vigorously rubbing his buttocks. Still in a somewhat

replacing him — he who had the church and all it stood for indelibly imprinted on his brain. He had vowed many years ago that he would be a deacon for life and retirement or any such related thing would come about at his death. And only at death, strictly. No-one was going to order him or force him to retire. And no young one was going to replace him. If any person did these things, he would even go to the lengths of hiring prominent *Vada* friends in the Kolar, Nara or Mekeo areas to expurgate that person's name from the book of the living. Old Mea then decided to attend the meeting. And then there was the lamp. He was still sure that someone would eventually trace it to him. He would be at ease once more as soon as the lamp was safe in his house.

He glanced up at his wife and said, "Okay I'll go. This will be a chance to get that lamp. If I don't succeed, then you get it later when you visit your sister."

"I knew you would finally go Mea Nao, I just knew it ..."

"Aw shut up! And I think I warned you sometime ago never to look at me in that irksome school ma'amish way again. So stop it!"

When old Mea entered the meeting room, he saw that all the deacons were present, all seated around the long, rectangular table with the minister at the head. The minister abandoned his conversation with Reverend Heagi Gau and greeted him as he pulled one of the two vacant chairs from under the table. Old Mea paused, reciprocated the greeting and all at once the thought of the 'last supper' came to his mind with him as Judas Iscariot the traitor. The thought disturbed the old man so much that he miscalculated the position of the seat of the chair, sat on the empty space and fell backward finally landing on his buttocks with a bone jarring thud. It seemed his bottom had not touched the floor when the others were beside him.

Getting him into a prone position with his head on someone's cupped hands, they began asking him all at the same time if he was all right. He pushed their restraining hands away and got into a seated position again, one hand vigorously massaging his buttocks. Still in a somewhat dazed state,

he told them quite annoyedly that he was all right, that there was no need for their alarm. Then brushing aside their helping hands, he got to his feet quite shakily and got seated in the chair again, but not before groping with a hand underneath him to ascertain he was on target. His buttocks were still numb so he slid a hand into his loincloth and rubbed hard, hoping to get the circulation going as soon as possible. Again he told the others who were still around his chair, that he was all right. He was annoyed because of their groundless alarm and superficial concern. He was sure that they were laughing at him in their minds and for a moment he thought he had heard a muffled laugh from one of them, but this was negated when he whirled around to investigate. Then he told them to stop annoying him and get back to their seats. In his mind he cursed them all and himself particularly for his clumsiness. Again he pictured himself in the undignified position on the floor and he muttered an oath. He pondered on the possibility of his mishap being brought about by forces not of his world.

After they had all sat down again, Reverend Heagi Gau handed out the agenda which he had typed out on ablong sheets of paper on his broken-down portable Ollivetti typewriter after he had returned from the ministers yesterday afternoon. He had deliberately set out the two items in English not because he wanted to show off his English, but because he knew the old deacon did not read, write or understand the language. He particularly wanted to see the old man's reaction when the minister had translated it into Motu. He wanted to savour that wonderful passing moment.

After his distribution of the papers, he returned to his seat beside the minister. It was then that the minister noticed the absence of Seri Vagi whose presence was a pre-requisite to the extra-ordinary meeting. Deacon Pipi Momoru of Mavara clan volunteered to fetch the janitor. Minutes later he returned with the janitor close behind him all puffed up and looking all important, obviously in high spirits he was probably savouring the thought that the pastor had finally come to his senses and decided that

his story be deliberated on. He was as usual wearing his faded maroon loincloth which looked as if it had not undergone a rinsing with soap and water for a month or longer. He was perspiring profusely from every pore from the combined effects of areca nut and his efforts of trying to keep up with the long striding deacon Pipi Momoru who had not listened to his pleas for slowing down a bit during their walk.

He greeted them all with much verve and gusto asking why their esteemable selves should summon his simple, lowly person at this time of the day. He received no answer for his queries as they all knew that he too had been informed about the reasons for this meeting by Reverend Heagi Gau yesterday. The others were preoccupied with their reading of the agenda or personal thoughts. Perhaps it was for the better that they were busy for had they not been so they still would not have been prepared to waste their breath answering a simpleton who was so used to receiving no replies to most, if not all, his questions.

He was told to take the empty chair beside the head bent old deacon who probably wasn't aware of the janitor's entry and who was still recuperating from the shame and indignity brought about by his mishap. Seri Vagi reluctantly took the chair, watching from the corner of his eyes the old deacon, probably expecting the belittling and haughty look from him. Quickly his simple mind perceived the thought that if after this meeting his evangelical future was decided favourably, he would spit the old deacon in the face, or better still, lunge over and knock him down and wring his thin neck in retaliation for his past arrogant attitudes.

Old Mea looked up at him but then diverted his attention to the front when the minister cleared his throat to speak. The minister said that it was customary to pray for guidance before a meeting. So they all folded their arms and closed their eyes while the minister said the prayer. This was the moment to take the lamp and hide it somewhere for the time being. Old Mea thought. While they were all praying! But where would he hide it? There was no good hiding

place. And besides, it was too risky as the prayer might end while he was away hiding the hurricane lamp. He abandoned the plan. He would get it when another good chance came up. Taking advantage of the present prayer was very risky. Then he decided to take a peep at the lamp on the shelf to his left. A frantic and alarmed feeling gripped him. Had he imagined it or had he actually glimpsed the pastor looking furtively at him through half closed eyes, spying on him. Gently he lifted his eyelids and saw to his relief that the pastor had both eyes closed tightly concentrating on the prayer. A sigh of relief left him; he must have imagined it all. The prayer ended and everyone looked up expectantly at the minister. The minister arose.

"Gentlemen," he promulgated, "you all know why I have called this meeting. My apologies if this meeting has in some way caused you any inconvenience. My advice however, is that your inconvenience is all for the better because what we have on our hands is a very important thing; one that requires sacrificing of our time and one that calls for co-operation from all clergymen. This matter is what I would call sacred. I must admit that I was informed of this matter only yesterday by our hard working and conscientious pastor Reverend Heagi Gau. Now this matter I am referring to is Seri Vagi's alleged vision of Friday night. If his tale was substance we will endeavour to find out. If it has then we will put forward our ideas as to why the Lord would see fit to make his presence known to one of us. If this vision is what I take it to be, that is a foreboding sign, then we will have to speculate on how best to avert or prevent what I think is a calamity. We will have to interrogate Seri Vagi." He paused and then looked at the agenda sheet.

"Now as you can all see in the papers before you, we have two items on the agenda. The first is what I have been talking about during the past minute or so. As soon as we finish with the first item we will go onto the second one."

The minister looked up at old Mea at the other end of the table and contemplated him

with what the old deacon depicted as a pitiful and apologetic look. The minister smiled at the minister and returned to Reverend Heagi Gau, who had never seemed to take his eyes off the second. He cast a smile and returned. The others too returned to their item and then looked at old Mea with sympathetic and apologetic looks. Old Mea had used. Old Mea only looked perplexed when he saw this.

Why was everyone acting like this? Surely they had not realised that he was to the janitor and his alleged vision. Why he and the janitor had been left in the chairs vacant for him to take? For a moment a pang gripped him and he thought of leaving the room with the excuse of relieving himself but then he decided against it. It would arise behind his back. He would make a jocular issue out of it and fall during his absence.

Seri Vagi too noticed all this. Being given his neighbour a look of jealousy rose within him. Why on earth were they giving attention to the equally stupid vision of it had been him, Seri Vagi, that all important vision? He had not resumed speaking, Seri Vagi jumped up shouting and pointing at them. They were all giving their attention to the wrong man.

"Gentlemen," the minister said, "as is customary we will begin with the first item on the agenda. First, we will relate what exactly happened from the beginning to the stage where the vision was given."

He looked directly at the janitor and pointed a finger at the same time.

"Now Mr Seri Vagi, would you be good enough to stand and tell us what happened that night. Everyone knows for this is a very important item. Remember, prevarications will not do. The Lord. Got it?"

The janitor, relieved that he was not all for nothing, muttered 'yes' and cleared his throat, wiped a

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with what the old deacon deciphered, was a pitiful and apologetic look. The old deacon smiled at the minister and reverted his gaze to Reverend Heagi Gau, whom he thought, never seemed to take his eyes off him for a second. He cast a smile and got none in return. The others too re-read the second item and then looked at old Mea in the same sympathetic and apologetic way the minister had used. Old Mea only looked the more perplexed when he saw this.

Why was everyone acting so strange? Surely they had not realised his connection to the janitor and his allegations. Was that why he and the janitor had been juxtaposed? Had they deliberately left the two contiguous chairs vacant for him and Mr Vagi to take? For a moment a panicky feeling gripped him and he thought of leaving the room with the excuse of relieving his bladder, but then he decided against it. Questions would arise behind his back. And they might make a jocular issue out of his accidental fall during his absence.

Seri Vagi too noticed all the attention being given his neighbour and a feeling of jealousy rose within him. The stupid fools! Why on earth were they giving all their attention to the equally stupid old Mea when it had been him, Seri Vagi, who had seen that all important vision? Had the minister not resumed speaking, Seri Vagi would have jumped up shouting and protesting that they were all giving their attention to the wrong man.

"Gentlemen," the minister continued, "as is customary we will begin with the first item on the agenda. First, Seri Vagi will relate what exactly happened right from the beginning to the stage where he ran home."

He looked directly at the janitor and pointed a finger at the same time.

"Now Mr Seri Vagi, would you be good enough to stand and tell us in detail what happened that night. Everything Mr Vagi for this is a very important matter. And remember, prevarications will only anger the Lord. Got it?"

The janitor, relieved that his fears were all for nothing, muttered 'yes' and arose. He cleared his throat, wiped away the areca

nut stained saliva that had accumulated on the corners of his mouth and began his story. He gave the same version he had given the pastor on Saturday afternoon, but with a few additions and disparagements that he thought put an air of sensationalism to his experience. The others listened intently and it was obvious that they were genuinely awed by Seri Vagi's story. At intervals they exchanged glances, shook their heads and clicked their tongues in utter disbelief. The minister too was awed. Since taking orders in 1969, he had never heard of anything like this, he admitted to himself. He, however, had heard of an old hula man who was said to speak with angels. That had been during his childhood days in Keapara Village. He had believed that story without question that time when he had first heard it. But the difference was that that hula man had been a normal right headed person and this man, Seri Vagi, was not. He was a mental retardate. For divinity to make its sacred presence known to someone out of the ordinary, something new; it was unique for want of a better word. Truly this would astound his superiors at headquarters in Port Moresby.

If any people present were unaffected by the story, or showed no passion over it amidst others who were literally on the realms of heaven, carried away by the story, then the pastor Reverend Heagi Gau and old Mea Nao were them. As it was, both were sitting quietly with no care in the world, their faces not hiding their total indifference and impassiveness. The latter in fact was fiddling around with his imperial while his eyes were on the ceiling studying some lizard which was stalking it's lunch-to-be of a full grown housefly.

When the janitor ended his story, he was asked if he could repeat it just once more and he said very pleasantly that he was much obliged to do so. For the twentieth time, post vision instances inclusive, he repeated his tale. After the repetition, he was intensively interrogated by the others. Reverend Heagi Gau in accordance with his plans, led a leading role in asking questions and for the same reason, he assumed a secretary role taking notes out of questions, the minister

announced that it was time they discussed the probable meaning of Seri Vagi's vision or the causes that souls justify such an event. For he believed the vision was an augur or a heaven sent warning preceding a major catastrophe and following divine anger. He said if the vision was a foreboding sign of a catastrophe, then they should discuss how best to avert, if not prevent it. After a long and lively argument, everyone came to the consensus that the general sinfulness and backsliding of the people were probably causes for the vision.

When deacon Morea Gau of the Botai clan put it forward that the increase in the abuse of alcohol and the general deification of beer were probable contributing factors, everyone took sidelong glances at old Mea. He was forced to stoically withstand their accusing glances. Firmly he said if any catastrophe were to come, it would more than likely be the result of the continuous defilement of the Lord's day and the backsliding of people like deacon Morea Gau and not because of the consumption of alcohol. Drinking alcohol was not billed as a sin in the bible. And if drinking was a sin, then there was no reason why smoking should not be a sin also.

Deacon Morea Gau arose and demanded to know where in the bible did it state that drinking was not sin. In return old Mea asked him if he could cite the exact chapter in the Holy Bible where drinking was billed as a sin. To get his point across, old Mea then asked if there ever was an eleventh commandment saying, 'thou shalt not consume alcohol'. At this, Reverend Heagi Gau said such a question was childish and completely irrelevant. He himself was of the opinion that drinking was a sin as it caused a man to lose his ethics and morals. Everyone with the exception of the minister, nodded approval at this. Old Mea was defiant and arose and told them again that he wanted to know where in the bible drinking was termed a sin. Deacon Morea Gau obviously encouraged by the support he was getting, arose again and demanded to know from old Mea where drinking was billed as not a sin in the bible. This went on for another five

minutes when the minister intervened having realised that sooner or later tempers would boil. Besides he thought it was unfair that they should all team up against an old man and victimise him. He gently slapped the table indicating he wanted silence. Old Mea and Morea Gau stopped in mid sentence and sat down. The minister spoke.

"Gentlemen, this is not the time for engaging in biblical quizzes or debates. We are gathered here for the sole purpose of discussing Mr Vagi's alleged vision. And not debating on it or asking each other if drinking or consumption of alcohol is a sin. I'd like to say here that you must not forget that we have in one way or another all consumed alcohol. Don't forget the wine in Holy Communion. Right now I've been thinking and have come to the conclusion that the matter that is Mr Vagi's vision should be left here as I consider it too big for us. In my opinion it would have to be acted upon by the prelacy in Port Moresby. In conjunction with us that is. What do you think?"

The others all nodded their heads in approval. The minister went on.

"Good. Now I shall go to Port Moresby and brief the bishop on the matter sometime in the future. When I return I will immediately let you all know of all that was said in our talk. So we leave the matter here."

He sat down again, studied the agenda again. Then on second thoughts he glanced up again and said.

"We might as well take a break. It'll serve to cool down tempers. And I'm sure you are all craving for a cigarette or an areca nut huh?"

When they returned five minutes later into the room, they were all in light moods having all apologised to old Mea for having been against him. Deacon Morea Gau had been most elegiac and contrite and had apologised thrice to old Mea for having been very vocal against him. He hoped he had made up for all this by sharing his areca nuts and cigarettes with him.

The jubilant janitor, however, had been dismissed by the minister as his presence was no longer needed. He had gone away triumphantly a very happy man, very

optimistic that his evangelic now on the threshold of realisation in Port Moresby only had to wait for Seri Vagi of Gunina clan, who was in this part of the country. A government too might take action and then he might someday be the first of Papua New Guinea. These were his thoughts as he sat across the windswept, white porch of Porebada toward his house.

When the meeting resumed the agenda item was read in English by Reverend Heagi Gau. He did it with the utmost pleasure. The translation a silence, a prayer that can only be assimilated in a hush-hush of churches the week over the room. With the Reverend Heagi Gau, everyone were down on the paper; not at the old deacon.

It took sometime for the implications of the pastor's words to sink in by the perturbed old man's brain. He had fully comprehended the matter. He was still staring with bloodshot eyes at the table. His face turned red, the red again just like the body of an octopus. He swallowed vigorously. An apple was moving in his action and then suddenly he burst out and shouted.

"No! You can't do this to me!"

He arose arms gesticulating.

"You can't do this to me you traitorous and backstabbing scoundrel! What I've done for the whole church!"

Then with speed and composure expected from someone his age, he beside the startled Reverend Heagi Gau handing out accurate resources to his cheeks. And then he took a dazed pastor by the lapels of his shirt and quickly released him. The others not restrained himself would have given the pastor a devastating uppercut to the face. He pulled away shouting all the words he could think of. Shocked by what had happened

optimistic that his evangelical dreams were now on the threshold of reality. The bishop in Port Moresby only had to hear it and he, Seri Vagi of Gunina clan, would be famous in this part of the country. Who knows, the government too might take an interest in him and then he might someday become King Seri, the first of Papua New Guinea. These were his thoughts as he sauntered happily across the windswept, white sandy street of Porebada toward his house.

When the meeting resumed, the second agenda item was read in English and then in Motu by Reverend Heagi Gau who obviously did it with the utmost pleasure. As he read the translation a silence, a pregnant one too that can only be assimilated to the reverent hush-hush of churches the world over, swept over the room. With the exception of Reverend Heagi Gau, everyone's eyes were down on the paper; none dared look at the old deacon.

It took sometime for the factual implications of the pastor's words to be perceived by the perturbed old man's brain. Even after he had fully comprehend the pastor's words, he was still staring with bloodshot eyes at the table. His face turned red, then pale and then red again just like the body of a captured octopus. He swallowed vigorously; his adam's apple was moving in harmony with the action and then suddenly he banged the table and shouted.

"No! You can't do this to me!"

He arose arms gesticulating wildly.

"You can't do this to me you ungrateful, traitorous and backstabbing lot! Not after what I've done for the whole church."

Then with speed and co-ordination, not expected from someone his age, he was beside the startled Reverend Heagi Gau handing out accurate resounding slaps to his cheeks. And then he took the somewhat dazed pastor by the lapels of his Phillipino shirt and quickly released his left hand. Had the others not restrained him in time, he would have given the pastor a southpaw devastating uppercut to the jaws. He was pulled away shouting all the Motu obscene words he could think of. The minister, shocked by what had happened checked if

the pastor was all right and then joined the others in trying to calm down the old deacon who was protesting that they should release him so he could do what he had always intended to do. The old man quietened only after he had spoken to him and slumped down into the arms of deacon Morea Gau who was very much obliged to let him. For sometime old Mea rested panting for breath and saying that he would get another chance to teach the pastor a lesson. When he had regained his breath, Vaburi who had run into the room after hearing the commotion, took charge of him and then with another deacon's help, took the old man away to his house.

It was natural that all talk in the village the next day be dominated by the scuffle between old Mea and Reverend Heagi Gau. Some people found it hard to believe that such dignified clergymen should sink so low as to engage in a fist fight. They found it even harder to believe that they should see fit to engage in such frivolous fights when they had a lot on their hands. They already had a lot of trouble in the form of Mr Vagi's vision, hadn't they? So why augment their burden with fights that could bring more anger from up above? Such fights were nothing more than abusing their positions and desanctifying them.

Some people with a sense of humour tended to treat it as a joke and said that the others should not have restrained the old man and the pastor so they could have fought it out to see who was the better fighter. They said it would be fitting if the two men approached the PNG Amateur Boxing Association in Port Moresby in the future and asked them to organise a public boxing match for them. Of course, this came into the ears of the still angry pastor and it made him the more determined to get his schemes going and get even with the old man. That afternoon he took the lamp from the shelf and left it on the porch; all the more to embolden the owner to make a move. At this stage he was sure that old Mea was the owner because if he had not been mistaken, he had actually seen the old man taking a furtive glance at the

lamp yesterday during the opening prayer. But he had to actually see the old man taking the lamp, or actually see the same lamp in their possession before he could be 100 percent sure.

After he was sure that the old man had taken the lamp back, he would get his schemes going. The 'wine affair' had suddenly come to him as a bit unreliable in the way of weapons. This was because the old man could deny knowing anything about drinking that wine. And besides it would be his word against the word of a four year old? Who would believe a very young girl? He could not rely on his wife, Vaburi, as she was worried about her older sister and would be reluctant to testify against her brother-in-law. So he had to first ascertain if the lamp belonged to old Mea to be sure that old Mea had played a part in Mr Vagi's alleged vision. The two weapons, namely the 'wine affair' and the 'vision affair' together would be more effective to get his plans of forcing the old man's retirement. If the lamp was retrieved by some other person and not old Mea, he would still try his best to pin the old man on the 'wine affair', even if Vaburi was reluctant. Or else he would threaten to divorce her if she decided not to testify against old Mea.

Yes, nothing was going to stop him from denouncing the old man and getting him to retire. He had caused him to be the laughing stock of the village and caused him to lose face in the presence of other deacons yesterday.

For the next couple of days, he hoped and prayed that the owner would make a move. His prayers were finally answered when he discovered four days later, Monday 19 of November to be exact, that the lamp was gone. Excited, he first approached his wife asking for the names of people who had visited the house during his absences. He learnt that some of his cousins had dropped in two days before. Also some members of the Porebada Women's Fellowship organisation had visited her. He wasn't satisfied with this, so he asked if anyone from her side had come. Yes, her sister Geua had come yesterday to tell her that old Mea had an

attack of asthma. His heart missed a beat. The fool, he was not to have noticed the lamp's disappearance after he had returned from fishing yesterday afternoon. The lamp had been taken during his absence he was sure. And old Geua had taken it. Now was the time to get the ball rolling; the time to get his scheme underway. The old man was as good as dead he told himself. Feigning concern, he said, "Oh, why didn't you tell me yesterday that old Mea had fallen ill? Oh no, look Vaburi you had better cook something to take with us when we visit them this afternoon, right? You know I really am concerned. I also want to reconcile with old Mea. You know, make up for that little misunderstanding. Now get yourself busy woman."

With that he went into the study and rehearsed on what he would say and do during their visit.

That afternoon about three o'clock, his wife and daughter dropped in old Mea's house. Old Mea who had slightly recuperated, was sleeping peacefully on the mat in the middle of the room, Geua beside him stitching a new string bag. She glanced up on their entrance and recognition lit her face. She reciprocated their greetings and then quickly laid out another mat for them.

After sitting, Vaburi untied the tea-towel that wrapped the dish of food they had brought. She pushed it toward her sister and then she brought out a packet of Cambridge cigarettes, some areca nuts and betel fruit. She put these in front of old Geua who, gratefully and almost tearfully, accepted them.

"Oh thank you very much indeed *Tadigu*. One does not see much of this kind of kindly gestures these days. Times certainly are changing. These days are not like the olden days when giving away charitably was as natural as drinking water. Yes indeed. God bless you all. Now I'll have to wake Mea Nao."

"No, no, no! Let him rest. He needs it," Reverend Heagi Gau said most lugubriously.

"You don't have to disturb him on our account!"

Even as he spoke, his eye old Geua to the part of the room as the kitchen. His task of lighting was going to be an easy task built along the basic traditional architectural design with only one purpose room, with no dormitory (ment) that would provide place for the lamp. That was in this house. Ah that was himself. A surety it was for beyond the hearth he saw a hurricane lamp. That used to light this morning's same lamp? His attention was old Mea who had been worried despite his protests. The old man slowly and silently looked curious. He looked at the lamp, his wife and then slowly he came to the pastor, who accepted Mea said, "I guess a hurricane is enough to signify our meaning."

The pastor agreed saying it did more to signify sincerity than mere words which is like life comes and goes. What happens is forgotten. It must now be set against the wind. We must reconcile new friendly bonds like old should. But first you must eat.

Old Mea gravely nodded. While he ate his meal of a few potatoes, yams and rice, they chewed areca nuts and engaged in talk. After his meal, old Mea and their conversation developed into a lively one discussing any subject brought up. The pastor still had his purpose and at times he moved the lamp near the hearth to illuminate it, useless because from the distance of twelve paces he just could not see the letter 'M'. He had to get closer.

"Excuse me," he said after a moment to relieve my bladder."

He strolled past old Geua's backdoor and into the latrine situated on the little porch of

"You don't have to disturb his peaceful sleep on our account!"

Even as he spoke, his eyes wandered past old Geua to the part of the room that served as the kitchen. His task of finding the lamp was going to be an easy task. The house was built along the basic traditional Motu architectural design with only one big multi-purpose room, with no *daiutu* (compartment) that would provide a good hiding place for the lamp. That was if the lamp was in this house. Ah that was a surety he told himself. A surety it was for when he looked beyond the hearth he saw it, or rather, he saw a hurricane lamp. That must have been used to light this morning's fire. Was it the same lamp? His attention was now drawn by old Mea who had been woken by his wife despite his protests. The old man sat up slowly and silently looked at the visitors, curious. He looked at the presents before his wife and then slowly he extended a hand to the pastor, who accepted it warmly. Old Mea said, "I guess a handshake will be enough to signify our meaning."

The pastor agreed saying a handshake did more to signify sincere reconciliation than mere words which is like the wind that comes and goes. What happened must be forgotten. It must now be seen as gone like the wind. We must reconcile and attach new friendly bonds like real christians should. But first you must eat."

Old Mea gravely nodded his agreement. While he ate his meal of a boiled chicken, potatoes, yams and rice, the other adults chewed areca nuts and engaged in casual talk. After his meal, old Mea joined them and their conversation developed into a lively one discussing any subject anyone brought up. The pastor still hadn't forgotten his purpose and at times he would glance at the lamp near the hearth to identify it. It was useless because from the distance of about twelve paces he just could not discern the letter 'M'. He had to get closer somehow.

"Excuse me," he said after a while, "I must relieve my bladder."

He strolled past old Geua through the backdoor and into the latrine which was situated on the little porch on the seaward

end of the house. When he returned he was beaming with ecstasy. On his way to and from the latrine he had seen a big spot of scratching that must have been done to exterminate all traces of the scratched letter 'M'. In its place he had seen that the blue point of the lamp had been scratched until the silvery colour of the metal had been conspicuously exposed. Strangely enough, this lamp had a new glass encasement though. The one he had expected to find had a sooty and a partly cracked glass. They had probably replaced it with a new one to prevent any identification. Very clever of them but they were not fooling him. Only one thing remained to be done and that was to see the red paint he had put at the base. After sometime he again excused himself saying he wanted to light a cigarette from a firebrand on the hearth. Old Mea said he had a box of matches in his stringbag but the pastor declined it saying it would save him the trouble of trying to get it. He walked over to the hearth, took a firebrand and lit his cigarette. He turned back and this act, he deliberately knocked over the hurricane lamp. As it lay upended on the floor, Reverend Heagi Gau could only stare wide eyes in triumph at the red spot of paint he had left for re-identification. This was the very lamp! His hunches had been far from wrong. The old deacon was as good as dead, already struggling abortively at the end of his fishing line.

"Ah how awkward and careless of me," he said as he picked up the lamp and placed it properly. He cast an apologetic look at old Mea and his wife.

"Ah not to worry *haroro tauna*. Not to worry. Accidents do happen. And there's no damage done," old Mea called light-heartedly to him.

"Soon, my friend, soon this lamp will do you a lot of damage," the pastor mumbled to himself.

At about half past five, the visitors left. That night the pastor made his plans that could only result in old Mea's retirement. He was going to give the old man two alternatives. One, retire voluntarily or two, face exposure.

Yes, this could only result in putting the old man out of action in the religious arena of Porebada. His two weapons would see to that. God's truth he was going to use then if the old man refused to voluntarily retire. Call it blackmail or what, he was doing it. It was in the best interests of the people and for the betterment of the whole church. Yes, nothing less than divine intervention was stopping him from getting the old man out of the church. He had had his time and now it was time for a younger one to take over. And when the old man retired, all the humiliations he, Heagi Gau, had been subjected to by old Mea would finally be avenged. He drifted off to sleep in triumph.

The next morning he was all set to make his final and crucial move. Right after the village's 800 city workers left for Port Moresby, he told Vaburi that he was visiting old Mea on account of some very important religious matters that needed urgent attention. Then he went into his bedroom and prayed, assuring the Lord that what he was going to do was in the best interests of the church. For the betterment and edification of Porebada United Church. He begged for his guidance. After the somewhat lengthy prayer, he arose, took a laplap from the clothes line, adorned it and marched out.

There was no turning back now, he told himself as he made his way past the aid post which is situated behind his residence. From his right came the chanting of school children in their classrooms. By some freak chance a class began singing a Motu translation of 'Onward Christian Soldiers'. He imagined himself as one of the soldiers in the song and then rather unconsciously he began marching to the rhythm of the tune and humming it. At once the singing ceased and laughter took over. When he glanced sideways to the nearest classroom he could see dozens of small heads popping out of the windows. Embarrassed he quickened his pace and was soon obscured by the classroom itself. He promised himself that when he came around to the school the next time to give religious instructions, he would reprimand those children and tell them that they would all go to hell after death

because they had seen fit to laugh at a man of God.

When he entered the old deacon's house, Old Mea was sitting alone, his wife having gone on a errand to the nearest trade store. It was exactly what he had hoped for. Her absence made it much easier for him to carry out his scheme. Old Mea cast a warm smile and greeted him. The pastor did not return the smile nor the greeting so the old man asked if anything was the matter. The pastor walked nonchalantly on toward him, neither taking his eye off him nor batting an eyelid. When he reached Old Mea, he stopped and contemplated him for a perplexing eternity — an eternity in which the old man asked a lot of questions which the former paid not the minutest heed to. The old deacon then asked if he still remembered their reconciliatory handshake of yesterday for it had suddenly dawned on him that what the pastor was exhibiting was none other than a hostile gesture. Again he asked the question but the pastor did not reply but only looked at him with something like a scowl. In the end he too decided to keep silent and counter the pastor's look. They both silently and unerringly looked at each other. They were both so still that any intruder barging in on them would certainly have mistaken them for the plaster cast life size dolls that exhibited fashions at the Steamships or Burn Philips department stores in Port Moresby.

After a while the pastor's face twisted into a mask of loathing, manouevred his tone, parted his lips and spat throwing a barrage of sputum all over the old man's face. The old man drew back instantaneously nearly falling flat on his back and stared incredulously at the pastor. Then he said, "What is the meaning of this? Have you gone out of your mind?"

He made an effort to rise but was rudely pushed down by the pastor.

"Sit you holier-than-thou pig," Reverend Heagi finally spat out.

Again the old deacon tried to get up and again he was pushed back. Then he decided to sit still and then asked most amiably what was the meaning of all this and asked if he still bore him a grudge.

"I thought that scuffle was wind like you said yesterday."

"Ha, ha, I came here not to scuffle my friend. I came here to announce your retirement. Okay? I can't make you retire."

"That is an impossibility. I can't make you retire."

"I, Heagi Gau am. And I have two weapons to make you, my friend, retire."

"Ha, ha, ha, that indeed is a good thing. What are your weapons? How do you intend to make me step down?"

He sounded defiant and it seemed as if he was in a difficult situation. So far as he could see, the old man was intimidating him with no earthly weapon, let alone forcing him to retire.

Tight-lipped the pastor said for your information, are your clandestine endeavours you involved in during the past couple of years?

"What in heavens do you mean by clandestine endeavours?" His voice sounded commanding. It had sounded almost earnest with an edge of frenzy in it. The old man noticed this too.

"Don't play the innocent," Reverend Heagi said. "You are the side of angels and you know it while I tell you everything the other way."

Elaborately the pastor told him everything he knew. Everything from the wine to the stage he had played at the doorway of the church.

"And I can prove that to you," he pointed to the lamp near the same lamp.

He walked over and took the lamp and came back. He showed the red mark on the left.

"I came here for the same reason, finding out if the lamp was here. It proved correct when I saw the red mark scratched out of existence. The old man seeing this red mark at the base of the lamp, this was the same lamp. Oh yes, from the beginning that what he purported to be divinity was not more than human. Now I give you

"I thought that scuffle was gone with the wind like you said yesterday?"

"Ha, ha, I came here not to talk about the scuffle my friend. I came here to demand your retirement. Okay? I came here ..."

"That is an impossibility. No one is going to make me ..."

"I, Heagi Gau am. And I can. I have the weapons to make you, my friend."

"Ha, ha, ha, that indeed is a laugh child. What are your weapons? How are you going to make me step down?"

He sounded defiant and challenging and it seemed as if he was in command of the situation. So far as he could see this young man was intimidating him with mere words. No earthly weapon, let alone power were forcing him to retire.

Tight-lipped the pastor said, "My weapons for your information, are the outrageous clandestine endeavours you have been involved in during the past couple of weeks."

"What in heavens do you mean? What clandestine endeavours?" Old Mea hoped his voice sounded commanding but in fact it had sounded almost earnest and pleading with an edge of frenzy in it. And the pastor noticed this too.

"Don't play the innocent old man," Reverend Heagi said. "You're not on the side of angels and you know it. Right listen while I tell you everything that I know."

Elaborately the pastor told him everything he knew. Everything from the drinking of the wine to the stage he had left his lamp at the doorway of the church.

"And I can prove that that lamp," he pointed to the lamp near the hearth, "is the same lamp."

He walked over and took the lamp and came back. He showed the red mark he had left.

"I came here for the sole purpose of finding out if the lamp was here. My hunches proved correct when I saw that you had scratched out of existence the letter 'M' and seeing this red mark at the base told me that this was the same lamp. Oh yes, I knew right from the beginning that what Seri Vagi had purported to be divinity was nothing more than human. Now I give you two choices.

One, retire voluntarily or two, I will expose you for what you really are. I assure you I will keep this a secret after you retire. I give you my word for that. And we'll let the others keep on believing Seri Vagi's story. Now about those choices, what do you say?"

The old man had slowly sunk into an enthralled state as the pastor had divulged his two secrets. When the pastor asked his question, he slowly looked up at him. There were tears in his old eyes. In a tremulous voice he said, "What is it that you really want from me? I have done you no harm my son. Being both married to sisters, I have always regarded you as my kid brother. And I have been like a teacher to you. And it was I who recommended you to train at Rarongo and those others were against it. It was I who helped you with your preparations of sermons after you ..."

"And treated me as if I was a nobody," Reverend Heagi Gau cut him off contemptuously. "Ah many were the times you humiliated me in front of many people. Remember the time you called me a useless and hopeless student? Now no more sentiments. I gave you two choices and I want quick answers."

The old man wiped away a tear that dripped down his cheek and a sob left his throat and he tensed himself to forestall any coming ones. The pastor seemed unmoved by the display of emotions and he nagged the old man for a quick answer. There was no sign whatsoever of any compassion on his determined face.

"You don't offer much in the way of choices ..."

"Ah come on, I wouldn't make such complaints if I were you. I want a straight and explicit ans..."

"Okay, I will retire."

It took sometime for the pastor's brain to take the words in.

"You mean it?" he asked. The old deacon nodded.

"I mean it. But you shall regret it. No one blackmails Mea Nao and gets away with it. I have friends you shall see. I have friends in Mekeo, Nara and Koiari. Even if they

don't get you, I have my own special ways of making you regret. You shall see."

Reverend Heagi Gau laughed.

"You dare threaten me? You forget I can always expose you to counter your reprisals. Yes, I shall be so ready for your *vada* friends. You know old man, I Heagi Gau am a shrewd man of action unlike the wobbly novice you took charge of and humiliated years ago."

Again he laughed.

"Now later I shall go to the minister and tell him that, that old man, Mea Nao, has finally decided to retire. I shall persuade him to call a meeting. Most likely it will be today. You know I want this matter to be over and done with us as soon as possible. When a time has been decided I'll send word to you. I want you to be there. Right? Now goodbye for now. You have been very co-operative today. I truly appreciate it."

With that he left. Old Mea bent his head, tightly closed his eyes, forcing out large blobs of tears to seep out of his eyes and trail down his cheek. For a long time he sat mumbling repeatedly, "You'll be sorry. You'll be sorry you have done what you have done." His face was the face of someone who had succumbed at last to defeat and is ready to accept any channel, whatever it may be of getting out of the humiliation that is brought on by defeat. He opened his eyes and stared fixedly at the floor. He did not even hear old Geua return from her errand.

Early that evening Reverend Heagi Gau sat waiting in the meeting room brooding. He was waiting for the others who were still to come. Right after he had left old Mea that morning, he had gone to the minister and had informed him about the old deacon's sudden decision to retire. The minister had showed surprise at the news and had said the matter would have to be dealt with at another date, but he had finally persuaded him to call the meeting that evening. And after he had come home he had sent Vaburi informing the other deacons of the meeting and its purpose. The old man, Mea too had been informed. He had thought old Mea's decision to retire would have to be officially accepted by a

council of clergymen before it could be validated and then later promulgated to the whole village.

Reverend Heagi's heart gave a lurch of sheer joy mingled with triumph and pride. What he had dreamt of happening for so many years was now culminating in reality—reality that would come about in no more than an hour's time. He thought back to the time in 1969 when the old man had humiliated him in the presence of other clergymen by calling him a 'little sanctimonious novice'. That had been shortly after his graduation from Rarongo. He had then vowed that he would do anything in his power to get rid of the old man once and for all. He thought of his two major attempts to bring about the old man's retirement. One had been in 1969 during the ministrations of Heau Tau and the other one was in 1978. His weapons then had been the old man's drinking habit but the two incumbent ministers in these instances had done nothing. On some occasions had encouraged aspiring young men from old Mea's clan to conspire and make the old man retire. But their efforts too had been abortive. He on some instances had been inclined to slander but then had decided not to. Now after ten years he had succeeded. One day, the pastor told himself, he would use a similar technique against the minister for having been implicitly on the old man's side, defending him almost every time the people criticized him. True there was some kind of an inexplicable bond between them. He had often wondered if the minister were the old man's son—a prodigal one who had gone away years ago and then returned with an assumed name. Yes, if he used a similar technique against the minister and succeeded in destroying his ecclesiastic career, then he, Heagi Gau, would be number one contender for the vacant seat that was to be left. So the scheming pastor sat there devising ways of getting rid of the minister. Some time next year he would implement his thoughts but not now.

By a quarter past seven all deacons, with the exception of old Mea, were there. The minister also had arrived. While they waited

for the old deacon, they talked his sudden decision. All ad and incomprehension at his Mea having been vocally defiant. Only recently he displayed his total repugnance of retirement. With much flourish Heagi said he had always boasted that he would finally succumb to pressures and voluntarily decision of old Mea's there as no surprise, he said. And by the knowledge of the old. Someone asked. The pastor the day before he and his father the old man for reconciliation it was during their conversation man had emotionally revealed. And what were the old man's such a decision? They all man had not given his reason deciding to retire, the pastor thought it had something to do that he had brought some gift on his visit yesterday. The old man had been grateful for such a kindness he had finally decided to retire. That was just a hunch, Reverend reminded them.

"Could it have anything to do with Vagi's vision?" Gaudi Vagi asked. "I mean could that vision be an augur to Mea Nao's retirement?"

The other deacons raised their voices in unison. It was a possibility. Only the minister showed interest about the speculation.

"I was of that opinion," Heagi told me that the day after the meeting at my house. But not so. I have my own reason why to reveal at this stage. That Vagi's is an augur of something much bigger than retirement. Ah, that reminds me the bishop is coming next Sunday visit. When I informed him about he was interested and surprised. He told me that with all this occurrence, anything of that expected, and did not rule out

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for the old deacon, they talked casually about his sudden decision. All admitted surprise and incomprehension at his decision. Old Mea having been vocally and physically defiant. Only recently he had physically displayed his total repugnance to the idea of retirement. With much flourish, Reverend Heagi said he had always borne the thought that he would finally succumb to their pressures and voluntarily retire. This decision of old Mea's therefore, had come as no surprise, he said. And how had he come by the knowledge of the old man's decision? Someone asked. The pastor answered that the day before he and his family had visited the old man for reconciliatory purposes and it was during their conversation that the old man had emotionally revealed his decision. And what were the old man's reasons for such a decision? They all asked. The old man had not given his reasons for finally deciding to retire, the pastor said. But he thought it had something to do with the fact that he had brought some gifts of food during his visit yesterday. The old man could have been grateful for such a kindly gesture that he had finally decided to retire in gratitude. That was just a hunch, Reverend Heagi Gau reminded them.

"Could it have anything to do with Seri Vagi's vision?" Gaudi Vagi of Vahoi clan asked. "I mean could that vision have been an augur to Mea Nao's retirement?"

The other deacons raised their eyebrows in unison. It was a possibility, they said. Only the minister showed any scepticism about the speculation.

"I was of that opinion after Reverend Heagi told me that the day before our last meeting at my house. But now I don't think so. I have my own reason which I don't want to reveal at this stage. That vision of Mr Vagi's is an augur of something else — something much bigger than old Mea's retirement. Ah, that reminds me, yes, the bishop is coming next Sunday to pay us a visit. When I informed him about the vision, he was interested and surprised as well. He told me that with all this sinfulness in occurrence, anything of that nature can be expected, and did not rule out the idea that

this could be a prelude to the Great Tribulation. Very alarming indeed. Yes, like he said, he'll be coming this coming Sunday ... that'll be the twenty-fifth ... yes, that's it. But we'll talk about what we decided during our talk after we have dealt with old Mea's retirement. What do you think?"

They concurred. Then their talk centred on other things of secular natures. When the clock struck seven-thirty, the time scheduled for the beginning meeting, the old deacon still had not turned up. The minister was about to send someone to get him when a distraught old Geua popped in and began talking in near hysteric tones.

The old woman broke off and wept bitterly. The others had now stood up and were waiting for the pastor or the minister to make some kind of move. The pastor stood up and went to the old woman. Vaburi, who had heard her sister's outbursts, was already beside her comforting her and very near to tears herself. He told her to take her sister into the next room to stay, that he would be able to talk sense into the old man's head. They went back to the table rather disappointed. Reverend Heagi Gau went into the study, took his flashlight and went down onto the windswept street. Children were at play, sitting beside fires telling stories or playing housie housie or bingo under the street lights. Their gleeful howls and shouts were almost drowned by the almost deafening rustle of the two coconut trees near the house.

When he neared old Mea's house, he noticed it was dark. Old Geua had mentioned nothing about it being dark or lit. Was it a presentiment? He wondered. Was he walking head on into an ambush? Was old Mea lying in wait with his Mekeo, Nara or Koiari *vada* friends? He considered the latter question. No, it was overly unlikely that old Mea had gone to the Mekeo, Nara and Koiari areas all within twelve hours to fetch his friends. He cautiously ascended the ladder and halted on the porch about a metre and a half from the open door. He strained his ears trying to detect any sound that might tell of a second presence but the moaning of the wind

through a hanging fishing net to his left, wouldn't let him. The whole interior was pitch black and there certainly was an air of the sinister about it. He banished the idea of going back and getting someone to accompany him, because something, a feeling he didn't comprehend told him not to. He switched on the torch and trained the beam of light into the interior and then slowly at half paces, advanced. At the threshold he stopped and shouted the old man's name into the darkness. There was no reply. He thoroughly scanned the whole interior with the beam of light, at least all the places below his height excluding the roof. He saw the Coleman pressure lantern on the floor and touched it. It was lukewarm. Old Mea must have put it off not so long ago, probably shortly after old Geua had left the house. Why would he want total darkness in the room? He straightened up again and shone his torch to the back door. Again he called the old man's name and again received no reply. A faint red glow in the far right hand corner made him shine his torch in the direction in a jerk. He found it was a momentary glow from a dying ember on the hearth. For a moment he had thought someone had dragged hard at a cigarette in the darkness.

The old man was nowhere in the room, he told himself. He was probably in the latrine or somewhere thereabouts on the back porch. He shone the torch on the backdoor and advanced slowly. When he had covered about two metres, his forehead came into glancing contact with something in mid air — something that was in the initial stages of getting cold. As he staggered back, startled, his immediate thought was of a ghost but there had been no recent deaths in the village. He regained his balance and trained the beam of light into the darkness where that coldness had touched his forehead. What the beam focussed on made his blood run cold, and made the hairs of his body stand erect as if attracted by a magnet. At the same time, a tingling sensation crept up his spinal column to his head. But these were gone as immediately as they had come. He looked at the two thin feet swaying to and

fro before him and laughed. It was the old man hanging from the beam trying to scare the hell out of him.

"Come on old man, get down now. You can't scare me. Have you become Tarzan of the Apes all of a sudden? ..."

His words came to an abrupt halt and he gasped as the beam of light focussed on what he saw. If the sight of the two thin legs had made his blood run cold, then this sight before him made his blood freeze. There in the beam of light was the pale, deathly and drawn face of old Mea. He was staring straight at him through unseeing eyes, his sanguine tongue lolling so pitifully out. In death the old man looked so sad, fragile and vulnerable. That volatile and invulnerable air that face had perpetually worn while alive was gone. The pastor did not have to assure himself that the old man was dead; dead beyond all mundane hopes of revival. His eyes took in the thin polythene rope that clung mercilessly onto the thin neck and all the hate, revulsion and rancour for the old man he had harboured for ten years finally departed from him and was replaced by compassion and regret — two alien emotions he had never envisaged he would feel for, or on account of the old man hanging before him. He was also aware of a certain feeling which very much resembled the one he had experienced when he had been weeping beside the dead body of his dear mother back in 1966.

Suddenly he hated that murderous polythene rope and yes, himself. Would he ever be the same again? His eyes and the beam of light then followed the rope upward until it coiled itself into a rough knot around the four-by-two beam. Then they came back to the old man's face. And for a long while he stood there looking unerringly at the haggard face. Speechless as he was, he could only swallow repeatedly.

"Suicide," his mouth suddenly formed the words. It was only a whisper. "Oh Lord, submit his soul into Paradise, and ... and for ... forgive me."

He mumbled as the tears streamed down his cheeks over the cupid's bow of his upper lip and disappeared between his lips.

Suddenly he let out a wild y
the house of the ecclesiastic

Two days later on Thursday November, 1979 an article 'Porebada' appeared on the the Post Courier newspaper. Moresby police are investigating the recent suicide of an elderly man in a village, 15 kilometres west of Moresby. Police spokesman yesterday said Mea Nao, 68, a prominent man, was found hanging from a beam of light early on Tuesday evening. The police are puzzled by the absence of a body but refused to say if foul play was involved. Preliminary questioning of witnesses revealed that Mea Nao's death was due to certain unexplained events occurring during the past couple of weeks. The man said investigations would be conducted. Further questioning of another witness, Reverend Heagi Gau, who was present at the body.

To this day the citizens of Moresby know why old Mea had seen

Suddenly he let out a wild yell and fled from the house of the ecclesiastical Motuan.

Two days later on Thursday, 22nd of November, 1979 an article titled 'Suicide at Porebada' appeared on the second page of the Post Courier newspaper. It read: 'Port Moresby police are investigating the apparent suicide of an elderly man at Porebada village, 15 kilometres west of the city. A police spokesman yesterday said the man Mea Nao, 68, a prominent clergyman was found hanging from a beam in his house early on Tuesday evening. He said police are puzzled by the absence of a suicide note but refused to say if foul play was involved. Preliminary questioning of villagers have revealed that Mea Nao's death was pertinent to certain unexplained events in the village during the past couple of weeks. The spokesman said investigations would include intensive questioning of another clergyman, Reverend Heagi Gau, who had discovered the body.'

To this day the citizens of Porebada don't know why old Mea had seen fit to die the

most unorthodox of deaths — suicide. Some say his suicide was pointless, that he had everything in the world to live for. And in the aftermath of his death the probe into Seri Vagi's alleged vision was suspended and then later called off altogether, the people having assumed that the vision heralded nothing else but Mea Nao's suicide. The only people who know of the truth of the circumstances on that Friday night are old Geua and the pastor and to some extent, Vaburi. There of course are some who still believe that the vision was a foreboding of a much bigger thing than old Mea's suicide. They still expect a drought or a famine to this day, almost three years later. As for the poor old janitor, Seri Vagi, he's been dead for more than a year now. He died in 1980 coincidentally on the same date Mea Nao committed suicide. He died a very disappointed man, his dreams having been dashed by the pastor. His poor grave lies overgrown with weeds under a frangipani tree in a secluded part of the Porebada cemetery. It is said that every Sunday night at midnight his ghost can be heard hammering, sawing and sweeping in the church.

LOOKING THRU THOSE EYEHOLE: THE DILEMMA OF THE PAPUA NEW GUINEAN WRITER IN THE 80s.

by Ganga Powell

"Once an artist went overseas
his father died in his absence
and was buried in the village

he followed a rainbow upon his return
and came to a cemetery
he dug in search of reality
till he broke his father's skull
to wear its fore-half as a mask

try it/look thru those eye-holes
see the old painting/view the world
in the way the dead had done"

— "Looking thru those Eyeholes"

by Russell Soaba.¹

The dilemma of the writer in Papua New Guinea is succinctly expressed in the above poem — the problem of being heir to two traditions, the indigenous and the introduced and the attempt to "look thru those eyeholes", the eyes of the ancestors, which the poet sees as the donning of a mask.

The Papua New Guinean writers of the sixties and seventies were born into contact societies of the forties and fifties.² They had roots in traditional cultures, yet were transplanted early to another culture, and were in part at least, alienated from their own because of the formal education system. Most writers of an emergent nation with a colonial past have faced this trauma. Most have also taken much longer than Papua New Guinea did to break away from the literary patterns imposed on them by the mother country. In Indian writing of the 1860's for instance, we find much pseudo-romantic effusions such as the following:

"Ah, fair one! lone as desert flower,
Whose bloom and beauty are in vain;
How dark was that too fatal hour
Which brought thee lasting grief and
pain!"³

And in Africa, in 1964, four years after independence in Nigeria, Chinua Achebe complains that schoolboys are still writing about English winters instead of the local harmattan because there is "something shameful" in the African weather.⁴ It is to the credit of the young Papua New Guinean writers of the 60's and their mentors that they never went through this shallow, imitative phase. Indeed, the newly emergent writing of the 60's is startling in the lucidity of its prose⁵ and the vibrant imagery of its poetry. The following lines are from John Kasaipwalova's *Reluctant Flame*⁶:

"Cold bloodless masks stare me, not for
my colour
But for my empty wealth house and pas-
sion logic.
I dream to see people, they give me leaf-
less rootless logs
The logs are trimmed, they shine in their
trimness
Look how orderly fat and silent they float
this earth

With their guns, their airplanes, their cyc-
 lone wheels and their bishops
 And all this like a snake's shining eye, they
 fix straight my looking
 So, quickly I say 'this is for me, my food,
 my soul and my spirits
 Masta masta give me more, I will pray, I
 will obey, Yes masta truly!"

There is neither imitation nor uncertainty in the use of language and image here. It is nature, virile and extremely sophisticated. English is as pliant in Kasaipwalova's hands as artist's clay. He can do what he will with it, whether to capture the "PNG" idiom or to vituperate on the colonial experience. Of course, Kasaipwalova is unique, his early work a *tour de force* that he himself has not equalled or excelled since. But if we turn to some of the other writings we find the lyric impulse to be strong. I quote a short poem from Kama Kerpi, who is from the Highlands of PNG.

We sat around the fire
 Doors barred to shield off
 the cold mountain winds.
 The flicker of firelight
 leaping before our eyes.

And there under the cover of darkness
 the old woman began
 stories of long ago,
 of her formative simple joys.
 And there we followed her on an unused
 trek
 passing through an old ruined kingdom.

Piling over the horizon were the days
 of wars and hill-farming
 where feasting and hunting
 became the simple joys of life,
 a life that remains a scar in her.

Sorrow masked her wrinkled face.
 It was a nightmare,
 and only sleep awoke us from a
 strange journey.

— "The Simple Joys of Life"⁷

Given this quality of writing within the first decade of a newly emerging written tradition, it is not surprising that critics were un-

stinted in their praise and enthusiastic about the future.

Unfortunately the years that followed dimmed these hopes and by 1975 Nigel Krauth was lamenting the decline: "If the years between 1968 and 1973 produced all the excited energy of the birth of a literature, perhaps the recent silence is the stunned realization that the infant is a bastard."⁸

This down-trend is even more evident in the 80's, and as we move farther away from the excitement and vigour of the 60's the urgent need arises for once again looking for the reasons behind the decline and, if possible, making an attempt to reverse it. While it could be argued that to speculate on what might be written is a hypothetical and therefore useless exercise, the over-riding justification in the case of Papua New Guinean writing is the very high expectations raised by the first writers and the dramatic decline in the short span of about fifteen years.

A positive factor that emerges when we look at the present situation is the evidence of interest in writing. The *New Nation*, which is a magazine aimed at younger audiences, organizes annual literary competitions and they average about 150 entrants. The *Times*, a local newspaper, runs a weekly literary page and it attracts three to four entries a week. These figures indicate a steady interest and willingness to actively engage in literary activity. Moreover the cross-section of people that these figures represent is quite startling. A random sampling includes policemen, government officers in remote patrol posts, game rangers working in forestry departments, office secretaries, workers on coffee plantations, dental health workers, as well as teachers and students.⁹ This kind of participatory interest from such a wide cross-section of society is certainly worth considering in this discussion. It seems to derive directly from the fact that in non-literate societies poetry and song were not the exclusive activities of a group but popular art forms in the best sense of the word — initiation rites, courtships, funerals, were occasions when anyone could and did extemporize in poems and songs. It seems to me that such artistic vigour should not be allowed to die out for lack of nurture.

The National Broadcast has been broadcasting local plays regularly. During the 70's the NBC received on an average a dozen unsolicited radio scripts to choose from. Admittedly some were good, but they were evidence of a situation is somewhat different. Scripts have dropped down in the last month and recently the NEB is advertising for radio plays — have never had to do in the past.

The problems of the Papua New Guinean writer of the 80's are many. I list myself to four: problems of language, the lack of a vital literary tradition, the lack of oral creativity, the lack of a literary tradition and the lack of a philosophical base.

One of the problems relating to the distance that formal education in language puts between the writer and the uneducated, is poignantly demonstrated in Soaba's novel *Wanpis*. The novel covers the formative years and the turning home after long years of schooling with never any real connection. As he walks along the track suffused with eager, joyful happy home-coming. When he recognizes the huge change and recognizes the huge change he calls out eagerly to the young woman he realizes, must be the one that he had left behind eight years ago. The young woman, however, runs inside in great haste with a shocking realization that he is not in English and was therefore unintelligible to his sister, the young woman. This alienation through education is a very genuine problem in New Guinea today. From the point of view, this restricts and limits the potential audience and sets him apart from the majority of his people.

The other problem is the lack of language skills that are being acquired by formally educated Papua New Guineans. The average young Papua New Guinean of the 80's is uncertain of English usage and limited in his vocabulary. I heard a recent lecture at the University of

The National Broadcasting Commission has been broadcasting locally written radio plays regularly. During the years 1975-1980 the NBC received on an average, ten to fifteen unsolicited radio scripts a month to choose from. Admittedly they were not all good, but they were evidence of interest. The situation is somewhat different today. Radio scripts have dropped down to two to three a month and recently the NBC resorted to advertising for radio plays — something they have never had to do in the past.¹⁰

The problems of the Papua New Guinean writer of the 80's are many, but I will restrict myself to four: problems associated with language, the lack of a vital link with traditional oral creativity, the lack of a strong critical tradition and the lack of solid indigenous philosophical base.

One of the problems related to language — the distance that formal education in an alien language puts between the educated and the uneducated, is poignantly depicted in Russell Soaba's novel *Wanpis*. The story begins in the formative years and the young hero is returning home after long years away in boarding school with never any short visits home. As he walks along the track to his village he is suffused with eager, joyful expectations of a happy home-coming. When he gets to the village and recognizes the hut which is 'home', he calls out eagerly to the young woman who, he realizes, must be the now grown-up sister that he had left behind eight years ago. The young woman, however, is frightened and runs inside in great haste. Suddenly the shocking realization that he had been calling out in English and was therefore completely unintelligible to his sister, overwhelms the boy.¹¹ This alienation through language and education is a very genuine problem in Papua New Guinea today. From the writer's point of view, this restricts and fragments his potential audience and sets him apart from the majority of his people.

The other problem is the limited English language skills that are being imparted to the formally educated Papua New Guineans. The average young Papua New Guinean of the 80's is uncertain of English grammar and usage and limited in his vocabulary. In a recent lecture at the University of Papua New

Guinea, a University academic put the problem thus: "... I shall be blunt and state quite flatly that in my opinion the level of English usage in PNG leaves a lot to be desired."¹² He pointed the finger of blame at the "functional approach" to teaching English and the non-inclusion of literature in school curricula. The result of this policy is seen in the lack of a good vocabulary and insensitivity to the subtleties of language such as nuances, the undertones and overtones of meaning. While this results in slack and sometimes even unintelligible writing in almost all areas of day to day communication, the effect on the creative writer is disastrous. I quote from a Papua New Guinean voicing his frustrations over language:

"I can still remember the day when I joined the system — that is, the system of education. Up until that day I had been a Tolai child leading a normal Tolai life ...

On the day I joined the education system this changed ... I was no longer allowed to speak Kuanua. All conversations had to be in English despite the fact that at this stage I had no English vocabulary ... I remember being completely inhibited during my first years at school. I could no longer chat idly with my mates. I could no longer make fun through speech. My quick wit was no use to me. I was like a vegetable. I was controlled by the limits of my vocabulary.¹³

In this situation language becomes an effective strait jacket constricting the imagination and restricting communication. Creative writing can hardly flourish in such an environment.

This situation becomes all the more tragic when we look at the rich linguistic and communicative skills of traditional Papua New Guinean societies. Jerome Rothenberg, in his book *Technicians of the Sacred*, coins the phrase "primitive means complex" with reference to non-literate languages.

That there are no primitive languages is an axiom of contemporary linguistics ... Everywhere a development has taken place into structures of great complexity. People who have failed to achieve the wheel will not have failed to invent and de-

velop a highly wrought grammar. Hunters and gatherers innocent of all agriculture will have vocabularies that distinguish the things of their world down to the finest details."¹⁴

Rothenberg continues:

"Measure everything by the Titan rocket and the transistor radio, and the world is full of primitive peoples. But once change the unit of value to the poem or the dance event or the dream ... and it becomes apparent what all those people have been doing all those years with all that time on their hands."¹⁵

A quick glance at anthropological works shows us that multi-layered meanings and the practice of "veiled speech" are a commonplace of traditional rhetoric.¹⁶ But this is merely the tip of a largely unknown iceberg. In his recent study¹⁷ on the Kaluli people of West Papua, Steven Feld gives us a tantalizing glimpse into the vast uncharted seas of traditional aesthetics and poetics. He speaks of "linguistic usage that amplifies, multiplies or intensifies the relationship of the word to its referent."¹⁸ He speaks of sound itself as a system of symbols. He also indicates that the Kaluli had what seems to be a religious view of art where the final climactic response to a dance for example becomes an essentially mystic experience.¹⁹ More in-depth studies of other culture groups will no doubt reveal similar aesthetic and poetic traditions. The young writers of the 80's are less in touch with their non-literate traditions than their predecessors and likewise more oblivious to the rich traditions waiting to be resuscitated, adapted and innovated upon. There is therefore an urgent need for systematic research and understanding of traditional aesthetics and poetics.

So far John Kasaipwalova is the only one still engaged in creative writing, who has searched back into his native Trobriand aesthetics and poetics.²⁰ Perhaps this is a contributory factor in setting him apart from the rest. But Kasaipwalova, ironically, has moved into another art form, the Kesawaga, which is traditional dance drama. Kasaipwalova has expressed the opinion that in this form he can achieve closer communication

with his audience. While one can sympathize with the assent to the reasons for his departure from the literary scene, it is a great loss to the world of PNG writing.

The lack of a strong critical tradition derives historically from the early years. In the 60's Ulli Beier, who has been acknowledged as the "mid-wife"²¹ who presided over the birth of PNG literature, was keenly aware of the fact that the time was ripe and the world was ready for literature from the newly emergent nations. He therefore acted with speed and promptitude in getting writers into print. Hind-sight forces us to consider the long-lasting repercussions of this policy. A strong critical tradition did not grow up alongside the creative writing.

Ulli Beier was also a strong believer in the theory that alien Western modes and standards would inhibit young creative talent. This was certainly the reason why the young writers were not pressed into imitative pseudo-western moulds as writers elsewhere were. But this policy has led to a lack of standards as well as the lack of a strong critical tradition based on western poetics and aesthetics. This has reached a stage now where the writer is unaware of both the traditions he is heir to, the indigenous and the imported. The result is that much of the writing of the 80's is very simple nostalgic lyricism or, in drama, surface comedy. There are many literary dilettantes producing many poetic and dramatic fragments, but nothing more sustained, more complex or more disciplined.

Nora Vagi Brash in her plays²² shows an intuitive rapport with the concerns of the grass roots of PNG as well as a keen, if wicked insight, into the foibles of the new elite. This immediately places her in an advantageous position as a comic dramatist and a commentator on contemporary Papua New Guinea. Add to this a gift for dialogue, a saucy wit and an instinct for comic situation and one would seem to have a combination hard to heat. But Nora Brash has yet to write a well sustained and carefully crafted play. Informed analytical criticism of her work can act as the counterforce against which she could extend and enlarge her craft. One can not help feeling

that Nora Vagi Brash' hairs-breadth from being vehicles of social comm

I will finally look at indigenous philosophic ers can find soil for su Bernard Narokobi, a la philosopher by inclinat the drive towards th "Melanesian way". He the implications of "de New Guinean culture conscious attempt by into the concept of the catchy phrase the tern widely used. Narokob cepted and acclaimed matter rests there. In Papua New Guinea at ment of Mr. Narokobi partment to introduce at the University. How attained the status of a Henry Olela, Lecture University had this to

There are simply n scholars who have tematic or academ values, nor are thei UPNG and other learning in PNG w in a significant way philosophical ana World View.²³

As a result, says Dr. leave these institution entific training, but v studies which could gi ing of the multiplicity ences which make up t and the world.²⁴ The d for Melanesian Studi towards giving writi their writing. In the 7 concerns of the young the grounds of youth excuse is no longer v or collectively. Yet v evidence (with except or deeper concerns. anti-colonial outburst cerns of the majority

that Nora Vagi Brash's plays miss out by a hairs-breadth from being extremely forceful vehicles of social comment.

I will finally look at the lack of a concrete indigenous philosophical base in which writers can find soil for sustenance and growth. Bernard Narokobi, a lawyer by training and a philosopher by inclination, has spear-headed the drive towards the formulation of a "Melanesian way". He has written widely on the implications of "development" for Papua New Guinean culture and has advocated a conscious attempt by intellectuals to search into the concept of the Melanesian way. As a catchy phrase the term has caught on and is widely used. Narokobi himself has been accepted and acclaimed as a visionary. But the matter rests there. In 1980 the University of Papua New Guinea authorized the appointment of Mr. Narokobi to the Philosophy Department to introduce "Melanesian Studies" at the University. However the subject never attained the status of a discipline. In 1981 Dr. Henry Olela, Lecturer in Philosophy at the University had this to say:

There are simply not enough Melanesian scholars who have gone through a systematic or academic study of Melanesian values, nor are there enough graduates of UPNG and other institutions of higher learning in PNG who have been touched in a significant way by participation in a philosophical analysis of Melanesian World View.²³

As a result, says Dr. Olela, "Many students leave these institutions with technical or scientific training, but without the humanistic studies which could give them an understanding of the multiplicity of cultures and experiences which make up the modern Melanesian and the world."²⁴ The development of a center for Melanesian Studies would go a long way towards giving writers a sense of direction in their writing. In the 70's the limited range of concerns of the young poets was excused on the grounds of youth and immaturity.²⁵ This excuse is no longer valid, either individually or collectively. Yet writing today shows no evidence (with exceptions of course) of wider or deeper concerns. Nostalgic lyricism or anti-colonial outbursts are still the main concerns of the majority of writers.

Russell Soaba is the exception. He has been writing since the 60's, continued to write while others were distracted by more immediately pressing concerns such as politics and is still writing now. He is the most philosophical of Papua New Guinean writers. He has been largely responsible for the creation of the modern PNG myth of the "Wanpis" which is the Pidgin word for a misfit, an alienated man. At this stage of transition in PNG when many are "caught between two worlds", the figure of the misfit has become a meaningful and evocative symbol in Soaba's writing. It is evident that Soaba aligns himself with western Existentialist thought. However one feels that the extreme *ennui* and disillusionment that Soaba portrays sits somewhat uncertainly on his Melanesian characters. It is well to recall what Chinua Achebe said about African writers' attempts to "contract the sicknesses of Europe ... the *human condition* syndrome." "Presumably European art and literature have every good reason for going into a phase of despair. But ours does not. The worst we can afford at present is disappointment."²⁶ Perhaps this is why Russell Soaba has not touched a responsive chord among Papua New Guinean readers.

The 80's could prove to be a period of consolidation in the development of Papua New Guinean literature. A concerted effort should be made to reassess language deficiencies, to activate research into the past and to establish a strong critical climate for writers. It must be stressed that a sense of urgency is needed, especially with regard to the past. As Narokobi puts it, "We can no longer be content simply with the idea that the old man will hand down his skills to his sons and daughters. The fact is that the old men and women are dying. The young have other priorities."²⁷

This consolidation has to be done by Papua New Guineans themselves to be of any relevance or significance. The time is ripe for such activity. The urgent pressures of politics in a newly independent country are receding into the background now and the young undergraduates and graduates of the 50's and 60's have reached their maturity. The winds of change have perhaps already begun to

sweep through the Papua New Guinea scene. John Waiko, one of the young writers of the 60's has now received his doctoral degree for an oral history of his Binandere people. This decade should see more Papua New Guineans engaging in systematic research into their own backgrounds — whether historical, sociological or aesthetic. Out of this will no doubt emerge a new and dynamic impetus towards creativity.

I would like to conclude with a Binandere image of the "natural order" of growth, continuity and renewal as expressed by John Waiko: "The new finger nail should grow in the image and under the protection of the old. Only when the nail is properly formed should the old fall away."²⁸ In such a stream of continuity "looking thru those eyeholes" will be natural and inevitable, not a mere symbolic gesture.

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FOOTNOTES

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4. ACHEBE, CHINUA, *Morning yet on Creation Day*, London, Heinemann, 1975, p. 44.
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7. KERPI, KAMA, 'The Simple Joys of Life', *Call of Midnight Bird*, Port Moresby, Papua Pocket Poets, 1973, p. 24.
8. KRAUTH, NIGEL, 'Unfolding like Petals: the Progress of Papua New Guinean Literature', Mimeographed, p. 5.
9. Information derived from conversations with Julia Daia Bore, editor *New Nation* and Kirpal Singh, literary editor, *The Times*, as well as personal experience as joint-editor of *Ondo-Bondo*, a PNG literary magazine.
10. Information derived from conversations with Peter Trist, Principal, NBC Training Center, Rabaul, and Fred Ume, Drama Production Unit, NBC.
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26. ACHEBE, op. cit., p. 24.
27. NAROKOBI, BERNARD M., 'Art and Nationalism' in *Voices of Independence*, op. cit., p. 223.
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