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The Sun is God

Written by Adrian McKinty

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Adrian McKinty

THE SUN IS GOD



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It is when we try to grapple with another man's intimate needs that we perceive how incomprehensible, wavering and misty are the beings that share with us the sight of the stars and the warmth of the sun.

Joseph Conrad
Lord Jim (1900)

The sun is God!

J. M. W. Turner
reputed last words (1851)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The following story is based on true events. Emma Forsayth, Bessie Pullen-Burry, Governor Hahl, Doctor Parkinson, August Engelhardt *et alia* are real individuals who lived in, or, in Miss Pullen-Burry's case, visited, German New Guinea in the years 1906–7.

Kabakon Island lies in the Duke of York group between the large Papuan islands of New Britain and New Ireland, roughly 1,500 miles north of Brisbane and 200 miles west of the Solomons. In the decade before World War I, Kabakon was the *Heimat* for the extraordinary society who called themselves 'Naked Cocovores' or '*Sonnenorden*'. The mysterious deaths that took place on Kabakon during this time remain unsolved to the present day.

There are several fictional characters and many fictitious elements in this book; where the interests of the novel and strict historical accuracy have collided I have put the demands of the former first.

THE SUN IS GOD

1

Massacre on the Groot Hoek River



Lieutenant William Prior should never have been on duty that night at all. The war was nearly over and Will and three other officers of the Military Foot Police had been on their way to a saloon in Bloemfontein. On the track down from the camp a starved lioness had launched an attack on Lieutenant Rigby's horse, a shot in the air sent the skinny creature scurrying into the bush, but Rigby fell and broke an ankle. Riding double with Rigby, Will reached the field hospital just after nine where he surrendered his friend to the efficient hands of Harry Douglas of the Royal Army Medical Corps.

A breathless enlisted man ran over to Prior. 'Lieutenant Prior, sir, lukin for thissin, sir, trouble at Camp Z. T' kaffirs. Blow up, sir, or as near as makes na matter.'

Sergeant Black was a Yorkshireman from some hamlet in the North Riding and while few in the regiment could follow anything he said, Will could understand him perfectly. Will had grown up in Leeds and as the son of a popular doctor he had come into contact with every social class in the county.

'Who is supposed to be in charge of Camp Z., Sergeant Black?'

'Lieutenant Ashcroft, sir but he's legged it, sir. Drunk, sir.'

'What sort of trouble is it?'

'Know nowt, sir. Corporal Townes comes running t' camp, sir, screaming about t' kaffirs and Lieutenant Ashcroft, sir.'

'All right, let's get over there, sergeant, and see if we can't sort this out between us, eh?'

Camp Z. was across the valley on the other side of the Vaalkop about three miles from the field hospital. Both men got their horses from the stables and rode together across the barren wasteland that had been rich wheat and barley fields until the previous winter when they'd been torched on the orders of General Kitchener.

The sky was cloudy and moonless and the two men could see virtually nothing. Bats flitted above the horses' ears and great moths the size of small birds collided with man and beast.

As they got closer to the Groot Hoek River they could hear the sound of gunfire and yelling. Will nudged his pony into a canter and Sergeant Black followed suit.

Camp Z. was a 'concentration camp' for African prisoners who had worked in some capacity for the Boers in the Orange Free State. The condition for most inmates in the British camps had improved since the findings of the Fawcett Commission and the noisy campaigns of Emily Hobhouse and David Lloyd-George. Before Hobhouse's polemics in the liberal press, thousands of Boer women and children had perished from malnutrition and disease while their menfolk were shipped to prison camps overseas. Over the last year, however, the Boer camps had seen ameliorated food supplies and the establishment of prison hospitals, but the truth was that almost nothing had been done to better the lot of the native African prisoners. No one in England or Germany or anywhere else got terribly worked up about the well-being of inmates in the 'kaffir camps'.

As they neared Camp Z., Will and Sergeant Black saw the

first escapee, a boy of about eleven, running blindly towards the town with blood pouring from a head wound.

Sergeant Black raised his rifle but Will shook his head. One runaway child didn't amount to much. As they climbed the *kop* they passed another half dozen boys and one old man jogging up the hill. 'Doesn't look good, sergeant,' Will said.

'Nay, sir,' Black agreed.

They followed the curve of the Groot Hoek River and galloped to the camp entrance, where they found the situation parlous in the extreme. Seemingly the entire population of around a thousand men, women and children was attacking the small Military Foot Police garrison who were lined up in two rows in front of the camp gates. Three of the MFP soldiers were already injured but a corporal was holding the nerve of the remaining men. Some of the prisoners were escaping over the barbed wire and others were in the process of ransacking the aid station and supply shed, but by far the biggest danger was the mob at the gate. If the line of a dozen military policemen broke, the entire camp could run off into the South African night.

Will was in his dress uniform, armed with a six-shot revolver and a cavalry sabre. He dismounted, unsheathed the sword and ran to the camp entrance. 'Lieutenant Prior assuming command!' he bellowed.

A terrified private let Sergeant Black and Will inside the gate and it was at that moment that the Africans surged forward again. Two volleys from the soldiers kept them back but Will could see that several dozen African men had ripped the corrugated iron roof from the storage shed and were preparing an assault from behind these improvised barriers. If the prisoners all charged at once they would certainly overrun the position.

'Sergeant Black, go to the guardhouse, find the bloody Maxim gun and bring it back here!'

Sergeant Black saluted and ran to the guardhouse. He did not ask the obvious question: what if Camp Z. did not possess a Maxim gun?

'Does anyone know how this kicked off?' Will asked the soldiers.

'They've had no food or medicine for four days. The supplies haven't come through,' a Scottish corporal told him. 'We've been taking the dead ones out in carts, sir.'

Will marched in front of the line of military policemen and addressed the mob. 'Return to your tents at once! We will not hesitate to shoot if you attempt to escape!'

He was well aware that few if any of them spoke English but he hoped that his uniform and sword would at least have a visual impact. The mob jeered and someone threw an improvised spear at him which missed.

'Return to your tents at once! The food situation cannot be addressed until order has been restored!'

A skeletal woman dressed in rags ran to him from the mob and fell at his feet. He was horrified by her miserable, hollow face and bony outstretched fingers.

My God, were all the prisoners like this? He looked beyond the woman to the other inmates and from what he could see in the lamplight it was the same story: half dead, naked, brown stick-like figures with weeping sores and great gaping eyes.

For almost his entire time in South Africa he had been on standard policing duties in captured Boer towns or in the British garrison. He had heard the stories, of course, and even read the reports in the *Manchester Guardian* but he had expected nothing like this. He stepped away in horror and backed towards the British line.

'If you return to your tents I will make sure that food arrives tonight from the British commissary!' he yelled, but as he had expected, none of the prisoners moved. He could see that many

of the young men had armed themselves with rocks, stones and spears that had been manufactured from wooden joists and sharpened tent pegs. And all at once assorted missiles began to fall among the soldiers.

'Do any of you speak Dutch?' Will asked the men.

One of the privates raised a nervous hand.

'Tell them that I will personally guarantee the arrival of food tonight from the commissary at the Vaalkop!'

The private raised his voice to shout to the mob in Afrikaans. Although many of the prisoners did understand what he was saying the situation was too far gone for further British promises.

More spears and stones and one of the soldiers went down hurt.

'Sergeant Black, tell me about the Maxim!' Will bellowed.

'Maxim ready to fire, sir!' Black said in the stolid Yorkshire burr that gave Will confidence.

'Excellent. Now, who is the best rider among you men?'

The soldiers looked at a short blond private at the far end of the line.

'All right, you take my horse, ride over to the Vaalkop, find Major Potter and briskly apprise him of the situation. Then ride to the field hospital and tell Lieutenant Douglas that we are in need of orderlies and medical assistance.'

'Yes, sir!' the young man said, relieved to be getting out of here with his life.

Will addressed the nervous men. 'Now lads, this is nothing to be alarmed about. We are British soldiers and they are unarmed African civilians who should pose no threat to the likes of us. We shall fire a warning volley in the air and then we'll advance by squads and drive these people back into their tents. Sergeant Black will cover us with the Maxim at the gates, and I think I can safely say that—'

A heavy stone struck Will on the head, knocking off his pith helmet.

He was only unconscious for a few moments but when he came to he saw that the gates had been opened and half his command had deserted and were running for it. The mob was racing towards what was left of his men with their improvised weapons and corrugated iron shields.

A spear hit the Scottish corporal next to him and a private took a half brick in the head. Then Sergeant Black opened up with the Maxim gun. It didn't sound like much. Like water coming out of a drain or a fast pair of workmen hammering metal plate. It was not an unpleasant noise at all. Its effect, however, was devastating. Flame spat from the barrel and row upon row of Africans began falling to the ground. Will watched in awe and stupefaction. He had never been in a battle. He had never seen anything like this. Still they kept coming and Sergeant Black kept mowing them down like barley under the scythe, until, finally, the mob began to understand what kind of a machine the Maxim gun was.

'Cease fire!' Will commanded.

Only one minute had passed since Sergeant Black had begun to shoot. One minute and all was changed. Africans were dead and dying in row upon row. Sergeant Black had undoubtedly saved the lives of the remaining soldiers, but at what cost?

Will walked back to the military policemen who had gathered round the Maxim gun in amazement. Its brass was searingly hot and the holy words 'Deutsche Waffen und Munitionsfabriken, Berlin, 1898' glowed in the darkness.

All around them the air smelled of blood and gunpowder and death.

Presently a detachment of Australian troopers showed up with a group of MFPs from the Vaalkop. No one could believe the slaughter. When Lieutenant Douglas appeared and attempted

to examine Will's head wound Will pushed him angrily away. 'Not me, you fool! Them! Treat them!'

Nineteen had been killed outright. A further sixty-five were wounded. The incident at Camp Z. did not merit a mention in the *Manchester Guardian* or *The Times* or even in the fervently anti-British Dutch and German papers. The dead, after all, were only kaffirs. Will was not criticized by anyone. Quite the reverse. His actions were widely praised. He was mentioned in dispatches to General Kitchener and a month later he was informed that he was going to be awarded a DSO. They normally didn't give the Distinguished Service Order to anyone under the rank of Major but since Will had been the acting commanding officer at Camp Z. it had been deemed appropriate. The citation said: 'For gallantly leading his men in the face of the enemy.'

He didn't react when he heard the news from Colonel Wilson, but when he saw his name in the *Gazette* a month later he was physically sick.