

Atolls: Napoleon

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The young police officer told me, “I’m going to arrest Napoleon.” We were both standing on the deck of the *Kokkōmaru*, a small steamer that made regular runs to the outer islands of the southern Palau archipelago.

“Napoleon?”

“Yes, his name is Napoleon,” the young officer answered with a laugh, as though he must have guessed I would be surprised. “He’s called Napoleon, but he’s a native. It’s the name of a boy from the islands.”

Native islanders often have pretty strange names. Since many of them received their names from the Christian missionaries long ago, names like Maria and Francisco are very common. Some have German names such as Bismarck because Micronesia used to be ruled by Germany. All the same, “Napoleon” is a pretty rare name. Nevertheless, it is a rather splendid name compared to some of the other names that I have heard here such as July (this person was probably born during the seventh month), *Kokoro*¹ and even Toothpaste. Naturally, there is something comical in someone having a name that is a little bit too majestic for its bearer.

I was told the story of Napoleon, the black juvenile delinquent, as I was standing in the shade of a tent that stretched overhead on the deck.

Up until two years ago, Napoleon used to live in the town of Koror, but during his third year at the indigenous public school, he allegedly played such sadistic mischief on a girl younger than himself as to all but drive her to death. Aside from that, he was the instigator of a few other incidents of a similar nature and may have committed theft as well; two years ago, when he was thirteen years old, he was punished for these crimes by being banished from Koror to S Island in the distant south. Although nominally part of the Palau archipelago, these outlying islands are geologically separate and the indigenous people belong to the central Carolinian ethnic group far to the east who have completely different customs and a different language than the people of Palau. Even the delinquent Napoleon was apparently dumbfounded at first, but he seemed to have an uncanny ability to adapt to his new environment, to rise above circumstances, and to triumph, so within a few years he began to show signs of a will to power that the residents of S Island found hard to deal with. The mayor of S began to complain to the branch office in Palau about

¹ Heart

this young bully who was behaving in an unacceptable manner toward young girls and married women. While you might think that the adults on this island should have been able to deal with a delinquent on their own, they stood in terror of the boy for some reason. The population of S Island was not only very small but it was declining with each passing year; in fact, S was on the verge of becoming a desert island and the islanders were so lacking in will power that they just couldn't summon the energy to discipline a fifteen year old boy.

I learned from the police officer who was going to arrest Napoleon a second time that the officials of the Palau district police bureau, concluding that the youth had shown no signs of repentance, had decided to prolong his term of confinement and to change the place of banishment from S Island to T Island which lay far to the south. Accompanied by one native assistant patrolman, the officer sent on this mission boarded a small steamer that makes only about three trips a year to these outlying islands and which Japanese hardly ever ride, both in order to dispose of this case and to collect the head tax due from these out of the way islands.

I said, "I wonder if this Napoleon fellow will get on the boat quietly and move to T Island."

The officer replied in earnest, "What are you talking about? He may be a delinquent, but he's still just an island boy. There won't be any problem."

I realized from his tone of voice—a note of irritation crept into his voice that had been absent during our previous conversation—that he might have interpreted my words as expressing doubt about the police's image of absolute authority before the natives of the islands.

Napoleon was being banished to T Island because the natives of S Island didn't know how to handle him, but it was a foregone conclusion that the T islanders—a spiritless bunch like the S Islanders—would be driven to their wit's end by the antics of this young man. Couldn't they come up with some other way to punish him besides banishment? For example, what about forcing him to do hard labor under strict surveillance in the city of Koror or some such similar punishment? And then, what law authorized the authorities to apply the old fashioned punishment of banishment to a mere child? Who had established this law to deal with islanders who did not have Japanese nationality and particularly with minors? Even though I was also an official working in the South Seas Agency, I was completely ignorant about such matters since I worked in a completely different field and was also a newcomer. I wanted to ask the officer to explain these things to me, but I held back because I had apparently put him in a bad humor already and felt some consideration for the native patrolman who was standing nearby.

"The captain said that we'll be landing in S Island by noon, but you can't depend on his words since we've already wasted at least twelve hours over the past few days by running off course or overshooting our destination," the officer said, abruptly changing the subject, and then he stretched himself and looked out in the direction of the ocean. Imitating him, perhaps for no reason, I also squinted my eyes and gazed out at the dazzling sea and sky in sympathy with him.

The weather was absolutely perfect. Both the sky and the sea were a dazzling blue. The bright, transparent blue of the sky seemed to melt at the horizon in a vague mist of golden powder, and, the dark blue of the water—so effervescent that you felt as if you would turn the same color just by looking at it—spread out, swelled, and expanded

underneath it. The great dish of the sea, which was an indescribably rich, purplish blue, seemed to rise above and then sink below the white handrail on the deck as the swells lifted us incredibly high in the air then dropped us back into the depths. I recalled the expression “blue devils.” I don’t really know what kind of devil this expression refers to, but in my disordered mind I imagined that countless blue devils madly dancing in the dazzling platinum light might offer a spectacle as beautiful as this sky and sea.

After a time, averting my eyes from the too dazzling sea, I saw that the young officer whom I had been conversing with had fallen into a pleasant nap, resting in a canvas lounge chair.

Before noon the ship entered the bay after passing through a break in the coral reef. We were at S Island—the Elba to which this dark-skinned, little Napoleon had been exiled.

It was a small, low-lying coral island without a single elevated point. The sand mixed with coral on the beach, which formed a gentle arc in front of us, was so dazzlingly white that it hurt your eyes even to look at it. A row of old palm trees soared up into the bright blue of the midday sky while you could catch a glimpse of the tiny native huts far beneath them. About twenty native men and women came out to the shore and watched our boat approach, frowning and shading their eyes with their hands.

We could not dock at the pier due to the strong ocean currents. The ship dropped anchor about half a league off shore and three canoes sliced the waves and came to welcome us. Incredibly muscular men with bronzed bodies swam toward us clad only in red loincloths. When they got close, we could see they all wore black earrings dangling from their ears.

“I’ll be back soon,” the police officer said as he picked up his helmet, then he climbed down from the deck accompanied by his assistant.

We could only stay at this island for three hours. I decided not to go ashore mainly because I was worried about the heat.

After finishing my lunch in the ship’s hold, I went back up to the deck. The water inside the reef looked like jade dissolved in milk, forming a sharp contrast with the dark blue in the outlying seas. In the shadow cast by our ship, it looked as transparent as a thick piece of cut glass. I started to feel sleepy after looking down at the many fish splashing about—fish with gaudy, vertical stripes that looked like angelfish and thin fish the color of lead that resembled halfbeaks. I fell asleep right away after lying down in the lounge chair where the officer had slept a short time before.

I opened my eyes when I heard footsteps coming up the landing ramp and the sound of human voices: the police officer and his assistant had come back. They had brought along a young islander who wore a loincloth and stood off to one side.

“Aha! So this is your Napoleon, is it?”

He nodded back, “Uh-huh,” then he gave the lad a shove toward the corner of the deck where the rigging formed a pile. “You had better squat down over there.”

Standing behind the officer, the assistant patrolman, a youth about twenty years of age who had the face of a moron, barked out something to the youth, most likely interpreting the officer’s words. After throwing a sulky look in our direction, the lad sat down on top of a wooden box in the corner and gazed out to sea.

This young Napoleon had very small eyes for an islander, but his face was by no means ugly. He didn't look the least bit crafty or sly, although we generally expect an evil man to have a cunning look. Lacking any sign of intelligence, his face was that of an idiot, but there was not a trace of that comical, deadpan look that you find in the faces of most islanders. Unmitigated malice alone showed clearly in this stupid face, unleavened by any meaning or motive. You would imagine that a person with a face like this would be capable of the cruel actions that the police officer had mentioned in our last conversation. Yet, contrary to my expectations, he was very slight in build. In general, the islanders reach their full size by the age of twenty and there are many who have splendid physiques when they are only fifteen or sixteen. I had expected Napoleon to have a well-developed physique in keeping with the sexual offense that this precocious youth had committed, but instead he was thin and all shriveled up like a monkey. Indeed I found it all incomprehensible—how could a boy this tiny manage to inspire terror in the hearts of these islanders for whom physical prowess carries almost as much weight as family lineage in determining the social pecking order?

I turned to the police officer and said, "Good job."

"There was nothing to it. When the ship arrived, it was such a rare event that the kid came out onto the beach to watch along with all the other villagers. So it was easy to arrest him. But this guy here (he pointed to his assistant) is having a hell of a time trying to communicate with him," the officer added. "This Napoleon, it seems, has completely forgotten how to speak Palauan. He can't make out a word of the language no matter what you say to him. But how is such a thing possible? Can a person really forget the language of the place where he was born in just two years?"

Napoleon had apparently forgotten all of his Palauan since he had only been using the Trak language on this island during the past two years. It's not hard to understand how he forgot his Japanese since he had only studied it for two years in the public school. But how could he have forgotten Palauan, which he had been using almost since the time he was born. I nodded my head in agreement. But if you think about it, perhaps it is not as impossible as it first appears. Or, who knows, it might be just a ploy on the boy's part to avoid having to answer the policeman's questions. I nodded my head again saying, "Is that so?"

"I really laid into him because I thought that he was putting us on, but I guess he really has forgotten," he said to me wiping the sweat from his brow, and then he threw a spiteful look at Napoleon who had his back turned toward us. "In any case, he is a sulky, nervy little brat. I have never seen anyone so stubborn even if he is still a child!"

We set sail at three in the afternoon. As the engine hummed along, the hull of the ship began to pitch slightly up and down.

The police officer and I were both reclining on the deck chairs (as the only two first class passengers aboard the ship, we could hardly avoid spending time together) and we looked back at the island we had left behind. All of a sudden, the assistant patrolmen, who had been standing by us, let out a piercing shriek and pointed his finger to something behind us. Turning around, I saw the receding figure of a native boy just as he leapt over the white handrail and plunged into the sea. We all raced over to the handrail in a panic. In the swirling waters about fifteen meters from the ship, the runaway had

already made it past the stern of the boat and was swimming skillfully back toward the island.

“Stop the ship! Turn it around!” the officer barked out orders. “Napoleon has escaped.”

From one moment to the next, the ship was plunged into turmoil. Two native sailors who were at the stern of the ship dove into the sea in pursuit of the runaway. They were both stalwart youths who looked a little over twenty years old. The distance between the runaway and his pursuers grew less with each passing instant. When the islanders, after seeing the boat depart, realized what was happening, they raced toward the place where Napoleon seemed to be heading.

With breathless attention, I leaned against the handrail and watched this unexpected chase scene unfold before my eyes. It was an arrest scene in the South Seas set against a backdrop of bright, vivid colors. I must have been looking on with a very happy expression on my face.

“Interesting, isn’t it,” I realized that someone was talking to me and it turned out to be the captain of the ship who was standing right beside me without my realizing it (this captain always seemed slightly drunk no matter what the time of day). Calmly blowing out smoke from his pipe, he looked down at this sea drama with an expression of amusement on his face just as though he were watching a movie. I made a wry smile when I found myself secretly hoping that Napoleon would make it to the shore safely and escape deep into the island’s woods.

But, contrary to my hopes, the end was not long in coming. Napoleon was apprehended by his pursuers forty yards from the shore where the water was as deep as he was tall. The result was never in doubt if you compared this little boy with the two strapping youths pursuing him. You could see the boy being hauled off, the two youths holding him firmly by the arm on either side until he reached the beach. Afterwards, it was hard to tell what was happening because he was suddenly surrounded on all sides by the islanders.

The police officer was in a foul mood.

Thirty minutes later, Napoleon returned to the ship aboard a canoe in which the two young sailors who had just distinguished themselves had him pinned down. As soon as he got on board, he got three vigorous smacks in the face, one right after the other. Unlike the last time, when he was allowed to move around freely, this time his arms and legs were bound with thick hemp rope used on the ship. Shackled in this way, he rolled about in a corner on the deck between palm baskets stuffed with the island crew’s food supplies and the peeled coconut husks that were used for drinking water.

“The bastard! He has been a pain in the ass from the very start.” Despite his angry words, the police officer appeared to have cooled off a little.

The next day the weather was perfect. The ship continued to head south and no land came into view all day long.

Finally, around evening we entered an atoll off the uninhabited H Island. I thought that the ship was approaching this desert island to check whether any castaways had landed there. I vaguely remembered having read somewhere about some international covenant or code of ethics concerning sea routes. However, in reality, our stop had nothing whatsoever to do with this sentimental, humanistic way of thinking. We were

stopping here to do a favor to the South Seas Trading Company,² which enjoyed a monopoly on gathering clams in the shallows here, and to prevent poachers from encroaching on their territory.

From the deck of the ship, this low-lying coral island seemed completely covered by a tremendous flock of seagulls. Invited by some members of the crew, I decided to go ashore and have a look. I was utterly astounded. All around us, there was nothing but birds, birds, birds, not to mention bird eggs and bird droppings, whether in the shadow of the crags, on the trees, or in the sand. And this innumerable flock made no move to run away when we approached them—at most they waddled off to dodge us if we tried to grab hold of them. In color, some were white, but others were gray, or light brown, or light blue; in size, they ranged from birds as big as a child to tiny ones about as small as a swallow. There were thousands of these birds, so many that it was impossible to count them all, and they could be divided into dozens of different species. Unfortunately, neither I nor any of the crewmembers who accompanied me could say which species they belonged to. I started running around and chasing after them indiscriminately, happy as a child. I caught so many that I lost count and it was too funny for words. Once I held a long white bird with a red beak in my arms until it began to get unruly and pecked at me. I would catch one bird, then let him go, catch another, and then let him go, all the time raising a holler like a child on a spree. The other crew members with me were not having as much fun since they were not doing this for the first time, yet by swinging their clubs, they managed to cause quite a lot of useless carnage. When they returned to the ship, they brought back three rather large birds and exactly ten light yellowish eggs as food supplies.

I returned to the ship as happy as a boy back from a school outing and the police officer, who had not gone ashore, said to me. “That guy (he was referring to Napoleon) is in such a sulk that he refuses to eat anything. We loosened his ropes and brought him taro and coconut milk but he won’t even touch the stuff. How far will he carry his stubbornness?”

The boy was sprawled out in the same spot he had been the day before, fortunately a place shaded from the sun. His eyes were wide open, but he did not make eye contact with me even when I came up close to him.

The next morning, that is, two days after we left S Island, the ship finally arrived at the terminal stop of T Island, the new place of banishment for the young Napoleon. The water of the lagoon was light green, the sand white, and palm trees towered off in the distance. A myriad convoy of canoes raced to greet our arriving ship, the islanders climbed on board, and exchanged their chickens and eggs for canned sardine and tobacco; those who stood on the shore watched our ship with a look of wonder in their eyes. It was always the same scene whenever you arrived at one of the islands.

When the ship arrived, the patrolman shouted at Napoleon who was still lying down in the same place between the palm baskets, loosened his ropes, and roused him to his feet. Out of pure stubbornness, Napoleon had refused to have a bite to eat or a drop to drink during the entire two days of the ocean voyage. He rose quietly but he used his still

² The Japanese government established the South Seas (Nan'yō) Trading Company as a monopoly to promote commerce and economic development in Micronesia.

bound elbow to jab at the assistant patrolman, a look of rage in his face, when the latter grabbed him by the arm and tried to drag him toward the police officer. I could hardly fail to notice the look of surprise and terror that appeared on the patrolman's stupid face at the moment Napoleon jabbed at him. Napoleon walked alone down the steps of the ramp after the police officer. From the deck, I could make out his figure as he transferred to the canoe, got off the canoe when they reached shore, and walked with other islanders behind the police officer until he disappeared from view between the palm trees.

Seven or eight other passengers loaded their palm baskets onto the canoe and got off at T. Island. In exchange, the ten new passengers heading for Palau boarded the ship were carrying the same type of baskets. As is the custom in Trak, the islanders hung jet black earrings made of coconut shells from their distended earlobes and covered their upper bodies with wavelike tattoos.

About an hour later, the police officer and his assistant both returned to the ship. They had notified the islanders of Napoleon's banishment and the chief had taken the boy into custody.

The ship set sail in the afternoon.

As usual, the islanders lined up along the shore and waved farewell to us. After all, they only witnessed a "big" ship visit their island three or four times a year.

Looking out at the shore through my sunglasses, I noticed a boy who resembled Napoleon standing in the line. I asked the patrolman just to make sure and he confirmed that the boy was, in fact, Napoleon. I couldn't tell what sort of expression he wore on his face since our ship was already far from the shore, but he looked healthy and carefree now that he was set free—or perhaps this was only a figment of my imagination. Two smaller boys were standing by his side and from time to time they would chat together—had he already acquired a band of followers just three hours after coming ashore.

The whistle blew and the prow of the ship headed out to the open sea. I was sure I could make out Napoleon waving to us along with the other islanders lined up on shore. Why in the world did that stubborn, incorrigible boy feel like doing that? Was he simply mimicking the other islanders now that he had stuffed himself with taros and forgotten his anger and the hunger strike he had undertaken aboard the ship? Or did he wave to the ship returning to Palau because he felt a tinge of nostalgia for the home island whose language he had forgotten? I do not know whether either guess is true.

The Kokkōmaru was heading to the north in earnest. As we picked up speed, the Saint Helena to which the young Napoleon had been exiled, became just a grayish shadow, then a thin plume of smoke and—after about an hour—it totally vanished into the endless plate of the deep blue sea.