EVOLT, HENRY ("GERMAN HARRY")

Grim End Of Somerset Maugham's "German Harry"

By JOHN W. EARNSHAW

A RECENT news item that Somerset Maugham intends henceforth to devote his pen only to an occasional contemplative essay recalls his meeting with German Harry, the hermit of Deliverance Island, and the way in which he accurately foretold the manner of the old man's death.

Almost thirty years ago Maugham made his leisurely way through the South Seas and then on to the Far East, collecting material for many of his later stage and literary successes. At Thursday Island he chartered a lugger to carry him across the island-studded waters of Torres Strait to Merauke, that last outpost of the East, set among the swamps of the Dutch New Guinea coast.

"German Harry's" dining hut and open-air kitchen.

At Deliverance Island, well off any beaten track, he met an aged and bearded sailor who had lived a Crusoe-like existence there for almost 25 years, and whose only visitors had been pearlers, perhaps once or twice a year.

Maugham was so intrigued by the romance of the hermit's life that he wrote a short story on the subject, calling it "German Harry" (so was the old man known from Cooktown to Samarai.)

The story first appeared in the "American Cosmopolitan" of January, 1924, and "Nash's Magazine" of March the same year.

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AFTER describing his encounter with the sour and suspicious islander, Maugham prophesied with great insight the final lonely tragedy:

. . . and then I foresaw the end. One day a pearl fisher would land on the island and German Harry would not be waiting for him, silent and suspicious, on the water's edge. He would go up to the hut and there, lying on the bed, unrecognisable, he would see all that remained of what had been a man. Perhaps he would hunt high and low for the great mass of pearls which had haunted the fancy of so many an adventurer. But I do not believe he would find it; German Harry would have seen to it that none would discover his treasure and the pearls would rot in their hiding place.

Then the pearl fisher would go back to his dingy and the island would once more be deserted by man.

It came about that a few years later I was to play a minor part in this story.

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IN March, 1928, I was coming southward across Torres Strait with that famous bird of paradise hunter, Dick Roche, of Merauke, whose adventures on the dark rivers of Dutch New Guinea are legendary in the North.

We had spent some weeks in the swamps of the Bensbach River, where ducks and geese wheeled in their countless thousands.

Deliverance Island, some 30 miles from the desolate mangroves of the New Guinea coast, was to be our first stop; and I looked forward to meeting the hermit who had lived there for almost 30 years.

Roche, on his twice-yearly trips to the "civilisation" of Thursday Island, had regularly called at the island and for long periods was its only visitor. With little kindnesses he had gradually won the confidence and friendship of German Harry and in this way learnt much of his early wanderings and years of solitude.

It was only after a hard day's plug against the bustling south-east trade wind that we reached the welcome shelter of Deliverance Island. Perhaps half a mile or so in circumference, ringed with a beach of white coral sand, crowned with coconut palms dancing in the breeze, and surrounded by a wide fringing reef, it resembled an island such as might be imagined in a boyhood adventure book.

On the beach we could see no sign of German Harry. The only live thing in sight was a frantically ecstatic white mongrel dog which ran back and forth with barks of welcome. So it was with foreboding that we rowed ashore to where a huge and lonely fig tree spread its branches over the several little huts that made up Harry's domain.

With the pink-eyed dog tumbling at our feet, we walked into the shade of the tree. There, in the open, close to a smoke-blackened "kitchen," was a rude table laid with worn utensils for a simple meal—a meal which had never been eaten.

Nearby was a golgothic mound of human, rib-like turtle flipper bones—the midden of half a life of solitary meals.

A sense of finality and the timeless silence of lonely places hushed our inquiring voices.

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WITHIN the living hut all was in meticulous order. On a wooden bunk, grey blankets were tucked creaseless, ready for the sleeper, who came no more.

On a shelf rested a plate of turtle egg and flour scones from which some loathsome fungus sprouted. And in an old sea chest lay yellowed flannel shirts and trousers, long hoarded against a day that had never dawned.

All this order spoke of endless hours of idle occupation. There were no books to speak of consolation.

A low cry from one of our Malays brought us to the rear opening of the hut. There, half under the raised floor, lay what was left of German Harry. Time and hot tropic sun had removed all resemblance to a once-sturdy sailor. With outstretched skeletal arms the hermit seemed to clutch at the soil.

On the neighbouring wall a hanging slate carried the only message from the dead; a crabbed hand had inscribed January, 1928, with the numerals 1 to 31 beneath. This was the old man's calendar on which every figure to 25 had been cancelled with a stroke. So he knew the passing of the years—the last mark was then two months old.

The left hand and right foot were missing from the skeleton. Had German Harry been attacked by a shark while wading in the nearby shallows; or, stricken with illness, had he fallen at his threshold, there to be mutilated by his hunger-driven dog? That is a story that never will be told.

A grave was dug in the warm white sand under the fig tree, where we laid the bones of old Harry.

Idle talk had conjured up treasure in hidden pearls, but we never found them.

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LATER I heard from Roche the romantic story of German Harry.

Henry Evolt, for that was his real name, was born in Denmark in October, 1849. As a lad of 16 he shipped before the mast and for many years sailed the seas. Coming to Australia in the eighties, he joined the Austrian ship Gibraud from Newcastle, for Batavia with coals. But the ship was wrecked on the Woppa Reef in Torres Strait. Reaching Thursday Island he met up with an old shipmate, "Louis the Greek" bought a half-share in the latter's beche-de-mer boat, and fished and traded off the New Guinea coast for the next six years.

The partnership prospered, and in 1890 the pair had their headquarters on Deliverance Island, where they could retire from the pest and fever ridden coast, and also be safe from the fierce Tugeri headhunters who made periodic forays along the coast from Dutch New Guinea.

For another nine years all went well until a third adventurer appeared on the scene and began to work for them. This man, "Joe Austen" or Joseph Augustin de Paoli, was a Corsican soldier of fortune who had fought in the Crimean and Franco-Prussian wars. Joining the Communist uprising in Paris in 1871, de Paoli had been arrested and exiled to New Caledonia, but succeeded in escaping from the transport at Melbourne. Then began his wanderings in the Pacific.

But his arrival at Deliverance was destined to break up the partnership of 15 years. One night he decamped with a boat loaded with turtle shell and other trade, and sold the lot at Thursday Island.

Because of this blow, Louis the Greek drifted away, and German Harry was left alone. His solitude remained almost unbroken for the next 28 years.

Towards the last his greatest fear was that Authority might wrest him from his island refuge and send him to the frightening care of a home for the aged near Brisbane.

German Harry was the last of the old New Guinea beachcombers, and his like will not be seen again.

By
CK. PERCIVAL

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The following morning air cover was provided by the U.S.S. carrier Sicily. H.M.S. Cardigan Bay then escorted the L.S.U. down the tortuous channel, shelling Communist positions as she made her way to sea.

No official details yet have been released about the test-flying of the captured M.I.G. 15. But one point clearly was established during the salvage—the M.I.G. 15 is powered by a Russian version of the Rolls Royce Nene jet engine.

About four years ago Britain sold the Soviet about 20 Nene engines. The Nene was then regarded as obsolete, but has evidently been stepped up by the Russians to a remarkable degree of efficiency.