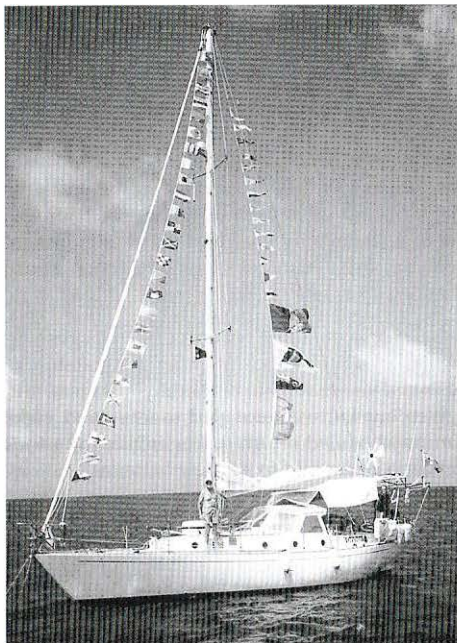




Crusader dressed overall to welcome Pied Piper II to Huon Reef.

seated in the river bed of a shaded spring which was their only reliable water source. There was plenty of 'tok tok' as we scrubbed. Life at Bushman's Bay is always busy, and it was great fun and a privilege to share so much together.

It was here that I wrote the short story, *The Bishop, the Rope and the Shark* as a memory for the

children, but it was the adults who really enjoyed it! I did not know then that we were to meet the Bishop several times and share his table.

We left the bay to take the children and their fathers to Losalava, for school and kindergarten holidays were over. It saved them a full day's walk over rough terrain, and it gave us the opportunity to see the new traditional house made from hardwood poles and pandanus, that one of the fathers had built for the children to live in during the week while they attended school. They only came home at weekends. Relatives nearby kept 'an eye' on things. One child, a 10-year old, did not go to school. It was his job to cook and look after the rest. Losalava was also full of action Melanesian style, and we were welcomed into village activities as we waited for the weather to moderate to go to Vanua Lava, a day's sail north.

After sad goodbyes to the Grays, *Chir'od* and *The Piper* had a brisk sail on a breeze and sea that would discourage one 'on' the wind, but which exhilarates one 'off' it. Our destination was Sola, the 'big smoke' and government administration centre of The Banks Islands. It houses some 200 souls. But our arrival was not to be. Weather again forced us to wait, this time about six miles away. On the third day, Sola was safe to enter and anchor.

It was the Anglican Church Mothers' Union day, and people from all over the island had come for a big picnic. By chance we had wandered ashore into the centre of the celebrations and were soon

seated on a beautiful pandanus mat woven and offered by an older tattooed woman, lent some plates (it was a bring your own plate affair) and invited to be served from the Bishop's table. How embarrassing! But in ever generous Melanesian style, we were served beautiful food and welcomed into the throng. Two beef had been killed for the occasion. Cut and leaf wrapped in meal sized portions, the beef pieces were piled on to hot stones and covered thickly with banana leaves. This was done the previous day, in a pandanus and bamboo oven hut. We peered in as the oven was opened and the aroma was delicious indeed. We also visited another hut, this one round and without walls, where a great heap of taro had been cooking similarly. There were 200 people to feed and there was plenty to go around.

Our western sensibilities were sorely tried during the seven long speeches, each in bislama or the local language. Performances by each branch of the Mothers' Union followed. We longed for our cockpit and a cold beer. Later in the afternoon, there was a respite, for almost everyone walked to the soccer ground for custom dancing. The bishop did not go. The Church has disapproved of local customs for

many a long year and was not about to change for the Mothers' Union. However, I noted that the bishop, a Solomon Islander, had the telltale, red, eroded teeth of the devoted betel nut chewer! It seems that 'custom' for some is not seen as 'custom' for another.

The custom dancing was similar to what we had seen further south, for The Banks sends its celebrated dancers to southern parts of Vanuatu as paid entertainment. The head-dresses were outstanding and like nothing we had seen before. Painted red white and black with long spikes standing high, we heard that they are made for the one dance and then destroyed. Certainly they did look new and not as if they had been stored in the rafters of a grass house since the last dance.

The weather continued to moderate, so after reporting with our cruising permit to the Sola Customs officer, we took a day sail, in company, to the Reef Islands. Much like Australia's Barrier Reef, these tiny atolls sit surrounded by huge areas of reef reaching far out into the ocean. We anchored behind a reef in about 12 metres of coral rubble. *The Piper* pitched a bit, but held OK.

We dinghied to the atoll. All isolation and aloneness. To our surprise we found footprints and wondered if Man Friday was in residence. No! Kamuel and Roman from Vanua Lava, six miles away, had seen the boats come. Eager to trade, they had paddled out to us and were now offering fruit and the promise of lobster. Yes, please! The Banks are noted for their lobster. We supplied a torch and they delivered several beautiful live crustaceans at dawn.

The wind was lifting, the sea was up and we were keen to make the beautiful Waterfall Bay on Vanua Lava that day, so we left our friendly French companions, whom Ureparapara further north called The Lobster Catchers. They faced a paddle of six miles into the waves and swell of the open ocean. Their biceps indicated that they had done it or its equivalent before. Would we give them a tow? Well, who could refuse? Towing an outrigger canoe requires one paddler to stay on board to steer, and this Roman did. Motoring at 3 knots, *The Piper* wallowed about a bit, but not the canoe. It rode the seas well and we wondered at its calculated hull speed.



Willie Gray and his family.

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