

THE RELUCTANT EMPIRE BUILDERS.

The Gilbert and Ellice Islands - astride the Equator, just west of the 180th meridian, and about as far from Great Britain as it is possible to be; twenty-five tiny islands, some coral atolls and others 'steep to', but all only a few feet above sea level; none with any pretensions to reasonable harbour facilities; none with natural resources save for a modest production of copra amounting to a few hundred tons per annum; a group of islands with no strategic significance or importance, certainly in the last decade of the 19th century; and with no demand from the native peoples that Great Britain should establish a Protectorate over them.

And yet Great Britain did establish a Protectorate over them in the year 1892. But I doubt if many or, indeed, any, Gilbertese, if asked, would be able to state with any degree of clarity or accuracy just what moved - or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, compelled - Great Britain to take such a step, since it was not then her policy to acquire such territories, especially those the other side of the world; and, in any case, there were then two other nations which almost certainly had as good, if not better, claims to those islands at that time.

One such nation was the United States of America.

There is a well known saying that 'Trade follows the flag' and this was certainly true in the case of the Gilbert Islands. By 1819 American whalers had reached Honolulu and in 1821 one Captain George Barrett in the Independence II pioneered whaling in the Kingsmill Islands, as the Gilbert Islands were then called. Many succeeded them during the next fifty years and indeed there were whalers in the islands even as late as the last decade of the 19th century; further, they could claim to have discovered a number of the Pacific islands. Such whalers conducted trading from their ships; pre-eminent among them, for example, was Captain Ichabod Handy of Fairhaven, Massachusetts, master and principal owner of the barque Belle. Later this method of trade was taken over to some extent by beachcombers and castaways of many nationalities, including Americans. By the mid-sixties, however, resident traders commenced to appear, even though 'whaler-trading' continued into the mid-seventies, many of such ships being American, for example, under Captain Danielsberg, captain of the Pfeil, trading for Stapenhorst and Hoffschlaeger of Honolulu.

By the early eighties, American citizens were to be found trading in various islands of the Gilbert group; thus, when Captain Maxwell of H.M.S. Emerald visited those islands in 1881 he noted, for example, the presence of an American citizen named Smith, who was secretary to the King in Abemama, and another such citizen by the name of Lynch in Butaritari who owned the schooner Mathilde. There were also American citizens trading in the Ellice Islands then, for example, one Davies in the island of Nui.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the Government of the United States decided to take cognizance of these developments and, in 1888, it established a United States Commercial Agency in the island of Butaritari. One Frederick Fernand Rick, born in Breslau, Germany, but a naturalized citizen of the United States, was commissioned as Commercial Agent for the Gilbert Islands by letter from the State Department dated the 25th May, 1888; he had then resided in Butaritari for eight years, first as agent for the American firm of Wightman Brothers, and from mid-1892 as agent for Crawford & Co, both firms being based on San Francisco. His duties appear in fact to have been rather wider than those connected with trade and commerce. Reference is made later on to certain circumstances in which he played a part when the Protectorate was proclaimed in Butaritari in 1892, but it is sufficient at this point to note the establishment of the Commercial Agency and his appointment.

The interest of the United States and the establishment of the Agency must also certainly have been occasioned by reason of the fact that the two principal trading firms above-named which had been set up in the group with headquarters in Butaritari were both American.

Further, by 1892, when Captain E.H.M. Davis visited all the Gilbert Islands in H.M.S. Royalist and declared a Protectorate over the group, American citizens were scattered throughout the islands and engaged in trade, either for one of the two companies above-named, or on their own behalf; thus, in Butaritari, there were four American citizens working for Wightman Brothers, and two for Crawford & Co. The latter company also employed American citizens as traders in Maiana, Tabiteuea, Beru and Nikunau, in addition to British, Germans, Danes, an Austrian and a Gilbertese in Tarawa, Nonouti, Tabiteuea, Arorae and Tamana. In contrast, Wightman Brothers employed only one American and one Chinese in Abaiang, and one Chinese in Little Makin, the island adjacent to Butaritari. In addition, trading on their own account, were two American citizens in Abemama, two in Tarawa, two in Abaiang, and one each in Butaritari, Maiana, Marakei and Nonouti, whilst in Abemama there was one such citizen who had ceased to trade and one American citizen trading in Butaritari for the German firm of Jaluit Gesellschaft.

Coincident with these trading activities was also, of course, the need for shipping under the American flag, not only to provide a shipping service between the islands and the west coast of America for the carriage of copra from the islands to the mainland, but also to bring back trade goods in the opposite direction; vessels such as the barque "Helen W Almy" were engaged in this trade and it is also noteworthy that Commander Rooke of H.M.S. Miranda when visiting the islands in 1886 noted that two schooners ex San Francisco called at Onotoa for copra. Butaritari was, however, used principally as a trading centre for the whole group by the two American firms with headquarters there and, to support the distribution of trade goods and the collection of copra, schooners under the American flag were also engaged in such activities; though too numerous to mention, there were, for example, the "Annie F. Briggs" which Captain Bridge of H.M.S. Espiegle found loading copra at Nikunau in 1883, the "Wm. H. Stevens" which Lieutenant Moore of H.M.S. Dart found similarly engaged at Nonouti in 1884, and the "Fleur de Lys" and "Equator" which Captain Davis found in 1892 at Butaritari and Abemama respectively.

But shipping under the American flag was not solely engaged in trade and commerce. Its usefulness may well also have been welcomed by the United States authorities in that it was also engaged in the recruitment of Gilbertese for work in the canefields of the Hawaiian Islands. Thus, though originally flying the British flag, the brigantine "Stormbird" was transferred to the ownership of the Hawaiian Government in the mid-eighties, and was engaged in recruiting labour from the Gilbert Islands for service in Hawaii. Again, for example, in 1883 Captain Bridge found the recruiting schooner "Julia" at Tabiteuea, and another such recruiting vessel at Abemama.

Another factor which must have compelled the United States to take a particular interest in the Gilbert Islands during the 19th century was the presence there of American missionaries. The first representative of the American Board of Foreign Missions was the Reverend Hiram Bingham, who established the mission's headquarters in the island of Abaiang in 1857, and who spent some twenty years in those islands. Gradually, however, the work of the Mission was undertaken by Hawaiians or Gilbertese in the islands north of Beru, and the Reverend Taylor, whom Lieutenant Pugh of H.M.S. Renard met in Abaiang in 1876, and whom, with his colleague, the Reverend Walkup, Captain Maxwell met in 1881, were probably among the last Europeans to be stationed in those islands, though Reverend Walkup was still there in 1890.

That the United States was by no means disinterested in American interests in the Gilbert Islands at that time is also evident from the despatch of United States warships to those islands to oversee and protect the interests of its citizens and trade there. Thus, the U.S.S. Jamestown visited the islands in May, 1870, and the U.S.S. Narragansett in August of the same year. The former was under the command of Commander William T. Truxton and conveyed the Reverend Bingham and his wife to Abaiang, owing to the previous loss of their Mission schooner "Morning Star". More important, in the absence of the Reverend Bingham, rebels against the Uea (high chief) of Abaiang, aided and abetted by natives from South Tarawa, indulged in an orgy of "drunkenness, murder and arson which held undisputed sway" during which, in the further words of Commander Truxton "they laid waste the coconut and pandanus groves (of the Mission), destroyed the Mission property and twice assaulted and grievously wounded the Reverend Mr. Mahoe, Hawaiian Missionary". For these crimes the offenders, who admitted their guilt, were fined 50 barrels of coconut oil by Commander Truxton.

Similarly, Captain C.H. Simpson of H.M.S. Blanche, when visiting the islands in November, 1872, was informed that the natives of Abaiang were also collecting quantities of coconut oil which they had been fined by Commander R.W. Meade of the U.S.S. Narragansett.

Louis Beeka, the well-known author, writing of events in the latter part of the 19th century, also mentions visits to the islands of the U.S.S. Saginaw and the U.S.S. Adirondack.

After declaring the islands a British Protectorate on the 27th May, 1892, Captain Davis arrived in Butaritari on the 12th June. He reported part of that visit as follows:-

"I proceeded to the King's house, and found him seated, with several white men around him. I briefly stated my mission, informing him I had hoisted the British flag over the Group. On May the 27th, having ascertained on board the "Montserrat" that he had been on a visit to San Francisco, returning to Butaritari by that vessel, I asked him if he had enjoyed his trip? He said he had. I then asked him if it were true, that whilst at San Francisco, he had applied for American protection? He said "Yes"; and to my further enquiries hesitated, and answered that he had received no reply to his application; but "thought" someone was coming to see about it. I then told the King, that whomever he expected, would be rather late, as the British flag had been hoisted a fortnight previously over the whole Group".

Revisiting Butaritari briefly on the 19th - 21st June, Captain Davis reported:-

"the 20th being the anniversary of Her Majesty's Accession, I decided to remain over that day at the island to impress more strongly on the King and the natives the fact of the establishment of a British Protectorate over the island, and to remove any possible ideas of American annexation that might still exist in the minds of any of the natives, with reference to the King's late visit to San Francisco".

After visiting the Marshall Islands, then German territory, Captain Davis returned to Butaritari for the third and last time from the 6th to the 8th July, and reported as follows:-

"With reference to his San Francisco trip (the expenses for which Mr. Rick, agent for Crawford & Co., of San Francisco, informed me 'His Majesty was disposed to decline entirely to pay'), I considered that the King needed protection, and with my own interpreter, elicited the following:- That Captain White, of the schooner "Tarawa" (belonging to Crawford & Co.), asked him to undertake the trip, assuring him he would be put to no expense

"whatever. Had he to pay his own expenses he would not have gone, as he could not afford it, but Captain White pressed him to go. Tentepea, a half-caste, told me he was present, and corroborated all that the King had said with reference to Captain White. Before leaving for San Francisco he had seen no one from other islands in the group concerning American protection, and until his arrival in San Francisco, had entertained no thought of applying for it. His sole object in visiting San Francisco was to purchase a schooner, the negotiations for which, however, failed through want of funds. After his arrival at San Francisco, he was induced to apply for American protection, which he did, but as yet he had received no reply. I told the King that if, after what he had told me, Messrs. Crawford & Co., applied for repayment of his own and his attendants' expenses for this San Francisco trip, he was to decline to pay them until the claim had been investigated by some British authority. I again warned him against taking the advice of any one firm in particular, and knowing the influence Mrs. Rick had gained over him, I recommended him to abstain from being guided by her".

It is important, however, in view of what follows, to record the relationship between Captain Davis and Adolph Rick, which developed out of the former's visits to Butaritari. Of his first visit, Captain Davis wrote:-

"I also invited all the white men to be present (at his meeting with the King) and said that any complaints they wished to make I would enquire into.

Several traders were then introduced to me, some as representing firms. Amongst the latter was a Mr. Rick, agent for Crawford & Co., of San Francisco, whom I was subsequently informed (on my next visit to the island), was introduced to me as a "Commercial Agent of the United States". It did not strike me at the time that he held any official position, as he himself, in conversation I had with him, never referred to it; and it was only as I was embarking to return to the ship, that my attention was drawn by some trader present, that there was a Consular Official of the United States resident in the place. I said it was impossible, or he would certainly have made himself known to me, on such an important occasion as that of a Protectorate being established by a Foreign Power over an island in which he held an official position".

On his second visit on the 19th - 21st June, Captain Davis reported "Prior to sailing, Mr. Rick, agent for Crawford & Co., sent me a parcel of letters, and a note asking me to mail them at Sydney. I wrote to him that I would gladly do so, saying at the same time I noticed on some of the envelopes was printed "United States Consulate, Butaritari, Gilbert Islands", and as I had not been officially informed that there was any official of the United States Consulate at Butaritari, I should be glad on my return to be informed who the gentleman was for the information of my Government".

On his third and last visit on the 6th - 8th July, Captain Davis reported:-

"On my arrival Mr. Rick called on me. On his card was printed "U.S. Commercial Agent". He said he intended calling sooner, but he had been unable to get a boat, and that he thought I knew he held that position. I told him I understood that he was merely the agent of Crawford & Co., and, as such, of course I was very glad to see him; but his position as United States Commercial Agent I was unable to recognize until he was accredited to Her Britannic Majesty".

The part played by Rick in these matters is as follows. On the 12th June - the day of Captain Davis's arrival at Butaritari and on which he spoke to the King - Rick wrote the following letter to the Hon. William F. Wharton, Assistant Under Secretary of State in Washington:-

"I have the honour to report to the Department that on June 11 H.B.M. S.S. "Royalist", E.H.M. Davis, Capt. arrived at Butaritari and the same day hoisted the british flag and declared the island to be under british protection, having been previously through the whole Gilbert group, Butaritari being the last to come to for the same purpose. The King of Butaritari protested against the british flag being hoisted over his island and told the Capt. that he had sent a petition to Washington U.S.A. offering his Island to the United States as a coaling station. Before leaving Capt. Davis handed the King a Proclamation (assuming a British Protectorate over the whole group)".

There are two inaccuracies in this letter, if the account of Captain Davis is to be believed; first, the King did not protest at the British flag being raised over his island and, secondly, the King did not tell him that he had sent a petition to Washington offering his island to the United States. The date of the 11th June is also incorrect.

After the second visit to Butaritari of Captain Davis, Rick addressed the State Department further, thus:-

"I have the honour to inform the Department that Capt. E.H.M. Davis of H.M.S. "Royalist" has this day informed me that as the English had taken the Gilbert Group and I was only accredited to the King of Butaritari as Commercial Agt. for the United States, he could not recognize me as such but would report to his Government how long there had been a Commercial Agency here. As I understand that this matter of being recognized as Commercial Agent here has to be arranged in Washington, I would beg to draw the attention of the State Department to it".

Captain Davis replied to the last quoted letter on the same day as follows:-

"I beg to acknowledge your letter of this day's date in reply to my note of 21st ult, in which you inform me of the date of your appointment as Commercial Agent for the United States for the Gilbert Islands, a fact you will remember I learnt for the first time, officially from you yesterday when you called on me. Pardon me, if I here repeat what yesterday I informed you of verbally, viz., that Her Britannic Majesty having assumed a Protectorate over the Gilbert Islands from 27th May last, I am unable to recognize you as a consular Representative of the United States Government, until accredited by that Government to Her Majesty the Queen".

A day later, Rick wrote to the State Department at great length, forwarding the last quoted letter, and alleging that Captain Davis had deliberately ignored him when an attempted introduction was made on the 12th June. He further alleged, in a further letter of the same date, that he had asked Captain Davis to take to Sydney with him a large package of official, business and private letters, but that Captain Davis had declined to do so as the official envelopes bore the printed words "United States Consulate", a situation which Captain Davis did not recognize. However, after some discussion and further correspondence, Captain Davis agreed to take the mails as presented.

The next chapter in this saga appears in an article in the Washington Post of the 18th October, 1892, but it is based on information from the Gilbert Islands of the 8th August, such were the

appalling problems of communication in those days between the islands and the mainland. Though the article is based on highly discursive and much inaccurate information, it is nevertheless worth quoting in full as illustrative of the pressure from the European inhabitants of the islands for the United States to assume some form of protection over them. The article is as follows:-

" TO DRIVE OUT AMERICANS.

Evident intent of the British in the Gilbert Islands.

Favours for the Germans.

England credited with a desire to trade the islands for a slice of East Africa - A blustering, cursing, arbitrary Sea-Captain abuses an American, mistreats the King, and insults the United States Government - Protests forwarded to Washington.

San Francisco, Oct. 17. According to advices received here from the Gilbert Islands under date of August 8, the British, who recently established a Protectorate over the group, in defiance of the king's wishes, are determined to drive out American merchants, and to discriminate in favour of the Germans.

By this mail a strong protest has gone to Washington from Captain A.J. Kustel, who represents Wightman Bros. of San Francisco, the leading American merchants of the Gilberts. Kustel was shamefully abused by Commander Davis, of the Royalist, who took occasion to express his contempt for America and Americans. King Teburemoa drafted a letter to President Harrison, but at the last moment decided not to send it until further developments occurred. The letter says:-

'I have written you two letters before telling you and your cabinet in Washington I would like my land to have the American flag. I have not had any answer from you whether I will get it, but I would like to know why we cannot get it. Now an English man of war has come here and hoisted his flag on my land. I said to the Captain 'I have already given my land to the United States' but he replied 'Well, we have come first'. I told him that I was waiting for an answer to my appeal for the American flag. I would like you now finally to answer whether or not you are going to let me have your flag or not'.

The King was treated very shabbily by Capt. Davis who did not mince his words. The Briton appeared particularly angry over the articles in San Francisco newspapers which praised the king's conduct on his recent visit, and commended his desire to bring the islands under the American flag. He said:-

'The King's head is swelled. We will have to fetch him down a peg. I will show him who is master now. If he does not look sharp he will be out of his fat job. He has got to look after business more closely and deal square, or I will put an agent in his place, and the King can live on air as he used to do'.

Captain Davis, just before sailing away, received a petition from three merchants, English, German and Chinese, asking him to compel the king to reduce taxes and to place some competent agent in charge. Heretofore most of the business of the islands has been done by United States Consular Agent Rick, as the two big American firms of Crawford and Company and Wightman Brothers have controlled the copra trade on the islands for 20 years. Now, however, Captain Davis has issued an order that the natives shall pay no attention to Rick, and shall deal directly with merchants.

The case of Captain Kustel is an aggravated one, as the British Commander, without giving him a hearing decided against Kustel in a case of alleged assault upon a native. What made this procedure the more galling was that he cursed Kustel in the most blackguardly way and roundly damned all

"Americans who were trading on the islands. Kustel represented a big American firm, and also owns an important trading station. The assault simply consisted in the capture of a native who had deserted his schooner after signing articles. The native was a hard character who had been driven out of his home island for crime.

It is common report at Butaritari that the British do not care for the Gilbert Islands, but will trade them to Germany for a slice of East Africa. What lends colour to this gossip is the great exertion made by German merchants on the islands to secure the native trade and the evident purpose of the British to drive out Americans.

Capt. Davis is the most arbitrary Briton who has ever been known in the South Seas. He swears like a pirate, and even in public assemblies every other word is an oath. He cursed the King roundly and his abuse of Captain Kustel was foul. All American prestige, which had been built up by the enforcement of order and square trading, will soon be lost as Davis openly insulted all prominent Americans and advised the native chiefs to have nothing to do with them.

The foregoing despatch was shown to Secretary J.W. Foster yesterday. The United States has a commercial agent on the islands, but up to the present time he has made no representations of this kind to the Department of State. The Secretary says that early in the present year the Department received a communication from King Tebureimoa, of the Gilbert Islands, praying that the United States establish a protectorate over the islands. The King at that time was in San Francisco. The Department did not act upon the application for the reason that it has been the established policy of the United States to decline to extend its territory by such means. Such are the facts as officially stated at the Department.

The Gilbert Islands lie directly under the Equator, between 160° and 170° of east longitude. There are sixteen groups of these islands, and each group has its own king. The island on which the United States commercial agent dwells, and where the troubles are said to have arisen, is known as Pitt or Butaritari Island, and together with the small surrounding group is governed by King Tebureimoa. Some years ago, while the British and Germans were extending their colonies in the East Indies, there was a controversy between them as to the ownership of this particular group. Finally, it was arranged that Great Britain should acquire the Gilbert Islands and that Germany should take the Marshall and Caroline Islands. In the latter case, however, Spain successfully asserted a prior claim to the Carolines which was confirmed by the Pope acting as mediator. The British Protectorate over the Gilbert Islands has in the case of the group including Butaritari been repeatedly repudiated by the native ruler, who, as already stated, has sought an American Protectorate in preference.

There are certain aspects of the case which cause it to resemble the Samoan controversy, which came near involving the United States and Germany in strife; and although the Department of State has felt obliged to decline the request for a protectorate, it may be assumed that all legitimate American interests in the islands will be fully protected".

The article is such a farrago of inaccuracies and half-truths that space does not permit the wholesale correction of them. It hardly needs saying that Captain Davis, when shown the article, denied the allegations made against him, and the untruth of other alleged statements, at the same time pointing out that Kustel, probably the writer or major contributor of the article, had, together with all the other traders in Butaritari on the 7th July, sought the appointment of a British Resident over the islands. In any case, Kustell, an American

schooner owner, whose right hand had been blown off whilst fishing, was an unsavoury character and largely a stranger to the truth. A trader in Tarawa, he had for a long time past been selling arms, ammunition and gin to the natives. At the time of Captain Davis's visit, a native complained that Kustell had threatened to shoot him; Captain Davis interviewed Kustell, who freely admitted the charge but, as the offer of reparation made to the native by Kustell was, in the opinion of Captain Davis, totally inadequate, the latter agreed to Kustell's request that the matter be referred to his own Government.

Meanwhile, Rick's allegations about his treatment at the hands of Captain Davis had reached the United States Embassy in London for, on the 21st November, 1892, a Mr. Henry White, Chargé d'Affaires at the Embassy, addressed the Earl of Rosebery, then Foreign Secretary, at considerable length as follows:-

"I have the honour to acquaint your Lordship that the U.S. Commercial Agent at Butaritari, in the Gilbert Islands has reported to the Department of State that on the 11th June last, H.M.S. "Royalist", commanded by Captain E.H.M. Davis R.N. arrived at that port, hoisted the British Flag the same day and declared the Island to be under the protection of Her Britannic Majesty. The other islands of the Gilbert Group had also been previously visited and similarly declared under British protection.

I regret to add that this proceeding was marked, as I stated to your Lordship at the Foreign Office, on the 16th instant, by certain acts on the part of Captain Davis, which are in contrast with the conduct of other agents of foreign Governments when declaring under the protection of such Governments, islands and territories in which the United States maintained a Representative accredited to the local authority; and my Government feels it to be necessary, in the interest of good feeling, to invite the attention of Her Majesty's Government to such conduct, with a view to a friendly understanding.

Citizens of the United States have, during the last 50 years, established themselves in several of the islands of the Gilbert group. Acquiring property and vested property therein, they have won the confidence and esteem of the natives by their exemplary dealings and by their self-sacrificing labours as missionaries, and, supported by the benevolent contributions of the Christian churches of the United States, they have raised that remote island community to a state of civilized order alike notable and commendable.

These interests thus firmly established, called for due recognition and protection on the part of the United States Government, and on the 25th May, 1888, Mr. Adolph Rick was duly commissioned as Commercial Agent of the United States for the Gilbert islands with residence at Butaritari.

Captain Davis appears to have supposed, contrary to the usage which my Government has observed on other occasions and in other quarters, that the acceptance by Her Majesty of a protectorate over the local rulers of those islands, annulled the relations of other Governments to the latter and he appears to have treated the United States Commercial Agency as non-existent from the 27th of May 1892, when his proclamation of assumption of British protection over the Gilbert Islands was issued at Apamama 15 days before he arrived at Butaritari on the 11th of June. Mr. Rick was not lacking in courtesy to Captain Davis, and on the next day June 12th, sought an introduction to him through a reputable resident at Butaritari, Mr. J.F. Luttrell, but Captain Davis took no notice of the introduction, although Mr. Rick's name and office were distinctly announced, and he turned abruptly away. Owing to this misunderstanding, Mr. Rick and Captain Davis did not meet until July 6th, when the Captain informed him, orally,

"that he could not recognize him as a Consular Representative until he should be accredited to Her Majesty the Queen - a statement repeated the next day in writing.

Availing himself of the usual courtesy of forwarding homebound mails by returning war-vessels, Mr. Rick, on Friday July 8th, tendered to Captain Davis several sealed letters and in particular Official despatches to the Department of State enclosed in the prescribed printed envelopes supplied to Consular Officers for their business correspondence - Captain Davis demanded that the printed heading "U.S. Consulate Butaritari" should be erased, claiming that its appearance there was not courteous on the Consul Agent's part. He however accepted the letters the next day without erasure. The correspondence on the subject between Mr. Rick and Captain Davis is enclosed.

The trivial character of this incident makes it unworthy of notice, save as an indication of the temper in which Captain Davis appears to have executed the high mission confided to him. It cannot for an instant be supposed that Her Majesty's Government could have intended to give a Naval Commander the function of censorship over the official correspondence of an officer of a friendly power with the Government he serves; and in regard to the entire proceeding the Secretary of State quite fails to share Captain Davis's views as to that which constitutes discourtesy.

Neither is it readily supposable that Captain Davis's powers included the abrupt rupture and outlawry of the relations maintained by the United States Government with the Gilbert islanders through its deputed agent. Had the islands been annexed by Britain as conquered territory, the sudden breaking off of the representative functions of the agent of a friendly State might perhaps have found excuse as an act of military necessity, but in the present case it bears an unfriendly aspect, which my Government is confident that Her Majesty's Government will hasten to disavow.

In the course of the last few years, foreign protectorates have been asserted over territories in which the Government of the United States had established consular representation, without interruption thereof, until a new appointment required a new act of recognition. Were the British protectorate over the Gilbert Islands deemed to be of a different character, involving the substitutionary credence of the United States Commercial Agent forthwith to Her Britannic Majesty, this Government would have cheerfully considered the point on due intimation being given by Her Majesty's Government through the regular channels; but my Government is unable to accept the action of Captain Davis as such usual, timely, and friendly notice as is due from one Power to another; nor can the Secretary of State suppose Her Majesty's Government desires or expects that it should be so accepted.

An important fact remains and should not be dwarfed by the petty details which, to the great regret of the Secretary of State, encumber this note.

As I have already stated, the germs of civilization were planted in the Gilbert group by the zealous endeavours of American citizens more than $\frac{1}{2}$ a century ago.

The result of this work carried on by American citizens and money, has been in fact to change the naked barbarism of the island natives into enlightened communities, and to lay the foundation of the trade and commerce which have given these islands importance in the eyes of Europe today. Wrought by the agents of a colonizing power, this development would have naturally led to a paramount claim to protection, control or annexation, as policy might dictate. My Government has however slept upon its rights

"to reap the benefits of the development produced by the efforts of its citizens; but it cannot forego its inalienable privilege to protect the latter in the vested rights they have built up by half a century of sacrifice and Christian endeavour. The Secretary of State feels certain that no country will more readily acknowledge our rights in this regard than Great Britain, which has so largely shared with the United States in the work of carrying progress and civilization to the islands of the Pacific.

I am instructed to take an early occasion to make the views of my Government in this matter known to your Lordship and to say that my Government believes that it is entitled to expect that the rights and interests of the United States citizens established in the Gilbert Islands will be fully respected and confirmed under Her Majesty's Protectorate as they could have been, had the United States accepted the office of protection not long since solicited by the rulers of those islands.

I am furthermore to point out to your Lordship the expediency and indeed the necessity in view of Captain Davis's strange conduct of continuing the Consular representation of the United States in that quarter, under such superior sanction as Her Majesty's Government may deem fitting, by reason of the function of protection which it has assumed.

I may add that the representation of the United States in the Gilbert Islands takes the form of a commercial Agency, an Office already established at many points in Her Majesty's dominions".

Whether Mr. White was justified in accepting all of Mr. Rick's allegations is arguable. Whilst perhaps the seemingly somewhat brusque and formal attitude of Captain Davis may be criticized, certainly Mr. White's statement that Captain Davis was endeavouring to exercise "censorship" over the official correspondence of an officer of a friendly power is a fanciful conception; certainly, also, Mr. White's assertion or suggestion that Captain Davis's powers "included the abrupt rupture and outlawry of the relations maintained by the United States Government with the Gilbert Islanders through its deputed agent" is straining at the truth; in this connexion, it must be remembered that Mr. Rick was a trader for a large American firm, as well as being Commercial Agent of the United States, and, in view of the monopolistic position of the large American firms and their practice of "the clip", Captain Davis not unreasonably felt it only fair to warn the islanders that there was no objection to their trading direct with the firms instead of through the Commercial Agent. And certainly Mr. White's arguments as to the achievements of American citizens ring a little hollow when it is remembered that at that time there were currently civil wars in both Tarawa and Tabiteuea - the latter directly caused by a missionary of the American Board of Foreign Missions, in which hundreds of men, women and children were massacred.

However that may be, the interesting points to note in the last-quoted letter are Mr. White's claim that his country's activities "would have naturally have led to a paramount claim to protection, control or annexation" and that "My Government had however slept upon its rights to reap the benefits of the development produced by the efforts of its citizens", since any such claim had already been foregone by his Secretary of State over a month earlier - vide the quotation from the Washington Star cited above.

But perhaps the most extraordinary and inexplicable feature of the story thus far recounted is that Rick, by letter addressed to him by the Assistant Secretary of State, No. 14 of the 28th April, 1892, i.e. one day before Captain Davis sailed from Sydney on his mission to the Gilbert Islands, and one month before he declared the islands to be a British Protectorate, had instructed Rick to close down the Commercial Agency in Butaritari. Such evidence of this is contained in Rick's

letter of acknowledgment of such instructions, which read as follows:-

" Commercial Agency, U.S.A.,
Butaritari.

No. 10.

September 24th 1892.

Honourable William F. Wharton,
Assistant Secretary of State,
Washington, D.C.

Sir,

I have the honour to inform the Department of the receipt of dispatch No. 14 dated April 28th, 1892, on September 24th per Bark Helen W. Almy, requesting me to close the Commercial Agency here. I have done so and will forward all belonging to the Government to Manilla via San Francisco there being no communication between here and Manilla.

I etc.

A. Rick".

It is difficult, if not impossible, to escape the conclusion that the United States Government had learned of the mission of Captain Davis before he sailed from Sydney; the coincidence of the dates surely cannot be construed otherwise. And yet, if that be so, it makes the above-quoted letter of the Chargé d'Affaires to the Foreign Secretary difficult to comprehend, Rick having been instructed to close down the Commercial Agency nearly seven months earlier.

Two postscripts may be added to complete this section of the history of this matter, though neither provide a solution to the puzzle in the preceding paragraph. The first is a despatch from Lord Ripon, the Colonial Secretary, No. 41 of the 14th December, 1892, to Sir John Thurston, High Commissioner for the Western Pacific, sending him a copy of the letter received in the Foreign Office from the United States Chargé d'Affaires as quoted above; the despatch continues:-

"Her Majesty's Government consider that it would have been better for Captain Davis to have recognized Mr. Rick provisionally in the capacity of Commercial Agent for the United States, pending the result of a reference to Her Majesty's Government, and telegraphic orders have now been sent by the Admiralty to the Commander in Chief on the Australian Station to instruct the officers under his orders to recognize Mr. Rick in that capacity, and I have to request that, in order to give this recognition publicity, you will cause a notification to be issued in the Fiji Government Gazette that Her Majesty's Government have recognized Mr. Adolph Rick as United States Commercial Agent in the Gilbert Islands".

Apparently Her Majesty's Government, like others, was even then unaware of the closure of the United States Commercial Agency much earlier.

Secondly, even the mild reproof for Captain Davis mentioned in the last quoted despatch was not too seriously intended, since in the New Year Honours List for 1894 the Queen was pleased to confer on that officer the dignity of Companion of the Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael and Saint George.

With the passage of nearly a century, it is interesting to speculate whether and, if so, to what extent, the course of Pacific history might have been changed if the United States had taken the Gilbert (and Ellice) Islands under protection in 1892, or earlier. There is a monument on the island of Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands to those of the United States Marines who gave their lives in the battle for that island; the inscription reads:-

"Tarawa was the testing ground for Marine amphibious doctrine and techniques. It paved the way for the island campaigning that followed and provided answers that saved thousands of American lives along the road to victory in the Pacific".

But, if the United States had assumed protection of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands some 50 years earlier, one is now led to wonder whether that country's fighting men would have had to follow the same bloody trail through Kwajalein to Okinawa some half a century later.

The other nation which could certainly have laid a strong claim - at least in a number of respects - to some form of sovereignty to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands in 1892 was Germany.

Unlike the United States, however, the relationship of Germany with the Gilbert and Ellice Islands was on a slightly different geographical and economic basis, and in pursuit of a rather different policy. Thus, the economic relationship was not born out of whaling activities or 'whaler-trading', or indeed from the development of trading in the hands of beachcombers and castaways. It stemmed initially from the advent to the Pacific of merchants from Hamburg, Bremen and Berlin in the late fifties and early sixties. But, here again, there was a difference to the American approach in that, whilst the large American trading firms had established themselves within the Gilbert group at Butaritari, the large German firms based themselves outside the Gilbert and Ellice groups in Samoa, the Marshall and Caroline Islands, New Guinea and New Britain, though both the American and German firms had their agents scattered throughout the Gilbert and Ellice groups.

Hamburg merchants were established in Samoa in the late fifties and early sixties, the firm of J.C. Godeffroy & Son being established in Apia in 1857. They were followed by H.M. Ruge & Co., Hedemann & Co., Hershheim & Co., and the Deutsche Handels-und Plantagen-Gesellschaft (more commonly referred to as the DHPG). Originally traders and shippers, with their trading vessels plying to and from German ports, they later diversified their activities in Samoa by acquiring land for the development of coconut plantations. Thus Godeffroy & Co. acquired its first plantation in 1865 and by 1872 claimed over 25,000 acres. This diversification was important in view of what followed some 20 years later.

Meanwhile, by the mid-seventies, there were five German trading stations in the Marshall Islands, and by 1876 H.M. Ruge & Co., Hedemann & Co., Capelle & Co., and Hershheim & Co. were established in those islands, and the DHPG in the Caroline Islands, as Captain Bridge of H.M.S. Espiègle discovered when he visited Jaluit, Majuro, Arnho and Mille in 1883.

Capital backing from the mother country enabled German firms to establish commercial predominance in Central Micronesia and Polynesia within a few years of their establishment and the seventies might be termed the 'golden' age of German commerce in the Pacific, though in fact its Pacific possessions proved surprisingly to be of little overall economic importance to Germany. Interestingly, German firms made their greatest profits, not in Samoa nor New Guinea, but in the scattered atolls of Micronesia.

In 1879, however, Godeffroy & Co. went bankrupt, though its interests were taken over by the DHPG. In 1884, H.M. Ruge & Co. went into liquidation in Samoa. Nevertheless, German interests remained powerful there.

As might be expected from the fact that the centres of German trade and commerce were based in Samoa to the south, and in the Marshall and Caroline Islands to the north, agents for German firms in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands tended to dominate in the Ellice Islands and the northern Gilbert Islands as shipments of copra to, and the reverse shipments of trade goods from, the other islands mentioned above were doubtless facilitated. There was a German, one Peter Laban, trading for Godeffroy & Co. in Nukulaelae as early as 1857 and he was still there in 1872, in which year Captain Moresby who visited the islands in

H.M.S. Basilisk reported that "German oil traders have a white agent stationed on nearly every one of the islands to collect coconuts and coconut oil". In the following year such traders working for the same company were established in Nanumea, Vaitupu and Nukufetau, and in the eighties the Commanding Officers of H.M.S. Emerald, H.M.S. Espiègle and H.M.S. Miranda found agents for the German trading firms in Samoa established throughout the Ellice Islands, some of whom were German nationals, whilst others were of British, American, Danish or French nationality. In the nineties, however, agents of the firm of Henderson and McFarlane, based in Sydney, had supplanted most of the other agents in the Ellice Islands.

In the Gilbert Islands, there was a German trading in Tamana by the name of Henry Schumacher for the firm of J.C. Godeffroy & Co. in 1881, another named Olldag in Maiana, and a Dane in Butaritari. By the mid-eighties, however, the number of German agents had markedly increased and were to be found in the islands of Nonouti, Maiana, Abaiang, Tarawa and Butaritari, some of German nationality, others of British and French nationality; some were agents for Hershheim & Co. in the Marshall Islands, others for Crawford & Co. in Butaritari. By 1892, when Captain Davis visited the islands in H.M.S. Royalist, he found German, British, American and Dutch agents in Tamana, Nikunau, Onotoa, Beru, Tabiteuea, Nonouti, Abemama, Tarawa, Maiana, Abaiang, Marakei and Butaritari trading for the German firm of Der Haupt Agentur der Jaluit Gesellschaft based on the Marshall Islands, and Crawford & Co. and Wightman Brothers in Butaritari. In the same year, Captain Davis also found 30 Germans, 18 Americans and 16 British citizens, most of whom were engaged in trade, in Jaluit and other islands of the Marshall group.

Naturally, with headquarters of the German firms located in the Marshall Islands and Samoa, shipping links were necessary for the distribution of trade goods and the collection of copra in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands; thus, in the latter respect, exports of copra from the Gilbert Islands to the firm of Jaluit Gesellschaft in Jaluit in 1891 amounted to 1,409,459 lbs. As early as the mid-sixties, German barques such as the "Augustita" and the "Susanne" were engaged in visiting the Ellice Islands from Samoa, whilst in 1876 Lieutenant Pugh of H.M.S. Renard met with the German trading brig "Adolphe" in Tarawa. In the eighties and nineties, British naval officers reported a number of German trading vessels in both the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, such as the schooners "Matautu", "Estella" and "Flink", and the barques "John Wesley" and "Speculant".

Although it represented only one factor in the situation, Germany was obviously determined to ensure that its nationals and their trading interests were overseen and protected, not merely in Samoa, the Marshall and Caroline Islands, but also in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. Indeed, to protect German mercantile activity in the Far East as a whole, a cruiser squadron had gradually been formed ever since the seventies. Thus, Captain Davis reported in 1892 that he had been most reliably informed that "German men-of-war were constantly cruising in the group, and affording protection to traders, irrespective of their nationality". Thus, H.I.G.M.S. Ariadne called at Abemama in 1878, H.I.G.M.S. Habicht called at Niulakita in 1881, and H.I.G.M.S. Wolf, Alexandrine, Eber and Sperber visited the Gilbert Islands between 1886 and 1891, the Commanding Officer of the last-named warship imposing a fine of \$1000 on the Uea of Butaritari. Indeed, by November, 1890, there were three steam/sail cruisers in the cruiser squadron, based on Nagasaki and Hong Kong, with a fourth such cruiser based on Australia.

Reference has been made earlier to the diversification of the activities of the German firms in Samoa from their original aims of trading and shipping, as a result of which they acquired extensive

areas of land there for coconut plantations. This, however, confronted them with a situation which they had not foreseen. Whilst there were ample and easy opportunities to trade with the Samoans, the latter were unwilling to sign any labour contracts, so that any serious attempts to develop agriculture, especially plantation agriculture, were forced to depend upon the introduction of labourers from other less resistant societies.

The last four decades of the 19th century saw the needs of tropical planters and companies for native labour other than that in their own territories, especially since Fijians, Samoans, Hawaiians and other Polynesians showed a reluctance to work in agriculture, especially on plantations. So, in the seventies and eighties, the Gilbert Islands became a source of recruitment of native labour for Hawaii, as well as for Queensland, in both cases for work in the canefields. But the labour traffic for Queensland and for Fiji (which had commenced recruitment in the Gilbert Islands about 1864) reached its height throughout the Pacific in 1880 and was much greater than for the German and French territories. In the late eighties and early nineties, Gilbertese labour was also recruited for service in the Line Islands, whilst in 1892 Captain Davis found the steamer "Montserrat" in the Gilbert Islands recruiting labour for work in Nicaragua. Here one might digress momentarily to add an amusing footnote, namely, that one Harry J. Moors of Apia, who had recruited a troupe of Samoans and others to appear and perform their songs and dances at the World's Fair in Chicago and other centres in the United States in 1893, applied for and was granted permission to recruit 15 Gilbertese to make similar appearances at the California Fair and other centres in 1894.

In view of what transpired later, it is necessary to comment separately upon the circumstances attending the introduction of Gilbertese labour into Samoa, and its treatment there, in rather more detail. Whilst it is on record that, in the early seventies, J.C. Godeffroy & Co. had recruited and were employing some 1000 Gilbertese on their plantations in Samoa, in addition to some 200 labourers from the New Hebrides, possibly the best evidence of the labour traffic between the Gilbert Islands and Samoa, and the treatment of the Gilbertese in Samoa, is contained in a confidential report submitted to the British Consul in Apia by a Mr. Kelsall, Municipal Magistrate of Apia, in 1884. The latter was described by the British Consul, who himself reported in harsh terms to the High Commissioner in Suva on German treatment of immigrant labour, as "a man of undoubted integrity and large experience of labour attained in the Marquesas, Fiji and Samoa."

Part of Mr. Kelsall's report, which covers the decade 1874 - 1884, is as follows:-

"Notes on the management of the plantations of the Deutsche Handels & Plantagen Gesellschaft in Samoa.

Recruiting. Ten years ago the firm as it was then of J.C. Godeffroy & Sons obtained all their labour, with the exception of one lot from the Carolines, from the Kingsmill or Gilbert Group. These labourers were brought to Samoa in the same vessels which brought the copra from that group, and were recruited through the different agencies in the islands. They were returned in the same way by the copra vessels, but, either for the sake of convenience or with the idea of getting them again, were sometimes landed on the wrong island, where they found themselves in the condition of slaves and were glad to get back in the next vessel to Samoa in the hope that after four more years of plantation work, they might at last succeed in getting home. In some cases, according to their own statements, the captain did not go to the trouble of landing them at all, but simply took them the round trip.

Now, in 1884, the natives of this group, which is so favourably situated as regards Samoa, refuse to ship in any German vessel. In 1882 about 10 came, in 1883, not one. They hate the very name of German, and will never go anywhere willingly under that flag. The reasons of this are briefly:-

- "
1. The mortality on the plantations.
 2. The fact that they are always kept over their contract time.
 3. Ill-usage on the plantations.
 4. Payment in second-rate trade at high prices.
 5. The absence of anyone to appeal to, to redress their wrongs. The (German) consul never interferes except to punish them if they infringe on the terms of their contract.

Early in 1878 the firm, finding that it became hard to persuade Kingsmill islanders to leave their homes for Samoa, began to recruit labourers from the New Hebrides. The few years that have elapsed since then have sufficed to cause this recruiting ground to become barren as regards Samoa and for the same reasons that prevailed with the other group. Many of those even who have come away during the last few years have come away under the idea that they were going to Queensland or Fiji. The firm now get their supply of labourers from New Britain and New Ireland and unless great changes are made in Samoa even this supply will die out, unless the men are obtained under false pretences.

The effect of the scarcity of labour is that some of the former evils are aggravated".

Mr. Kelsall recorded that in 1883 mortality was 8%, excluding women and children, and that on one plantation it was even 16%. He then continued that "Under the German flag there is no redress and no one to appeal to", before citing cases of cruelty and brutality, including floggings inflicted on men, women and children, which had come directly to his notice. He remarked that complaints often resulted in sentences, as also did those who might steal a coconut or two. He finally commented as follows:-

"A year's sentence is by no means uncommon. Flogging is often inflicted on men, women and children of both sexes, not only by the manager and white overseers but by native overseers as well.

On some of the plantations labourers have to sign a new agreement on getting married, as it is called, that is, having any particular woman recognized as the wife. This extends the contract then by another few years.

From time to time there have been rumours of cases of ill-treatment ending fatally, and I have it on very good authority that some years ago a Kingsmill islander, a woman, who died within 48 hours after she had been kicked in the head by the manager of a plantation, was laid out by her relations on the main road for the inspection of passers-by until the manager heard of it and induced the men by bribes to bury her quietly".

Nor is his evidence unsupported. One source stated that the German firm despatched three recruiting vessels to the Gilbert Islands in 1879 but that they returned with only 7, 6 and one labourers, the Gilbertese preferring service in Fiji, Tahiti and Hawaii. Again, from about 1876 to 1892, William McArthur & Co. was the largest British firm trading in Samoa. Early in 1885, it applied for, and was granted, a licence to recruit 250 labourers in the Gilbert Islands and sent its brigantine "Myrtle" there for this purpose. The vessel returned to Apia later in the year with only 8 recruits, and the firm never attempted to recruit there again. It might here be noted in passing that the Germans did not allow recruiting for Samoa to take place in the Marshall and Caroline Islands, which were in effect under their protection.

As for complaints by labourers being returned to their own islands, an example of this is contained in a letter from the German Consul-General to the High Commissioner in December, 1882, wherein the former refers to the Master of the German vessel "Tongatabu" having left Kingsmill islanders at "Lenore near Malicolo" in the New Hebrides.

If confirmatory evidence were required of what Mr. Kelsall defines as "ill-usage on the plantations", there are numerous examples, perhaps one of the worst of which concerned Gilbertese employed on the plantation of a Mr. Cornwall, near Lata in Samoa. Mr. Cornwall was a former employee of the London Missionary Society who turned planter and married a daughter of one of the principal chiefs there. Accusations were made against him and his overseer by one W.J. Hunt, a troublesome New Zealander engaged in many speculative schemes, and one Ioane, a native ordained minister. Two allegations of the former may be cited:-

"A short time ago a Tokelau (Tabiteuean) woman for a trivial fault received the severe punishment of 40 lashes on her bare back, and afterwards the brutal overseer himself painted the private parts of the poor suffering creature with coal tar thereby inflicting upon her intolerable pain.

Again, upon another occasion a Tokelau woman who had absconded from the plantation was tied hand and foot, and carried a distance of five miles suspended from a pole in the manner in which pigs are carried, the poor wretch appealing in vain to be allowed to walk".

Ioane tells of complaints of the quantity and quality of food, the inadequacy of housing, the gross overcrowding in vessels bringing the Gilbertese to Samoa, inadequate medical attention and supplies for the labourers, and innumerable floggings inflicted by and admitted by the overseers.

The British Consul investigated these allegations and found them to be proven. He also noted that between the 27th November, 1887, and the 23rd April, 1878, there had been no fewer than 22 deaths on that particular plantation alone. In all fairness, it must be admitted that others besides Germans were responsible for such cruelties and brutalities. However, it is hardly surprising that the Gilbertese abhorred signing on for service in Samoa, but preferred work elsewhere.

The final factor in Germany's attitude to establish some form of protection or sovereignty over the Gilbert (and Ellice) Islands was political. As already noted, the United States had declined to assume any form of protection or sovereignty over the islands. As far as the United Kingdom was concerned, its position was ill-defined and unsatisfactory. The Orders-in-Council of the seventies had proved very largely ineffective, and visits by Her Majesty's warships in 1872, 1876, 1881, 1883, 1884, and 1886 before the visit of Captain Davis in H.M.S. Royalist achieved but little. Indeed, the attitude of Her Majesty's Government was hopelessly indecisive in the political sphere in those early years; thus, in respect of Samoa, the Foreign Office was not only against annexation, but also against withdrawal; it merely favoured a limited degree of intervention; it favoured the High Commissioner maintaining a so called supervisory check in order to ensure international harmony. The High Commissioner himself favoured a strong native government which would be able to ensure peace and afford security to foreign traders.

Not so Germany; in his account of the establishment of the Protectorate over the Gilbert Islands in 1892, Captain Davis reported as follows:-

"Mr. Corrie (a trader of long-standing and high repute in the islands and his interpreter) informed me that no Foreign Power laid any claim to the group, as far as he knew, but that several of the traders on the various islands had some time ago applied to the Imperial Commissioner at Jaluit, Marshall Group, to obtain for them German protection, as the British Government appeared to have forgotten them, no British man-of-war having visited the group since 1886, whereas German men-of-war were constantly cruising in the group, and affording protection to traders, irrespective of their nationality. The white men preferred British protection, but there being no regular communication with Fiji, they looked to Jaluit for German help. His own deeds, for instance, for purchase of lands in the Gilbert Group, Mr. Corrie had registered in the Imperial Commissioner's office at Jaluit".

With her trading and shipping links; with her establishment of powerful trading bases in the Marshall and Caroline Islands as well as in Samoa (where it also wielded strong political influence); for a while, her labour links; and the frequent visits of her naval vessels (and their protection of traders irrespective of nationality), Germany's political outlook was totally different from that of the United States or the United Kingdom and, by the early months of 1884, it had become patently obvious that Germany was engaged in an aggressive search for colonies, spurred on by Bismarck's ambitions to pursue an active colonial policy and at the same time show that he could protect German interests all over the world.

Indeed, by late 1884, it was clear that Germany was intent upon a partition of the Pacific Islands, especially in the light of events in Samoa during the preceding decade. Thus, for example, in August, 1884, the German flag was hoisted over New Ireland, the Admiralty, Hermit and Anchorite Islands, and in the north-east of New Guinea. This spurred the British Government into action for, in October, a British Protectorate was declared over south-east New Guinea. Meanwhile, in September, Germany had suggested the establishment of an Anglo-German Commission to protect the interests of both countries in the Pacific and demarcate their exact spheres of influence. Germany was already well established by then in Samoa. Under a joint Anglo-German Agreement of April, 1886, the Marshall and Caroline Islands were declared to be within the German sphere of influence, and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands within the British sphere, the Solomon Islands being partitioned between the two countries. Only therefore by subsequently renouncing that Agreement - an unusual, if not unheard of, breach of international protocol in those days - could Germany have laid claim to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. Nevertheless, it may well have hoped that, in view of the negative attitude of the United States, and the indecisiveness of the British Government, fortune might somehow come to favour their hopes and desires.

Little of moment happened, however, in the next few years in the political sphere as far as the three principal nations were concerned. British attempts to introduce controls over the sales of arms and liquor proved to be largely ineffective and, in fact, tended to penalize British citizens rather than those of other nations. Apart from such moves, attention during the next decade tended to be concentrated on the problems of the New Hebrides.

Matters continued to drift whilst the Colonial Office gave desultory attention to replacing the ineffective Orders-in-Council of the seventies, and nothing was done to give effect to that part of the Anglo-German Agreement of 1886 as far as the United Kingdom was concerned. But, in May, 1888, the High Commissioner became extremely troubled about reports of German designs on the Gilbert Islands.

Suddenly, in mid-1891, the whole issue of the future of the Gilbert Islands became alive and a veritable flurry of correspondence at the highest level broke out.

The initial move came in a despatch from the Foreign Office to the Colonial Office, dated the 6th July, 1891, in which the writer stated:-
"I am directed by the Marquis of Salisbury to inform you that on the 3rd instant the German Ambassador at this Court expressed to his Lordship the wish of his Government that this country should declare a Protectorate over the Kingsmill or Gilbert group of islands in the South Pacific, on the ground that it is necessary that some kind of authority should be exercised there with a view to maintain order.
These islands which are situated in Latitude 1° 29'N and Longitude 173° 5'E are to the east of the line of demarcation agreed upon between Great Britain and Germany and therefore lie within the British sphere of influence. His Lordship is not aware that they are claimed by any foreign Power.
I am to request that you will move Lord Knutsford to favour Lord Salisbury with his observations on this proposal".

Only 12 days later a further despatch marked "Pressing" was addressed to the Colonial Office by the Foreign Office. Referring to the earlier despatch, the writer stated:-

"I am directed by the Marquis of Salisbury to state that the German Ambassador has informed him that the German Government have received information that the United States Government are trying to make treaties with the native chiefs of the Kingsmill or Gilbert Islands.

The German Government hope that Her Majesty's Government will assume the Protectorate of these Islands in order to prevent the United States Government from obtaining a footing there".

Some weeks elapsed before a further despatch marked "Very Confidential" was addressed to the Colonial Office by the Foreign Office, as follows:-

October 23, 1891.

"Sir, In a verbal communication of a strictly confidential nature, the German Ambassador has again called Lord Salisbury's attention to the steps taken by the United States to extend their commercial relations with the Gilbert Islands.

His Excellency's information on the subject is derived partly from newspaper accounts, but also from official reports addressed to the German Government. The islands are constantly visited by American ships, which embark coolies for South America and the Sandwich Islands and it is thought the United States Government may not improbably be induced by American traders to enter into negotiations with the native chiefs and to make treaties with them. By this means other powers would be precluded from assuming a Protectorate over the islands.

The German Government are averse to any such proceeding. They wish to keep the market open for the supply of labourers to the German plantations in Samoa, and they are unwilling that an excessive number of coolies should be exported to distant countries without the exercise of a proper control over the emigration.

As the Gilbert Islands are within the British sphere of interest the German Government were unable to accede to the request made to them by the white merchants there in 1888 for the establishment of a German Protectorate. They consider, however, that the interests of Great Britain and Germany are identical in this matter and Count Hatzfeldt has been instructed to enquire whether Her Majesty's Government will consider the question of taking the islands under their protection, on the understanding that no objection will be made in that case to the exportation of a limited number of labourers under recognized official restrictions.

You are aware that the question of assuming this protectorate has formed the subject of previous correspondence...I am now directed by Lord Salisbury to request that you will move Lord Knutsford to obtain from the Lords of the Admiralty an early expression of their views upon the points on which His Lordship has consulted them, and will favour Lord Salisbury with his opinion upon the present proposals of the German Government".

The leisurely pace at which this correspondence was conducted was maintained for, despite reminders from the Colonial Office, it was not until the 5th January, 1892, that the Admiralty replied in a confidential letter, as follows:-

"... I am commanded by their Lordships to request that you will state to the Secretary of State for the Colonies that there is no recent information in the records of the Admiralty to affect this proposition. These islands are now under independent chiefs, are well populated, the people are orderly, and mostly Christians. There are Mission Stations of the American Mission and London Missionary Societies in the Islands. The traders are mostly German. The Islands are within the British sphere of interest as laid down

"in 1886, since which date Germany has annexed the outlying islands on her side of the Line, but so far we have not done so. As these islands lie upwards of 2,500 miles from Sydney special arrangements would have to be made for a visit of a man-of-war should there be any intention on the part of Her Majesty's Government to proclaim a protectorate over the Gilbert Islands. From a naval point of view no advantage would result from the annexation of these islands as they are merely coral reefs raised little above the level of the sea, their productive powers are poor, and their population subsists mainly on fish".

A copy of the letter was sent direct to the Foreign Office.

Unlike the leisurely proceedings in the Admiralty, the Foreign Office reacted with speed, for in a despatch to the Colonial Office marked "Immediate" and dated only three days later - the 8th January - it was stated:-

"From the information thus supplied (in the Admiralty letter), it would not appear that these islands would be a very valuable acquisition for this country.

The inhabitants, however, are stated to be orderly and mostly Christians; there are both English and American missionary stations established there, but the traders are said to be chiefly Germans.

It will be seen from my letter of the 23rd October last that the chief object which the German Government have in view is to keep the labour market open for the supply of labourers to German plantations in Samoa, and it is for the Colonial Office to consider how far, in the event of a British Protectorate being proclaimed, the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific will be in a position to provide for the due and proper regulations of such traffic.

The Admiralty state that from a Naval point of view no advantage would be gained by the establishment of a protectorate, and that the islands are so remote from Sydney that special arrangements would have to be made for visiting them.

They lie, however, within the British sphere of influence, as laid down between this country and Germany in 1886, and in the event of its being decided that the obligation of a British protectorate would outweigh its advantages, it appears to Lord Salisbury that Her Majesty's Government will have no alternative but to consent to their incorporation within the limits of the sphere of German influence, should the German Government, as seems probable, be desirous of acquiring them.

In view of the delay which has unfortunately occurred in dealing with this question, I am to request that you will move Lord Knutsford to favour Lord Salisbury with an expression of his views at his earliest convenience".

In a despatch dated the 21st January, the Colonial Office replied to the Foreign Office as follows:-

"I am to state that, as the Marquis of Salisbury is of opinion that, unless H.M.'s protectorate is declared over these islands, there would be no alternative but to consent to their incorporation within the limits of the sphere of German influence, Lord Knutsford has no hesitation in advising that the German Government should be informed that Her Majesty's Government will establish a protectorate over the islands, and that steps should be taken by the Admiralty to give effect to that decision."

The greater part of this despatch concerns the question of the means of regulating the labour traffic between the Gilbert Islands and Samoa, but it concludes as follows:-

"Lord Knutsford, therefore, while anticipating some difficulties in the matter (of regulating the labour traffic), does not consider that they will be very serious; and in any case he would prefer that they should be met rather than that the Gilbert Islands should be handed over to Germany".

On this occasion the Foreign Office reacted with speed, addressing the Colonial Office in a despatch of the 23rd January, 1892, marked "IMMEDIATE AND SECRET", the relevant paragraphs of which were as follows:-

"In reply, I am to state that, under all the circumstances of the case, his Lordship agrees with Lord Knutsford that it is advisable that the Gilbert Islands should be placed under the protectorate of this country with as little delay as possible. I am accordingly to suggest that the Lords of the Admiralty should be moved to proceed with secrecy and despatch in the matter.

.....
I am to add that his Lordship does not propose to communicate the decision of Her Majesty's Government to the German Ambassador until a ship of war has been actually despatched, as secrecy is essential to prevent possible complications with other Powers".

The Colonial Office communicated this decision to the Admiralty in a letter dated the 31st January, stating inter alia:-

"The Naval Officer (of the vessel declaring the Protectorate) should, however, before issuing the proclamation, ascertain as far as possible that no evidence exists in the group of any foreign power having made any claim over the islands. Such enquiries would not, however, apply to Germany, as by the agreement of 1886 for the demarcation of spheres of influence, the Gilbert Islands are within the sphere assigned to this country.

.....
The officer should gain all the information he can as to the islands and their inhabitants and as to the amount of emigration which goes on and the places to which the labourers are taken. He should also warn the natives against American recruiting vessels as Her Majesty's Government have no means of protecting them if they go away from the Pacific".

On the 2nd February, the Admiralty sent the following signal to Lord Charles Scott, Commander-in-Chief on the Australian Station:-

"Orders go by mail 5th February for vessel to proceed Gilbert Islands immediately after hurricane season to place them under British protection. Have vessel ready accordingly".

Finally, the Colonial Office addressed the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific in a confidential despatch dated the 5th April as follows:-

"I have the honour to acquaint you that a representation was addressed to the Foreign Office by the German Ambassador at this Court in July last expressing the wish of the German Government that this country should declare a protectorate over the Kingsmill or Gilbert group on the ground that it was necessary that some kind of authority should be exercised there to maintain order.

It was subsequently represented that the United States Government were endeavouring to make treaties with the native chiefs, and that irregularities, similar to those referred to in the enclosure to your despatch, continued to occur in the labour traffic in the group as carried on by American vessels.

Instructions have accordingly been sent by the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to the Admiral on the stationto establish a protectorate over the group as soon as the termination of the hurricane season allows of a man-of-war being sent there."

But the German arguments, if analyzed, are hardly persuasive; thus:-

- (1) that "the islands are visited constantly by American ships": this assertion is very far from the truth. During the eleven years from 1877 to 1887 inclusive, only twenty visits were made by American ships, i.e. an average of just less than two each year, especially for the purpose of recruiting labour from the Gilbert Islands. Further, in four cases, the vessels also recruited from Rotuma, the Tokelau Islands, and Manahiki, and not merely from the Gilbert Islands alone;
- (2) that the American ships "embark coolies for South America and the Sandwich Islands": whilst it is true that some Gilbert islanders were recruited for work in, for example, Mexico and Nicaragua, and Ellice islanders were 'blackbirded' for work in South America, it does not appear that such traffic was undertaken by vessels sailing under the United States flag. Insofar as recruits from the Gilbert Islands for Hawaii were concerned, only 608 males were recruited between 1877 and 1887, or an average of 55 per annum; if those from Rotuma are excluded, the number would have been slightly less. But, to put the matter in its proper perspective, it might be mentioned that the DHPG during the years from 1880 to 1885 recruited 2289 New Guinea natives for work in Samoa whilst, from 1886 to 1890, the number recruited from that source rose to over 4400. This argument is therefore of very little relevance indeed;
- (3) that they objected to "an excessive number of coolies being exported to distant countries" and wished "to keep the market open for the supply of labourers to the German plantations in Samoa". The first part of this argument has little or no substance - vide (2) above. Nor does the latter part have much relevance, especially bearing in mind that it was advanced in the year 1891; for it has already been shown that, by the mid-eighties, those in Samoa were finding it virtually impossible to recruit labour from the Gilbert Islands for work in Samoa owing to the deplorable working conditions there, and had by then turned their attention to recruitment from the New Hebrides and New Britain. It is very doubtful, even if Great Britain had been agreeable to permit the recruitment of labour for Samoa from the Gilbert Islands after 1891, whether more than the merest handful of natives would have volunteered for work there;
- (4) that it was undesirable that the United States should be encouraged or permitted to extend their commercial relations with the Gilbert Islands, presumably to the detriment of German trading interests. But, whilst German commerce was important in the Pacific for sixty years from the first successes of the Hamburg merchants in the early sixties until the expropriation of German property after the first World War, its importance was strictly relative. Thus, like Germany's African colonies, its Pacific possessions were in fact of comparatively little importance to her. For example, by 1909, their trade was worth less than one seventh of 1% of total German trade. Even as a source of raw materials, the Pacific territories were of only minor value to Germany; thus copra, the main product of those territories, was less than 8½% of Germany's total copra imports in 1911 and 1912, whilst phosphates provided only 5% of its needs. Insofar as the particular German trading interests in the Gilbert Islands were concerned, those of the United States were scarcely competitive. Thus, in 1891, the American firm of Crawford & Co. exported from Butaritari only 1,043,929 lbs of copra, or some 400,000 lbs less than the amount exported to the Jaluit Gesellschaft..

If the German Government was concerned to protect the activities and interests of its traders in the Gilbert Islands, it should be noted that Captain Davis, who visited all the Gilbert Islands in 1892 found that, out of a total of some 80 traders, there were only seven German nationals working for German companies, and seven others of different nationalities working for the same companies; the Admiralty was in error in asserting that "the traders are mostly German;

- (5) that it was "necessary that some kind of authority should be exercised there (in the Gilbert Islands) with a view to maintaining order": the purpose of this argument could only have been either to ensure safe conditions for their traders and their trading activities, or for the purpose of facilitating the recruitment of natives for work in Samoa. Whilst it is true that limited civil wars were taking place in both Tabiteuea and Tarawa at that time, (the Admiralty was not wholly correct in asserting that "the people are orderly"), the safety of the traders was not in fact in any jeopardy, though their trading operations may have been slightly affected on the two above-named islands. If the purpose of the argument was to facilitate the recruitment of the natives, it is of no real relevance - see (2) and (3) above;
- (6) that the German Government seems to have accepted the opinions of the traders that "the interests of Great Britain and Germany are identical". But that could hardly be said to be so, save in the very limited judgment of the few British traders. The policies of the two countries with regard to colonies since the seventies, and especially since the mid-eighties, were quite different. As already remarked, by the early eighties, Germany was engaged in an aggressive search for colonies, whereas the British Government had vacillated over Samoa and shown little or no interest in taking advantage of the provisions of the 1886 Agreement by establishing protectorates over the territories within its sphere of influence; and
- (7) that "the United States Government are trying to make treaties with the native chiefs" and that "it is thought the United States Government may not improbably be induced by American traders to enter into negotiations with the native chiefs and to make treaties with them". The only reasons for the German Government to have adopted such an attitude would seem, at first sight, to have been on the grounds of preserving their trading foothold in the islands, especially vis à vis the Americans, and their privilege of recruiting there. But, as has already been shown, their trade was minimal and the potentialities for recruiting virtually nil. Insofar as the Government of the United States might extend their commercial relations with the Gilbert Islands, or enter into treaties with the native chiefs is concerned, the Foreign Office in its 'very confidential' letter of the 23rd October, 1891, stated that the German Ambassador's information was stated to be derived from newspaper accounts, as well as from official reports. In such case, it seems somewhat remarkable that the Ambassador should not have noted articles such as that in the Washington Post which made it quite clear that it was the policy of the United States not to extend its territory by establishing a protectorate or by proceeding by way of annexation in any circumstances.

If, therefore, none of the arguments advanced by the German Government, through its Ambassador, and analyzed above, provided justification for, or persuaded, Great Britain to assert its sovereignty over the Gilbert Islands under the terms of the Anglo-German Agreement of 1886, the conclusion is almost inescapable that the German Government was not in fact seriously interested in any of the spheres in respect of which it had made representations, but was in reality concerned to brush aside any possible political interests which the United States might then or later seek to establish in the islands and, with Great Britain perhaps vacillating to the point of renouncing its rights under the Agreement of 1886, as evidenced by the unenthusiastic response of the Foreign Office and the Royal Navy to assert such rights, in order to create a powerful political and strategic position in the Pacific in a huge arc stretching from Samoa, through the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, Nauru, and the Marshall and Caroline Islands, to New Ireland, New Britain and New Guinea.