

## LIFE ON A HAWAIIAN PLANTATION

An Interview  
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It was Sunday, hot and sultry. Everything seemed quiet and dead. There, gathered in the shade of a tree, was a group of old hands smoking their "Durham" and exchanging stories and gossip. Out in the open square some children were just aimlessly wandering around, too tired to play any games in the hot sun.

"This is plantation life or rather camp life." He made a sweeping gesture, taking in the whole camp. He was smiling, but his voice belied his looks. Hideo-san, born and raised on a plantation, was speaking. We were seated on his little veranda. It was somewhat of a protection from the hot rays, but when the occasional gusts of wind came up, they filled the air with iron-red dust of the fields. No wonder the whole camp is the color of the soil. Even the trees and grass that help to brighten the drab, hot scenery were tinged with it.

Hideo-san was telling me his story, his ambitions and hopes and disappointments. He was a tall lad, very tall for a Japanese, and strongly built. His face was tanned a deep brown and was brightly intelligent. He was polite and courteous. His English was surprisingly good and made me ashamed of myself for ever thinking that I would be listening to that peculiar English so common among boys of Oriental ancestry.

"How is it that you speak English so well? It seems so out of place." The question popped out before I knew it.

Fortunately he did not take offense. Smilingly he said, "I always studied hard in English and practiced speaking out loud at home and down by the river. I turned out for the school debate team and took part in oratorical contests."

"Didn't you have any trouble with your friends? I mean, didn't they tease and make fun of you when you tried to speak good English?"

"No, I never had much trouble with my friends," was the ready reply. "You see in the first place I'm big and can handle any of them. Then I was always a serious fellow. Sure, I've seen some of my friends kidded and teased. The others always said, 'Look at that guy. He's only a Japanese, but he's trying to be a haole. He thinks he's too good.'"

"Have you lived here long?" I inquired.

"Well, almost my whole life," was the reply. "I was only a baby when we moved here."

"Then you weren't born on a plantation?"

"I was. You see I was born on a sugar plantation, and I guess I'll always be on one unless some miracle happens."

"Why, don't you like it here?" I queried.

"I don't know. Maybe it's a good place, but again it's hard for a fellow who wants something else besides plantation life."

"Why, do you . . ." I wanted to ask him what else he wanted in life but he sensed my thoughts and interrupted me.

"Sure, I want to have a chance to go to the University like

you folks, to get something out of life—the good things in life, and to know the worthwhile things that make life better. I want to meet the finer people, to go out and see things . . . . You know what I mean.”

“Now, you shouldn’t feel all that way.” I said trying to pacify him. I could see the yearning in his eyes and feel the eagerness to go beyond the bounds of his little community—his little world. I felt sorry for him. “You should look at it in another way. You are working today and being useful. It’s more than many of us are doing.”

“Maybe you’re right. I might be better off, but you know how it is . . . .” He looked at me with a smile full of bitterness and wistfulness.

Then he continued, “But I sure envy you people on the outside. I am twenty-three years old and have lived around here practically my whole life. I’ve been brought up with “pines” and cane, and I guess I’ll die with them. Ten years from now I’ll be the same—just going along . . . .”

“I think you’re wrong there,” I broke in. “If you’ve got the stuff they might make you a big shot around here.”

“Don’t kid me,” he chided. “You know yourself I haven’t got a chance. You can’t go very high up and get big money unless your skin is white. You can work here all your life and yet a *haole* who doesn’t know a thing about the work can be ahead of you in no time. But just the same I’m going to try for some of the good jobs around here. Maybe I’ll never make a good plantation worker. Really, I think that ten years from now I’ll be living like my parents in these cottages. That’s why I want to go to the University. I want to study so I can make something out of myself. I want to make my parents proud of me. But what can I do with a family like mine?”

“What’s the matter with your family?”

“I can’t do anything I want to do. My hands are tied. Just because I happen to be the first born. You are a Japanese and must know my situation. I have to obey my parents. I am now grown up and must help my parents. Then I have four below me. I just can’t do anything. When I think of my family, I wish that I could do something to help them. I hate to think that we’re going to live on plantations all our lives.”

“Don’t feel that way . . . .” I started to interrupt, but he didn’t seem to hear me as he continued.

“Sure, the living is all right, I guess. We get free houses. This cottage is free. You see families get a whole cottage, but bachelors are usually given half of the house. The rooms are kind of small, but we have two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a parlor which we also use as a bedroom. The bachelors have a bedroom, a kitchen, and a parlor.”

“How about bathrooms . . . ?” I started to ask, but he intercepted me.

“We don’t have private baths. For bathing we have the camp bathhouse. You see the building there, that’s the camp bathhouse. And you see the other house there, that’s the camp

toilet." The bathhouse was a low, wide building; the toilet a taller and narrower construction.

"The bathhouse," he continued, "is divided into two, one-half for the women and the other half for the men. The bath is made ready by three o'clock so the workers who start coming back about that time can wash up. Everybody uses it, the Filipinos and all. It's the same with the toilet house, one side for men, one side for women."

"Things are on a community basis around here." I commented.

"Very much so," he replied. "Your business is the camp's business. It's not a secret until the whole camp knows. What you do concerns the whole camp. When I entered the oratorical contests they were all back of me. They were very concerned about it. And when the kids from here go out to play against kids of another camp, practically everybody follows them. They forget their nationalities."

Set apart by themselves in a lonely spot in the highlands, the people working and living together in the camp are naturally drawn together by common ties. This isolation has been the factor that has enabled the Japanese immigrants to preserve their old customs and habits to a considerable degree.

As Hideo-san continued: "Really, my father and mother are very old fashioned. Maybe your parents are like that too. Everything is obedience—the idea of *oya-koko* (filial piety). Father is the head, and we must obey him, right or wrong. Sometimes I do get mad, but I always give in, usually because mother begs me to and other times because I just can't help it. It's just like a habit. I want more freedom, more chance to do what I want and to think on my own. I hate to do things by asking his permission, but still I do it.

"I can remember when I was in the fifth grade my eyes were bothering me. I was afraid to tell him, but I told my mother. She was worried and told father of it. He asked, '*Oi, me wa do shita no ka?*' (What's the matter with your eyes?)

"His face was stern and hard as he asked me the question. 'Nothing,' I replied. And that ended the incident until my teacher came to see my father a week later to ask him to buy me a pair of glasses. You see he thought I was trying to be *hokano* (show off.)

"In all family matters he gives the last word. No one can contradict him.

"There was the time I wanted to go to a school dance. That was only about five years ago. I was still in high school. The school was giving a dance and all my classmates and friends were going. I wanted to go too. But I had no suit. And I was afraid to ask father for a new suit. I knew what that would mean. Anyway I approached mother. Very tactfully she spoke to him about it.

"He scolded, 'That's the trouble with you. You're too easy with the children. They're getting spoiled. And now you want him to go to a dance and to buy him a new suit. What's the

matter with you? What does he want to go to the dance for? To see the girls, I suppose? Do you want him to be useless and good for nothing? A new suit for his graduation is enough!

"I didn't go that year, but the next year and my senior year I went to some of the dances. I don't know how father changed his mind but he did. I think when he found out that other fathers were letting their sons and daughters go to dances he allowed me to do the same. No, I never enjoyed dancing very much. But I just wanted to go."

He shook his head and smiled sort of wistfully as he mused. Then he went on: "Yes, father and mother came a long time ago. They first came here twenty-seven years ago. I mean father came first and sent for my mother two years later. He was born in Yamaguchi-ken of Japan and came to Hawaii when he heard about the riches here. He heard big stories of gold and money. He was the third son and was allowed to go by his parents.

"He first arrived in Honolulu and was a very disappointed man. He knew no one and he had no money. And the streets did not have the gold that he had dreamed about. However, he had no chance to think because he was taken to a plantation and immediately put to work. He first worked on a sugar plantation. Although there were other Japanese people working there he felt kind of lonesome because there wasn't anybody from his district. He did *hapai-ko*, *hoe-hana*, cut cane for about ninety cents a day. It is little today but in his day it was plenty. You know most of our parents never saw money until they came to Hawaii. Work was hard, but money in cash was coming in so he felt fine. After a little for two years he wrote back home for a wife.

"When mother came over, he had some money and they had a fair start. No, she didn't stay at home. She went out in the fields to work with the hoe and the knife. Yes, my parents have been working and slaving in the fields but they have hardly anything to show for it, except that they have raised us. We are their only hope. I hate to fail them even if I have to work here all my life.

"They have worked for about twenty years. They're not too old in years. But if you see them you will see what I mean."

At that moment two old people came up the steps. They were old and wrinkled. Very politely they bowed to me and said, "*Konichi-wa* (good day). *Atsui desu ne?* (Isn't it a hot day?)"

I returned their courtesy, bowing in my best manner.

The old couple was very courteous and asked me to come in and to make myself at home.

In Japanese fashion I thanked them but politely declined their offer.

Indeed they were beyond their years. The years of hard work in the fields had sapped the fullness out of them. They were not yet sixty but they looked seventy.

"You have very nice parents." I complimented him when they retired into the house.

He only shook his head. "Yes, thank you. But you can see why I cannot leave or disobey them. They need me here. As I said before I would like to go away and try to get some real things out of life, but . . . ."

He spoke earnestly and sincerely. I could not help but be affected by his words. Here was a boy who wanted to go out and do things but was held back by family and economic reasons.

"After about ten years of working on the sugar plantation my parents moved to this place. You see, there were some people from his own prefecture who had come to live here.

"No, I don't remember very much about my early days. You see a plantation is all the same. It hardly changes. All I know is that mother used to leave me with some lady when she went out into the fields. When my other brothers and sisters were born, she stayed home until I was old enough to take care of them. One thing I do remember I was busy taking care of my younger brothers and sisters and I don't remember very much. One thing I know is that I used to hate school and always ran away. My father was furious. He gave me a beating and after that I never missed school. After school I would run home because I was hungry and wanted some of the *musubi* (rice ball) that mother left in the safe (food cabinet).

"However, I grew up and studied hard," he said with a smile.

"Yes, I understand that you were one of the brightest in your classes. I also hear that you were one of the outstanding students in your school."

"No," he denied modestly. "All I did was to study harder than the others. You see my parents were very strict and always made me study before I could go out to play. They were always happy when others told them I was making good. Of course, they would always say in Japanese style, 'Oh, no, our son is hopeless. He never had any ability.'

"Yes, I attended the language school. It was the happiest moments for my father and mother when I would come home with some prize at the end of the year. They were very concerned about my Japanese. That was one thing I had to study every night. You see, they took my English for granted. Anyway my parents were very glad when I wrote my first letter in Japanese to my grandfather in Japan.

"I went through high school and wanted to continue to the University. But my parents tearfully pointed out the impossibility. They said, 'No, we can't allow you to do it. It grieves us deeply to say no; but we must think of the younger ones. You have four younger ones below you, and you, being the oldest, should think of helping them go through school. You are the oldest and must forget yourself. Your father and mother are getting old and you must help us take care of the family.'

"Do you know but the whole camp was concerned about it? They knew that I had made pretty good in school. They even praised me for my school work; but shook their heads about my going to the University. They said, '*Oya wa ima made lippani minna o sodate ta no de kore kara anata ga oyakoko shite kureru*

*no ga atari mae.* (Your parents have done splendidly in rearing you and now it is your turn to be dutiful and help them in their old age). Of course I gave in. My life was not my own. I had obligations to my family.

"And so I went to work on the plantation. No, it was not the first time. During the summer months I used to help around the fields. You see most of us help from about fifteen. I remember the first time I went to work. I was just turning fifteen. I went out with the other boys of my age to help during the picking season. We followed the pickers. As soon as they finished a row they would dump the fruit out of the bags at one end and we would clear off the bottom edges of the pineapples and sort them into boxes according to size. We got about fifteen cents an hour. Day laborers made from fifty to eighty dollars a month.

"I've done most of the work in the fields. I have done *hoe-hana*, cut suckers (young pine shoots used in planting), loaded pines on trucks and trains, counted pines in the fields, and other kinds of work. I also picked fruits and helped to spray the fields to kill off the bugs.

"Today, I have a pretty good job. I help around the stations as a checker, and make out bills of lading. When there's nothing to do I go out with the gang in the fields. I make about seventy a month.

"Oh, you want to know something about the women. They get less than men, but they can do almost any kind of work. They don't do the hard work like picking the pines or loading. But they sure can *hoe-hana*, cut suckers, and sort pines. Sure there are some young girls who work in the fields. They're all strong and can last all day in the fields. They wear strong dresses and use home-made cloth coverings to protect their arms and legs from the sun and the pine leaves. You see the pine leaves are stiff and have sharp edges. You have to have something to protect you or you get all cut up. Boys are lucky. We have long pants and use gloves to protect our hands. Yes, the women also use gloves. Our arms are protected by long sleeves. The women wrap a towel around their heads and faces for protection against the sun. And like the men they wear large brim hats.

"Oh, my mother still goes out. She's still strong. I've tried to keep her home, but you know how it is. She's been working so long she feels lost when she hasn't anything to do. She has to do something to be happy."

He looked at me with a queer look. Then he looked away into space and began to shake his head. His mouth was puckered as he contemplated.

"I was just thinking," he began. "Yes, ten years from now I'll be living the same life of my parents. I hate to think of it. I want to . . . well anybody wants to improve, you know that. Up at five every morning and out in the fields. Ever since I can remember I have gotten up at that early hour. Sure it's dark and cold when you get up. But that's plantation routine.

"By the time you finish your breakfast the whistle blows, and everybody must get together at the office. The breakfast isn't much either. We eat just plain food. We have mainly rice, *miso shiru* (soy bean soup), pickled plum, cabbage and turnip, and fish or meat that's left over. Yes, sometimes we have ham and eggs. But we usually eat rice. We must have something solid. You see we start work at six and if we don't eat a healthy breakfast, we'll starve before lunch. We have coffee and bread, but we usually have them after our main meal. Bread, chocolate and jam are often for the kids.

"We work in the hot sun. Yes, the morning is cool and fresh; but when the sun comes out, boy it's sure hot. In going to work we get into a truck that takes us to the field where we work. After work the truck comes for us. Sometimes we walk home if the field is near the camp. You know, we're just like prisoners. You know what I mean."

✓ He wished to express the idea that their work is a life routine, that there is nothing to life but work in the sun and back home without any great motive for living except to exist. I can see the drudgery that he dreads. His work today, tomorrow, next month, next year and the years to come will invariably be the same with the same gang. He has seen his father and mother wither and dry, working long years in the fields. He has seen their life, drab and empty. He wants something better. Can we not feel the pulsing urge and desire of the young man to grasp some color out of life?

"We usually get through work about three in the afternoon unless we have to work overtime. The first thing we do after coming back from the fields is to clean up—go to the *furo* (bath). But some prefer to play some games before taking a bath. You can play ball. Some go out to tend their gardens that they have in the back of the camp. We usually get through with our baths and have a little time to 'chew the rag.'

"After supper some stay home, some go to the movies, or some go to town just to fool around. On Saturday nights most of the young fellows are out. Some go to the city for movies and some for dances. They like to come back and say, 'I went to W. Theater last night'.

"I very seldom go into the city because I don't have a car and cannot afford to spend the money the way some of them do. And you know I have to ask father for money. I can get it, but I hate to have them think that I am spending hard earned money foolishly. All the money goes to father, and he doesn't like to give it out for just foolishness.

"Mother knows that I am not always happy. So at times she comforts me with the thought that suffering in this life will bring greater happiness after death. Yes, she is very religious. So is my father. Every morning he gets up and prays before breakfast. Mother offers rice to the family shrine before serving us. On certain days like the *bon* (time of the return of the spirits of the dead to this earth) we all kneel and pray together. It doesn't make any difference that we are Chris-

tians, I mean me and my younger brothers and sisters. It's true with all my friends who go to church."

Indeed it is strange but very true in Hawaii. Parents who are devout Buddhists do allow their children to become Christians and yet, at the same time, require that they kneel at the family shrine or go to the Buddhist temple with them. When the family is having some hard luck, the parents take their children to pray with them at the shrine. On New Year's morning, many of the parents still take their young ones to pray at a temple. The children, in most cases, do not feel anything. This situation may be explained by the fact that the Japanese family is so closely knit that any religious ceremony concerning one member is considered primarily a family affair. It is not regarded purely as an individual religious matter.

"How about marriage?" I asked. "Haven't your parents . . . . ?"

"That's out of the question yet," he laughed. "I'm not ready. I haven't found the girl that I want. Yes, some or most of my class-mates are either going steady with girls or are married. They marry pretty young out here. The parents want them to.

"Until the right one comes along I won't marry." He sighed as he said it. Then smilingly he continued, "Some of my friends have been married in Japanese style, through matchmaking. No, they seem to be getting along all right, but I still say I want to find my own wife.

"I almost forgot. My parents have found a prospective wife for me. She is very 'Japan-ified'. She was in Japan for a couple of years. My parents think that she will make an ideal wife, and daughter-in-law. They want me to accept her. For once I haven't given in. That's one thing I want to have my own way. I want to find my own wife and I will."

"Do you have interracial marriages around here?" I inquired.

"Very rarely," was his reply. "You see Japanese parents are very strict in that matter. They don't want their girls to marry outside nationalities. It's the same with the boys. Sure they are friendly with other nationalities; but they won't stand the idea of interracial marriage. Their daughters and sons must marry Japanese or they are disgraced among the other Japanese or they are disgraced among the other Japanese people. There used to be a strong feeling against Okinawans, but nowadays the feeling is not so strong. Just this year a girl got married to an Okinawan, and there was no objection. In fact everybody said that it was a fine marriage. You ought to know these things."

"Yes," said I, "it's the same in town. But in town the girls go around with other nationalities. The parents feel badly, but they resign themselves. One girl who was going with a Filipino was sent to Japan. The parents told her that if she didn't give up the Filipino they would commit suicide. By the way, how are the Filipinos?"

"They're all right until they get into a fight. Once I saw



two Filipinos going for each other. Suddenly one of them pulled out a pocket knife and tried to poke the other fellow in the stomach. He missed and cut his ham (thigh). The one with the cut ran back into his house and locked the door. Nobody butted in. It's no sense when they have knives. You'll only get hurt. The Bayaus (Filipinos) are all right as long as they don't lose their temper. They're dangerous when they lose their temper.

"No, they don't have many fights because the trouble makers are fired from the camp as soon as they start anything.

"That's excitement, but I don't like that kind. It's too much for my heart. I rather have *bon odori* (dance of the festival of the dead).

"Yes, we have lots of fun during *bon* season. They have dances all over the country here. It is one time I have a big kick. Sure, I take part in the dances. More than half of the fun is in dancing and singing. There's an old saying that runs like this: '*miru mono wa . . .*' (those who dance are fools, but those who watch are greater fools). Haven't you seen a country *bon* dance? It's really like a carnival. Everybody comes out for a good time."

Yes, everybody comes out to have a good time. The old and the young . . . they all make merry by singing, dancing and laughing. But there is yet one bitter note in the happy voices blending so well with the merry beat of the drums. It is the cry of despair of the second generation. Theirs is not an easy thing to do—to adjust themselves to the ways of their parents and the ways of a western life. Here in the story of a youth who has lived on a plantation all his life is shown the conflict that challenges the second generation. Like all youth he has manifested a desire to better his conditions. But the home situation, the strong family ties, the old customs and traditions have weighed him down. He has been educated in American schools and has ever endeavored to live up to American standards. He wants to live a decent life as he understands it. Will he be able to do so in his present conditions? Will he become resigned and make the best of his lot, and ten years from now, will we see the shadow of a man, lunch bag hanging from his back and hoe on his shoulder, wending his way back to his humble abode from the fields, trodding in the footsteps of his parents?