



The Return of the Idol

by Nicholas Richards

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Anthropologists are all over the place after they make contact with the mysterious Awola tribe.

Dramatis Personae

Hubert}

Alan}

Ian}

Fergus}

Ranald}

George}

Lewis} British explorers

Nabiloturmowelenushewanda (Bilo) – interpreter from Tova

Brigadier Reginald Merriwether-Finchley-Fox-Patterson – father of Hubert

Lady Miriam Merriwether-Finchley-Fox-Patterson – mother of Hubert

Sir Cedric Postles – Foreign Office Minister

Miss Jennifer Mullington – secretary to Sir Cedric

Jack Egton – Foreign Office official

Professor Max Freeman – academic consultant

Debrivar – Museum Official

Panagral – Mayor of Blot

Dr Lodor Michalek – Director of the Museum of Blot

Professor Zebrinovo – elderly Slothian explorer

Douglas Cooper – British diplomat

Golamene} – Chief of Great Essex

Kabaka}

Pelamu}

Alenti}

Dulumete}

Kulateke} – Awola

Bemakale – a Morchalan

Natives of the Essex Islands, Nightwatchman, Newspaper boy

The action is set in the remote island of Great Essex, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London, the household of a retired brigadier, and the central European Republic of Slothia.

(The island of Great Essex. Lush vegetation, tropical sounds of birds and insects, and an occasional monkey-like call in the distance. Enter from the back of the auditorium Hubert and Alan, two British explorers, as if struggling through heat and thick vegetation. Hubert, wearing a rucksack, forges ahead, while the more cautious Alan looks warily around.)

Alan: Hubert! Hubert! Wait a moment! Don't go on by yourself. Hubert...!

(Hubert waits for Alan to catch up.)

Alan: **(Looking behind)** We've lost the others. You have brought your phone, haven't you?

Hubert: We travel thousands of miles to an unexplored island on the expedition of our lives - and you're fussing about phones. **(Tapping a pocket)** Yes - as it happens. **(Indicating the stage)** But we'll see them from up on that ledge. Come on, Alan, old boy! Where's your sense of adventure?

(Hubert advances boldly to the stage followed by the timider Alan.)

Alan: We shouldn't get separated. Who knows what's around? **(Looking around the audience nervously)** Hubert...? Do you have the feeling we're being watched?

Hubert: Of course we are. All the curious creatures of the forest are wondering what we're up to.

Alan: And if we run into the locals?

Hubert: That's why we've come here.

Alan: We're here to *make contact*... not *run into* them. They may shoot poisoned darts at us if they think we're host-... **(As he walks past the audience he, as it were, snags his arm on some unfriendly plant and lets out a sudden cry of pain.)** Aie!

Hubert: What's up?

Alan: Just cut myself on something. **(Looking at his arm ruefully)** Badly. **(He applies his mouth to the cut.)** Don't think this island wants to be explored.

Hubert: It's just shy. No Europeans have been here for, what...? Forty years? It'll get used to us. **(Hubert leaps onto the stage and surveys the area around as if from elevated ground.)**

Alan: A shy island! You do talk rot, Hubert.

Hubert: **(With jaw-dropped wonder at the view)** Hey! Would you look at that!
(Alan gets onto the stage, nods in impressed agreement, and points over the heads of the audience.)

Alan: There's the beach... You can see our camp. And look: there's a boat come in.

Hubert: That'll be the chap from Tova.

Alan: Who?

Hubert: Didn't Ranald tell you? He's managed to find someone who can speak the language.

Alan: Useful! Don't imagine *google translate* is much good here.
(Hubert takes out his phone and holds it up, catching the light so that it flashes into the audience.)

Alan: Any signal?

Hubert: Yup. I'm sending a signal without even turning it on.
(Meanwhile other explorers – George, Fergus, Lewis and, a little behind and a little doleful, Ian - enter the auditorium. Rapid speech and movement.)

George: There! There they are.

Fergus: Where?

Lewis: Up there: catching the sun. Come on, Ian.
(Meanwhile Alan continues to enjoy the view while Hubert's curious wandering takes him Off Left.)

Ian: I've stepped on something... **(picking up his feet awkwardly)** squidgy and slimy.

Fergus: That's what brave explorers do, Ian. And then they proceed to bigger challenges.

Alan: Here come the others.
(George, Fergus, Lewis and Ian approach the stage.)

Fergus: **(To Alan)** Don't go off on your own. **(He climbs onto the stage.)** Asking for trouble.

Alan: Tell Hubert. Then enjoy the view.

Fergus: **(Getting up onto the stage)** We need to be careful in case... **(Looking around)** Wow!
(Ian, Lewis and George join the rest on stage. They walk around, variously wondering at the view. George takes out field glasses.)

Lewis: View to die for!

Ian: There's a boat.

Alan: That's our interpreter, according to Hubert.

George: **(Through the glasses)** Oh yes. I see him.

Fergus: **(Pointing over the audience)** And over there... the other island?

Lewis: **(Following Alan's finger)** Little Essex?

Fergus: **(With a nod)** Little Essex.

Ian: Hard to take that name seriously.

Alan: Hard to take *Hubert* seriously.

Fergus: Where is he?

Alan: **(Looking Left)** Looking for somewhere more dangerous, I guess.

George: And the natives?

Ian: No sign of human life around here.

Fergus: **(Looking Left)** *Someone's been here before.*

Alan: What makes you say that?

(Fergus gives a look towards Hubert, who is returning from Left holding a human skull.)

Alan: Oh. I see.

Hubert: **(Proffering the skull)** *What do you see, Doctor Kildare, man of bones that you are?*

(Alan takes and examines the skull with evident expertise. All gather around curiously.)

Alan: Male... (?) European stock... From the teeth I'd say between twenty and twenty-five.

George: **(Facetiously)** Don't suppose you can tell what university he attended?

Alan: No, George. **(To Hubert)** Where did you find...him?

Hubert: **(Pointing Left)** See that rock? He was snug in a neat niche, grinning a welcome.

(A distant, sinister shriek. They look around and at each other.)

Ian: What ...?

Alan: Harder to identify. Lewis knows about forest sounds.

Lewis: Some kind of monkey, I think.

(Another shriek)

Lewis: I hope.

(An uneasy pause as they listen to the forest)

Fergus: **(Briskly)** Come on. Back to camp. Ranald said not to go far.

George: Yes, let's move. It's ... *spooky* up here.

(They begin to move Right and Off.)

Fergus: And if we're going to meet and greet the Awola we'll need what's-his-name to interpret.

Lewis: Let's hope he can say **(histrionically)** 'Put down your spears: we come in peace – and anyhow we don't taste good' in Awolan. What *is* his name, by the way?

Fergus: Biro, I think. Short for something unpronounceably long.

Ian: As long as Hubert Merriwether-Finchley-Fox-Patterson?

Fergus: Same sort of syllable count, yes.

Lewis: **(Gesturing Right)** There's a better path here.

George: Come on, Alan.

(George, Fergus, Lewis and Ian move quickly and leave Right.)

Alan: Right. **(Indicating the skull)** Better put Yorick back.

(Alan goes Off Left. Hubert follows the others, but seems to hear something, stops and looks around.)

Hubert: Alan?

(Suddenly from the dark of the auditorium a figure – an Awolan – runs lightly towards the stage. As Hubert turns to face the front another Awolan appears from Upstage, then two or three more. Hubert's cry of surprise is stifled by an efficient Awolan hand, and he is bundled briskly Off Upstage. After a few moments of silence a distressed Alan is heard from Off Left calling faintly.)

Alan: Hubert? Hubert...?

Scene 2 The home of the Merriwether-Finchley-Fox-Pattersons, somewhere in England. Enter Brigadier Reginald Merriwether-Finchley-Fox-Patterson Left on a mobile or cordless phone.)

Merriwether: Hubert...? Oh, your brother's having a wonderful time, I gather. Yes... Well he's gone to the Essex Islands this time. *The Essex Islands*. ... No, nor me. Somewhere near Tova, apparently. ... Well there's this tribe they want to find out about. *The Howlers*, or something. Not the easiest to talk to, and they shoot arrows at helicopters. ... No, I'm not worried... You know Hubert: always lands on his feet. He'll charm the spears out of their savage hands before you can say 'anthropologist'. ... How about you? ... An evening job? ... That'll keep you out of mischief. ... Want to speak to your mother? ... Well I'll give her your love. ... Very well, Clarence, better sign off for the mo. ... Hubert may be calling soon – to say he's in one piece and all that. And he'll want an update on the cricket. ... Yes, but it's *summer* in Australia, you know. ... Right, Clarence. ... Bye, for now. Yes... Bye then,

Clarence. **(Discontinues call and walks Right as he talks to his wife Miriam Off)** That was Clarence. Apparently he's got a job in Coneyville. ... Nor me. Stacking supermarket shelves. Anyway: good that both our boys have fallen on their feet, isn't it? **(Exit cheerfully.)**

Scene 3 Great Essex, same place as before

(Enter from the back of the auditorium George and Lewis, and walk towards Stage Left.)

Lewis: Hubert...? **(Loudly)** Hubert...? Alan...?

(George and Lewis mount the stage. Enter Right below the stage Fergus and Ian.)

Fergus: **(Looking Off Right)** Up here.

(Ian and Fergus mount the stage and greet George and Lewis.)

George: **(Shrugging shoulders)** No sign.

Fergus: **(Indicating over his shoulder)** We've brought Ranald.

Lewis: And the interpreter?

(Fergus nods. Ranald and Bilo, the interpreter, enter Right and mount the stage.)

Ranald: This is where you saw them last?

Fergus: Right here.

Lewis: Hullo, Ranald.

Ranald: **(Making introductions)** This is George... and Lewis. Bilo. Short for...?

(George and Lewis shake hands with Bilo. Bilo speaks carefully and with a lilting accent.)

Bilo: Nabiloturmuwelenushewanda.

George: But we can call you Bilo?

(Bilo nods agreeably.)

Ranald: What must you think, Bilo! First day on the island and we've already lost two of our team!

Ian: **(Gloomily)** We'll *all* be gone in a week.

Bilo: Your friends – they go on their own... into the forest?

Lewis: Hubert would: he's mad. Not Alan though.

Ranald: If they've been snatched... **(looking at the ground)** there'll be signs of a struggle.

(They spread uneasily about the stage.)

Ian: You can see marks on the ground here. Look.

Lewis: Of course you can, Sherlock. We were here a little ago.

Ian: These are scuffling scrapes – not explorers' tracks. **(Calling)** Hubert...? Alan...?

Ranald: What were they doing?

Lewis: Alan was holding a skull.

Ranald: A skull?!

Lewis: Hubert found it... **(Pointing Left)** up in that rock. **(He moves Left and peers Off.)** Wonder if... Oh yes, they put it back before ... whatever happened happened.

Ranald: I'll take a look. May find another way down. **(Beckoning George)** With me, George.

Lewis: Don't go far. They could pick us off two by two.

(Ranald and George go Left and Off. Monkey-like call in the distance. The rest peer around uneasily.)

Lewis: It's good to have you with us, Bilo.

(Bilo smiles graciously.)

Fergus: What do *you* think, Bilo? Have the Awola captured them? Is that what they do?

Bilo: **(Shrugs)** Many years ago westerners came here. There was fighting. The Awola, they are maybe still angry.

Ian: Perhaps they were angry with... **(gesturing Left to the skull)** him?.

Bilo: **(Shaking head)** That skull, high in the rock – with a sea view? If he were enemy of the Awola **(darkly)** his skull I think had made a warrior's drinking-bowl.

Fergus: **(Running a worried hand over his head)** Don't want mine to be a warrior's drinking bowl.

Lewis: **(To Bilo)** Let's hope your sweet Awolan words melt their hard Awolan hearts.

Ian: How long were you here?

Bilo: I was not here.
(A pause as this sinks in. Jaws drop.)
Bilo: I was on the other island.
Ian: What?!
Lewis: On *Little* Essex?
Bilo: Yes. After shipwreck I lived with the Morchala, the people of Little Essex, almost a year.
Ian: Did you never come here?
Bilo: One time only. They took me to the far side to take part in a raid. There is much raiding between the islands. **(With a reminiscent smile)** It was fun.
Ian: But how can you be our interpreter if you've only been here for an amusing raid?
Bilo: The peoples of the islands, they are cousins. And, like your English and American, the languages on either side of the water, they are much the same.
Ian: Let's hope the words *Don't shoot: we come in peace* is much the same in Awo-...
Ranald: **(From Off Left)** Whoa!
Lewis: **(Calling Off)** What is it?
(Lewis goes anxiously Leftwards. Ranald and George return.)
Ranald: There's a way down behind the rock, all right. The ground falls away without warning.
George: We should put up a Danger notice. What's the word for *danger*, Bilo?
Bilo: *Kadag. Kadag* means *Stop! or something bad may happen.*
(Strange animal-like cry. All look around nervously. There is a tense silence - shattered suddenly by...)
Ian: **(Loudly)** Hubert? Alan?
(... whereupon all start in alarm. The others make hushing gestures.)
Lewis: For goodness sake, Ian...!
Ranald: If the Awola are nearby...
Ian: **(Crossly)** Then we'll meet them – isn't that why we've come, after all? – and we'll ask if they've seen our Alan anywhere... or eaten anyone answering to the name of ... HUBERT...!
(All start. Bilo puts a restraining hand on Ian's shoulder.)
Bilo: Shouting invites attack. I first speak to them, they pause - maybe lower their wary spears.
Ian: **(Coldly)** If you know best.
Bilo: I know the words that will quench the fire of their approach.
Lewis: Perhaps we'd better learn a few of these words. In case we meet their fire without you.
Fergus: Good idea. How do we say 'We are friends'?
Bilo: I do not think they have a word for *friend*. Maybe you say, 'We are not enemy'. Gegema ko sasa.
Ranald: Gegema...?
Bilo: Gegema ko sasa.
Ranald: **(Taking out a notebook to write the words down)** Gegema ko sasa.
Lewis: Like no language I know.
Fergus: Not surprising, Lewis: you only know English.
Ranald: **(Showing his notebook to Bilo)** Is that roughly it?
(Bilo shrugs.)
Ranald: You can't...? You can't read?
Bilo: **(With a shake of the head)** Words live in my mind and mouth: I cannot peel them from dead paper. But I remember well – without these trailing lines. **(He hears something Left and makes a hushing gesture.)** St! **(Briskly)** You stay here. They see me alone: it is better. **(Exit warily Left.)**
(The explorers look around and at each other uneasily, and gather closer together.)
Ian: Do we trust him?
Ranald: Of course.
Ian: Bad news if he hands us over to the natives.
George: Why would he do that?

Ian: **(Shrugs)** For ransom.

Ranald: **(Impatiently)** Nonsense, Ian! You'll see Bilo's as straight as a sunbeam.

Ian: You'll see he's a fraud when he turns us over to the Aw-OH...!

(Shouts and confusion as from all sides rush in Awolans brandishing spears. They surround the explorers in a crouched circle. After a tense and menacing silence they begin a slow, quiet chant.)

Awola: Ulu ulu tenetaka, mawe polu: Tchi! Tchi!

George: Great snakes!

Awola: Beme toku leremeta: Ta! Kopu ta, ta! **(They rise and begin to circle the explorers.)**

Lewis: Glad to be proved right, Ian?

Awola: Nee-me, nee-me Uu! Uu!

Tso-pe-ma-la koro-pe-me ju-lu, kere-ba!

(Sudden silence. Ranald brings out his notebook and is about to utter the phrase he wrote down when the book is dashed out of his hands by an Awolan spear. The Awola now repeat their chant and move faster around the frightened explorers, first one way, then the other.)

Awola: Ulu ulu tenetaka, mawe polu: Tchi! Tchi!

Beme toku leremeta: Ta! Kopu ta, ta!

Ranald: **(Desperately)** What was it...? The *Not enemies* thing?

Awola: Nee-me, nee-me. Uu! Uu!

Ian: Geg...nama... something...

Lewis: Masu?

Awola: Tsope-mala koro-peme ju-lu, kereba!

Ian: **(Very loudly)** GEG-NAMASU!

(At these words the Awola stop for a moment in astonishment. Then they howl in a paroxysm of anger. Clearly Ian's attempts at Awolan have backfired as the chief, Golamene, echoes his word.)

Golamene: *Geg-namasu?*

Awola: **(With affronted looks at each other)** *Geg-namasu?*

Golamene: **(Shouting angrily)** Nara-magu! Nara-magu! [How dare you!]

Awola: Nara-magu! Nara-magu!

(The Awola continue the chant, pointing the spears directly at the explorers.)

George: That worked well.

Lewis: What's that word for *danger*?

Ranald: Oh yes: that may stop them.

Lewis: But what is it? Ka- something...

Fergus: KADAG!

(The Awola suddenly stop moving and chanting. They look around and at each other.)

Fergus: **(Pleased at the effect)** Kadag! Kadag!

George: Well done, Fergus! Thought we were done for. **(Calling Left)** Bilo! Back here. It's safe now.

(After a moment and seeing no danger the Awola abruptly resume their chanting and dancing. There seems to be no hope for the explorers.)

Awola: **(Tightening the circle)** Nara-magu! Nara-magu! Nara-magu...!

(Bilo returns Left and takes in the situation.)

Bilo: **(At the top of his voice)** Daba! Daba! Dale, Awola topu! Teblemel sasa. [Stop! Hail, gentle Awola! We come in peace.]

(The Awola stop still and stare wonderingly at Bilo: a foreigner who speaks convincing Awolan.)

Golamene: Krata? Trupe plan Awolati gele? [What is all this? Do you really speak Awola?]

(Bilo weaves his head in an Awolan nod. The Awola are placated but remain suspicious.)

Pelamu: Tara tibet? [Why have you come?]

Kabaka: To laban? [What do you want?]

Alenti: Tep glan gel? [Who are you?]

Bilo: **(Pointing at himself)** Tovale sa. [I am from Tova.] **(Indicating the explorers)** Emene engele. [They are from the West.] **(Opening his arms in a gesture of peace)** Dadakanu si-engele. [They have come to explore.]

Kabaka: **(Angrily)** Meke plan ‘*Geg-namasu*’. [They just said, ‘Geg-namasu’.]

Bilo: **(Indicating the explorers, shaking head)** Perlen: *gegema ko sasa*. [They meant, We are not enemy.]

Dulumete: *Gegema ko sasa?*

(The Awolans repeat *Gegema ko sasa* with staccato laughter as they realise the misunderstanding.)

Ranald: What’s the story, Bilo?

Bilo: What you said. *Geg-namasu* means *rotten bread fruit*. They did not like that name.

Fergus: Say something *good* in Awolan... and cool things.

Bilo: Poke-lawa, neru. Neru. [Drop your guard, please.]

(The Awola lower their spears slowly and warily.)

Ian: **(Still dubious)** Ask them about Hubert and Alan.

Bilo: **(With irritation)** Of course. **(To Golamene)** Meke birol gel ki engele tun? [Have you seen two foreigners anywhere?]

Golamene: **(With an arch ‘perhaps’ gesture)** Re-re. [Perhaps.]

Pelamu **(Similarly arch)** Meke dakan gades sase – *re-re*. [We *may* have seen them.]

Bilo: **(Making gesture of *Where are they?*)** Tun?

Dulumete: Letaman korle-dur munele tu doluba... **(with hand raised)** *lawapi*...

Bilo: *Lawapi*...?

Kabaka: Lawapi mebreka Etemali gel.

Golamene: **(Nodding)** Etemali!

Fergus: What’re they saying?

Bilo: A word I do not know. They say the lost ones may return from the dark forest if we bring back...

Alenti: Etemali!

Bilo: **(To Golamene)** Etemali... *to*?

Golamene: Gla Etemali gogu solama. Pa klek da sin-engele... parum sen-ni kipuk.

Bilo: Etemali is the spirit of the Great Ancestor. You stole this - one and a half lifetimes ago.

Fergus: We did?

George: I wasn’t alive one and a half lifetimes ago.

Kabaka: **(Peremptorily)** Mebreka Etemali! Birol si-gades.

Ranald: What does this mean?

Bilo: Bring back Etemali. Then you see your companions again.

Awola: **(With weaving nods of confirmation)** Etemali!

Ian: Well unless we know what this thing is...

(As Bilo opens his mouth the Awola clearly feel that enough words have been said.)

Kabaka: **(Forcefully)** Nala mepe! [No more!] Mebreka Etemali!

Alenti: Mebreka Etemali!

(All the Awola loop around Bilo and the explorers with brandished spears, chanting:)

Awola: Mebreka Etemali! Mebreka Etemali! Mebreka Etemali!

(The explorers fall back and leave hastily Right. The Awola wait, look at each other with expressions of triumph, and then wind their way Off Left, their chanting fading away.)

Scene 4 London. A room at the Foreign Office

(Sir Cedric Postles, Minister at the Foreign Office, is asleep under the daily newspaper. Miss Jenny Mullington, his secretary, is working nearby. Enter Jack Egton, a civil servant, with anxiety.)

Egton: Morning, Miss Mullington. **(Briskly addressing Postles, not noticing that he is asleep)** Just been talking to the Tovan Minister responsible for the Essex Islands. Doesn’t seem very

helpful, I have to say; and he's not at all happy that those anthropologists were on the island without due permission. Says they'll be arrested for violating Tovan territory.

(Postles emits a little snore, which Egton seems to take as dismissive comment.)

Egton: The two captured Britons are Alan Kildare and Hubert Merriwether-Finchley-Fox-Patterson. I know, sounds more than two. They've probably been taken deep into the island by the tribesmen. Anyway, just thought I'd update you. Better get on the blower to Hubert's father. Happen to know him well, in fact; but it's not going to be an easy call. **(Exit.)**

(A flurry and a few snorts and Postles emerges woozily from under the paper.)

Postles: Oh... Morning, Jenny...

Mullington: Afternoon, sir.

Postles: Afternoon is it? Did I miss luncheon then?

Mullington: No, sir. You had lunch at lunchtime. A good one, I believe.

Postles: Who with, do you happen to know?

Mullington: The Minister of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Postles: Of course. Ah well. Time marches on. Think I'll pop in to the canteen for a spot of tea.

(Getting up stiffly) Jack been in?

Mullington: Just a moment ago.

Postles: Oh? Must've missed him. Apparently there's been an incident in the Essex Islands.

Mullington: So I heard.

Postles: Know where they are?

Mullington: Yes: two hundred miles from Tova. I once did a school project on them.

Postles: Never did projects when I was at school. We were actually *taught* things in my day. **(He heads Left.)** Join me in some tea? I'm sure you deserve it as much as I do.

(Exit Postles, followed by Mullington.)

Scene 5 The Merriwether-Finchley-Fox-Pattersons'

(Enter Left Brigadier Merriwether-Finchley-Fox-Patterson on the phone.)

Merriwether: Hello, Jack! How's things at the Foreign Office. ... Yes, we're doing fine thanks... Must tell you about your godson! Yes. ... Well, he's on an expedition to the Essex Islands. Apparently they're two hundred miles off the coast of... ... Oh, you know? Well I suppose you chaps need to know that kind of thing. Anyway he's with a team of anthropologists trying to make contact with a mysterious tribe. Called *Wallabies* (?) – something like that. Seems they're stuck in the Stone Age and don't even have... ... Oh, you know that too. And you knew that Hubert was on this...?

(Enter Lady Miriam. As Merriwether hears disquieting news about Hubert he gives wary looks towards his wife, not wanting to worry her.)

Merriwether: Oh... ... I see. ... He's all right, I assume. ... And they're on their way back now...? Right. So what should we...? ... Mm. ... Very well, Jack; I know you'll do everything necessary to... Yup... I understand. ... Yes. ... And thanks for calling, Jack... Good of you. ... Bye, Jack. **(He discontinues the call with a preoccupied gaze, and then turns to his wife uneasily.)** That was Jack.

Lady Miriam: So I gathered. You were talking about Hubert?

Merriwether: **(Appearing distracted)** Mm? Oh...yes. Yes, we were.

Lady Miriam: Well?

Merriwether: Oh he's quite well, I'm sure. You know Hubert.

Lady Miriam: I mean, what's the news? I heard you say they're on their way back. I thought the expedition was going to take at least two months.

Merriwether: That's right. Need at least two months to get to know a remote tribe, I expect.

Lady Miriam: So why are they coming home early?

Merriwether: Technical reasons, I understand. You know these anthropologist types.

Lady Miriam: Apart from Hubert, no. He's all right, isn't he?

Merriwether: Oh, you know Hubert...

Lady Miriam: **(With mounting irritation)** Yes, he's my son. But is he all right?

Merriwether: Of course... he'll be all right.

Lady Miriam: Well I suppose we'll see him quite soon - as he's on his way home.

Merriwether: Well actually... Hubert's in fact staying on the island... erm... a little longer.

Lady Miriam: Oh? Why?

Merriwether: He's... Oh, I suppose it gives him the opportunity to do more research. You know, learn their ways and words... He seems quite... captivated by this tribe. **(As if noticing a calendar)** Gosh, is it March already?! Time to sort out the garden. Those borders won't mulch themselves!

(Merriwether makes to leave. Lady Miriam follows him.)

Lady Miriam: **(With disquiet)** Is he there on his own?

Merriwether: Erm... No – I understand there's another young chap with him – called Kiljoy, or something.

Lady Miriam: Why leave two young men on a remote island amongst dangerous savages?

Merriwether: Well, you know these anthropologists...

Lady Miriam: No, I don't – apart from Hubert.

Merriwether: Yes, you know Hubert. Expect he's having a whale of a time.

(Exeunt Right Merriwether followed by an anxious Lady Miriam.)

Scene 6 Street in Blot, the Very Democratic Republic of Slothia

(A boy is selling newspapers.)

Boy: Gazety Skavnitsu! Gazety Skavnitsu!

(Enter Left the elderly Professor Zebrinovo with a walking stick. He buys a paper and looks at it casually. The boy walks Left.)

Boy: Gazety Skavnitsu! **(Exit Left.)**

Zebrinovo: **(His attention grabbed by an article)** Great Essex! Antropologikinsti Bretaniye... **(With a faraway look)** Etemali... **(Exit Right Zebrinovo thoughtfully.)**

Scene 7 Great Essex. An Awolan settlement.

(Enter Hubert with some Awolans. He walks around slowly and heavily. As he nears the edge of the stage an Awolan warns him not to stray.)

Awolan 1: **(With a forbidding movement of the hand)** Tuku. [No further.]

Hubert: **(Compliantly)** Betak. [OK]

(Hubert sits on the ground and sighs with evident fatigue. The Awolans mutter to each other.)

Awolan 2: **(Looking up)** Birol sa sli-sli. [I see rain.]

Awolan 1: Yela re-re. [Perhaps tomorrow.] **(Nodding sagely)** Ko *poron*, pere *yela* re-re. [Not today, but tomorrow perhaps.]

(Enter in a noisy rush Kulateke, a mischievous Awolan boy.)

Hubert: Kulateke! What's the news? To ru-ru?

Kulateke: **(Excitedly)** You-bet! You-bet! **(Rattlingly fast)** Leman maral lobon det gele! Leman maral lobon leman! Dorun birol umu sa susu? Neru! Neru! [They're bringing you your big bag. May I have a look inside? Please!]

Hubert: **(With a shrug of incomprehension)** Nope. Slower, Kula. Luwe mu.

(Enter another Awolan (3), bringing Hubert's rucksack, which he gives with a grunt to the delighted Hubert, who rummages inside while Kulateke watches with avid interest.)

Hubert: **(Looking up and thanking Awolan 3)** Makre! Makre! **(Aside)** Wonder if I'll get my phone back. **(To the Awolan)** Mebreka gele susu?... [Would you bring back...] **(stuck for a word)** 'sat phone' ...?

(Hubert mimes holding a phone. Awolan 3 gives an uncomprehending shrug of incomprehension. Hubert takes from his rucksack a notebook and from his pocket a pencil, draws a phone and shows it to Awolan 3. Kulateke meanwhile takes a curious look in the rucksack. Suddenly the Awolan understands and gives an exclamation of recognition, but then shakes his head.)

Awolan 3: (Shaking his head) Ko dorun. [Not allowed.] Re-re (indicating a weapon) ngkamu. [Perhaps it is a weapon.]

Hubert: It's not a weapon. (With a deprecating gesture) Ko ngkamu! Ko!

(Hubert gives up on his phone, and looks at Kulateke with a wry expression, which Kulateke mirrors. The Awolans discuss Hubert's request...)

Awolan 1: To laban de? [What does he want?]

Awolan 3: Laban gul tobu. [He wants that small, hard object.]

Awolan 2: Gla ngkamu igo? [It's some sort of weapon, isn't it?]

Awolan 3: Kot hurun sa. Re-re. [I don't know. Maybe.]

(... while Hubert settles down with his notebook, watched closely by Kulateke.)

Hubert: (Holding up the notebook with whimsical solemnity) Hubert's Log. (He opens the book and begins to write - companionably speaking what he writes (in italics) to Kulateke.) 17th March... question mark. First entry since capture by the Awola. Unsure of the date as I have been delirious with fever and may have lost a day or two. Just been given back my rucksack, sans sat phone –which they think may be ngkamu: a weapon. (Looking up) Hope they don't turn it on and run down the battery. (Writing) As I write I am being watched curiously by my guards and... (smiling at Kulateke) a cheerful scamp called Kulateke.

Kulateke: (With delight, pointing to himself) Sa! Kulateke!

Hubert: The Awola are friendly - as long as I do what I am told – and show no signs of wanting to eat me; but perhaps they are waiting until I am fully recovered. We found a human skull just before I was captured. Alan said it was European. Like any Englishman abroad I am urgently learning the language – and can already talk about the weather. My favourite word is sli-sli (rain). To build up strength I have been eating all manner of fruit and roots and large, crunchy insects. All raw: they really do not make fire. (Looking up) Wonder if it'd be wrong to play Prometheus. I like my insects cooked. (Resuming writing) Kulateke is looking over my shoulder. Perhaps I could teach him to read and write. (He holds up his pencil to Kulateke.) Gele? [You?]

Kulateke: Makre! (He snatches the pencil and happily springs away with it.) Makre, You-bet!

Hubert: No, Kula, I wasn't giving it to you. (He stands up, obviously weak, and tries to get back his pencil.) Give back... (Pointing at himself) Mebreka!

(Hubert totters after Kulateke, who picks up the notebook. The other Awolans look on amused.)

Kulateke: (He holds up the notebook...) Makre! (...and begins to eat the page Hubert has written.)

Hubert: No, Kula! Daba! Daba! [Stop!]

(Kulateke spits out a few fragments of page in disgust. The Awolans decide to intervene.)

Awolan 1: (Sternly) Kulateke...! Daba! Mebreka!

Awolan 2: (Grabbing Kulateke) Mi! Mi-mi! [Now! Right now!]

(Kulateke gives back the book to Hubert, who looks with dismay at the mangled page and rips it out. Kulateke bounds Off with a chuckle and the pencil. Hubert sits down with a sigh to resume his log, and then realises the pencil is gone. Meanwhile Alan, unnoticed by Hubert, is brought in Upstage by another Awolan (4). Alan has roughly made crutches and a bound leg.)

Hubert: My pencil! (He stands up but, realising he does not have the energy to pursue Kula, quickly sits back down.) Silly boy!

(Awolan 3 goes after Kulateke.)

Hubert: (Wailing vainly) Where in Great Essex am I going to find something to write with?

Alan: (Taking a pen from his pocket) This do?

Hubert: (Whipping round with amazement) Alan?

Alan: **(Shaking hands)** Merriwether-Finchley-Fox-Patterson, I presume. Don't get up. Heard you're *off games*. **(Indicating his leg)** Been in the wars too.

Hubert: I was just writing about you. **(Brow furrowed in bafflement)** What the deuce...?!

Alan: ...am I doing here? **(Indicating leg)** Waiting for this to mend. It's broken.

Hubert: How?

Alan: Badly. Went to put back that skull, remember?

Hubert: **(Nodding at his leg)** Mentioned the skull.

Alan: And thought I'd see what was behind the rock. **(Ruefully)** There was *nothing* behind the rock. Must have fallen thirty feet. Lucky to get away with just one cracked limb. **(Looking around)** Though didn't really get away.

Hubert: They found you?

Alan: Found and rescued and arrested. **(He comes to Hubert and settles down awkwardly.)** And they were humane. Gave me crutches and some seriously disgusting drink for the pain.

Hubert: Good for them! Where've you been hidden?

Alan: Close by. Guess they didn't throw us together in case I caught whatever you were having.

Hubert: Thoughtful Awola! **(Looking at his leg)** What date do you make it?

Alan: 23rd March. Friday.

Hubert: **(Correcting his date)** I *have* been ill. How've you been passing the time? Learning the lingo?

Alan: You know me and languages. Grunts and gestures get me by.

(Alan pegs his way Right towards the edge of the stage. Awolan 2 puts up his hand and grunts in warning. Meanwhile Awolan 1 leaves the stage while Kulateke reappears Upstage Right.)

Alan: But I do know the word for 'Stay there, don't move or you'll be for it! Just you try me!'

Hubert: Tuku?

Alan: That's it.

Awolan 2: **(Nodding with a smile and putting up his hand in warning)** Tuku.

Alan: And there it is again.

Hubert: **(Looking beyond Alan)** And there's that rascal Kulateke again. **(Calling)** Mebreka!

Alan: What does 'mebreka' mean?

Hubert: 'Bring back!'

Alan: Guess there's no word for 'pencil'.

Hubert: He knows what he's pinched. Kulateke...! Mebreka!

(Awolan 2 grabs Kulateke roughly by the ear. Kulateke squeals.)

Awolan 2: Tipana! [Give it!]

(Kulateke goes to Hubert and hands back the pencil contritely.)

Hubert: Makre.

Alan: There you go. We can make pencils; they can make boys do what they're told.

Hubert: I can't make a pencil. I could *buy* one, given a shop and some money. We're feebly dependent on the products of others. **(Indicating the Awola)** Not like them.

(Alan notices Awolan 1 approaching with Hubert's phone in his hand.)

Alan: **(Archly)** True. We all use phones – but we can't produce them.

Hubert: Wish an Awolan would produce my phone right now.

Alan: Well your boat's come in.

(Awolan 1 approaches Hubert and hands him his phone.)

Hubert: Oh thank you! **(Taking the phone)** Makre, makre! **(He switches it on.)** Still has some juice. Could call home. Mother will want to know whether I'm changing my socks. **(Tuts.)** No signal. **(Moving the phone around)** Maybe some passing plane will see it glinting in the sun.

Alan: If the signal picks up we'll be tracked. But be discreet or they'll confiscate it.

Hubert: Our rescue party'd better be discreet. Don't want them blasting their way into our new friends' world like commandos on a do-or-die opera-...

(Suddenly there is a cry Off, which causes the Awolans to spring to readiness.)

Awolan 1: Bamala! Mimi! [Get moving! Now!]

Awolan 3: (To Hubert and Alana) Talika! Talika! [Quick!]

Alan: What?

Awolan 3: Mi-mi!

Hubert: Another raid.

(Hubert and Alan get up slowly and begin to move off with the Awolans.)

Alan: Not our people, I guess. The local Vikings.

Awolan 1: Morchala!

Hubert: Yup: the Little Essexers again.

Awolan 2: Toben.

Alan: *Toben?* Means *they're close*, I think.

Awolan 3: Bamala! Mimi!

Hubert: Better go. We're hardly in a fit state for battle.

(The Awola leave Right Upstage, at first escorting Hubert and Alan; but preoccupied with the raid...)

Awolan 1: (Pointing Right) Gol! gol! [That/there!]

Awolan 2: (Counting the Morchalans he sees) Ki... lu... tek...

(... they run Off, leaving Hubert and Alan limping after. Alan stops Hubert.)

Alan: We could do a runner.

Hubert: (Shakes head) We're both still off games. And I want to learn more Awolan. Can't even count beyond four. **(Counting to demonstrate)** Mok... ki...

Alan: Hubert: this is no time to count up to four!

Hubert: Mok... ki... lu...

(Suddenly a spear-brandishing Morchalan dashes through the auditorium towards the stage.

With quick thinking Hubert holds up the phone, fiddles for a moment; and as he is on the point of being transfixed by the Morchalan's spear a bright flash from the phone makes the Morchalan stagger back. Hubert repeats the flash. The baffled Morchalan runs away. Possibly other Morchalans appear and then retreat as the first Morchalan runs past them with frightened warning.)

Alan: Real photo bomb!

Hubert: (Looking at the picture he has taken) And I've snapped a Morchalan.

Alan: Come on.

(Kulateke runs on, followed by the other Awolans.)

Kulateke: Krikil!

Hubert: He thinks that was lightning. **(To Kulateke)** Ko krikil. **(Indicating his phone)** GOC.

(Rumble of thunder. Kulateke, thinking that the westerners do not understand how thunder follows lightning, shows the causality with one hand then the other.)

Kulateke: Krikil... brumulo.

Awolan 1: (Off) Mi bamala! Talika!

Kulateke: Krikil... brumulo. Krikil... brumulo. Krikil... brumulo ... **(indicating a happy rain-shower with fluttering hands)** ...sli-sli!

(Hubert pulls the insouciant Kulateke Off Right. Exeunt, Kulateke happily chanting krikil, brumolo, sli-sli. More thunder.)

Scene 8 A room in the Foreign Office

(Chairs, table and screen or flip-chart. Enter Right Mullington showing in Professor Freeman, who consults his notes while Mullington prepares the map. Enter Left Postles and Egton.)

Postles: Can't be that difficult to get two men off an island. Why not send in Special Forces?

Egton: If only it were that simple, sir. Great Essex is no ordinary island. Now may I introduce Professor Max Freeman. **(To Freeman)** Sir Cedric Postles, Minister for Overseas Events.

Freeman: Pleased to meet you, Minister.

(Postles and Freeman shake hands cordially. Exit Mullington Left.)

Egton: Professor Freeman is an expert on the geography and politics of this area; and he has kindly agreed to give us a briefing. **(Handing over)** Professor Freeman.

Freeman: Thank you, Mr Egton.

(A map is displayed, showing the two Essex Islands and the coast of Tova. Postles and Egton sit.)

Freeman: Now here you see the Essex Islands, some two hundred miles from Tova. This here **(tapping the map)** Great Essex, and there is Little Essex.

Postles: So *that's* where they are. What's that speck to the south?

(Egton goes over to the map and flicks a finger at it.)

Egton: A fly, sir.

Postles: No: **(effortfully rising and pointing)** *that*.

Freeman: That is the small and uninhabited Harwich Island - dubbed *Tiny* Essex.

Postles: **(With a chuckle)** The baby of the Essex islands.

Freeman: **(Ominously)** A baby who may soon get a frightening rattle.

Postles: *Rattle?*

Freeman: I shall come to Tiny Essex shortly, Sir Cedric.

(Enter Mullington Left with a tray of coffee cups and cake. Postles sits.)

Postles: And to that frightening rattle, I hope. Why Essex, by the way?

Freeman: Oh - they were called that by a British sea captain in the...what was it? ... 18th century. *Barking*, I think... **(He takes a cup from Mullington's tray, declining the cake.)**

Mullington: **(Interjecting confidently)** John Barkworth. He landed in the islands in 1754 and claimed them for Britain. Enraptured by their unspoilt charm he named them after his beloved native Essex.

(A surprised pause at Mullington's unexpected and assured contribution. She takes the tray to Postles and Egton.)

Freeman: **(Impressed)** Quite the expert!

Postles: Miss Mullington once did a project on the Essex Islands. **(Taking coffee and a large slice of cake)** And are these islands still the paradise Barkwell found them?

Freeman: So I believe – but they are no longer British.

Postles: Well nor was the Garden of Eden, but by all accounts it was a decent place. Who owns them now?

Egton: They were given to Tova, sir, when that country gained independence from Britain.

Freeman: And the Tovans are very jumpy about them. The islands have been given the designation *protected territory*. They do not allow visits without special permission.

Postles: Did our chaps get permish?

Egton: **(Taking coffee, declining cake)** Yes – but from the wrong department. They were supposed to apply to the Ministry for Cultural Exchange, but instead obtained a permit from the Department of Ethnic Affairs. If the Tovans get to our captured pair they face a five-year gaol sentence. And a Tovan gaol is not a good place to be!

Postles: So we send in a squad of commandos and get them out pronto.

Egton: Not an option, sir. We cannot risk the damage that would do to our relations with Tova.

Freeman: And then there's the Dabanese.

Postles: The *Dabanese*? How do *they* come in?

(Another map is displayed, zooming out from the first map to show the country of Daban, a menacingly large expanse next to Tova. The Essex Islands are now the size of full stops.)

Freeman: With formidable force and a great deal of persuasive money, Sir Cedric. They want to buy Harwich Island.

Postles: *Tiny* Essex? Why? Don't tell me they want to put their warships and things there?

Freeman: That is *exactly* what they want to do.

Egton: And we really do not want the Dabanese military in that part of the world.

Postles: Nor, I imagine, do the Essex Islanders.

Freeman: Their bows and arrows will hardly trouble the ruthless forces of Daban.

Postles: *A frightening rattle* indeed. **(He places his cup on the saucer with a clatter.)** But the Tovans are our friends. They wouldn't let the Dabanese install themselves in that area, surely?

Egton: They would if we go into their *protected territory* with guns blazing, sir. Isn't that what you're saying, Professor?

Freeman: Indeed, Mr Egton. It would give them a convenient pretext to earn Dabanese money.

Postles: **(Sighs)** Playground politics! Why is Tova so prickly about these islands anyway?

Freeman: They say they want to protect the way of life of the indigenous people.

Postles: The Rolos?

Freeman: The Awola. Did your project cover them, Miss Mullington?

Mullington: **(Fluently, as if reading an article)** It is thought that the Awola, together with their cousins the Morchala, arrived in the Essex Islands some thirty thousand years ago. They do not use metal tools nor, apparently, do they make fire; and their language has no known relative.

Postles: And these bounders won't release our boys until they get this... what is it called...?

Egton: Etemali.

Postles: And we don't have the foggiest what...
(Freeman produces a large photograph - perhaps on the same flipchart as the map - of the Idol, a shield-shaped piece of wood depicting a grotesque face.)

Postles: **(Getting up for a closer look)** ... is...*that*?

Freeman: This wooden object was brought back from Great Essex by a certain Professor Zebrinovo forty-two years ago. He calls it *The Idol of the Awola*. I am in contact with the elderly Zebrinovo, and he is certain that this is what the Awola want.

Postles: Why would they want that ghastly thing?

Freeman: Presumably it is a sacred object.

Postles: Then let them have it. No doubt this Professor Zebedee will be happy to hand it over. Probably glad to get it out of the house.

Freeman: It's not that simple.

Postles: Oh don't *you* start! Why isn't it *that simple*?

Freeman: Professor Eliam Zebrinovo is not British...

Postles: You don't say! Still - I'm sure he's a decent soul.

Freeman: And the Idol is no longer in his possession. He donated it to his local museum in Blot.

Postles: What?

Freeman: Blot.

Postles: Blot?

Egton: Blot is a provincial town in the Very Democratic Republic of Slothia, sir.

Freeman: And the Slothians won't give up this trophy easily – especially to the British.

Postles: **(Sitting down, defeated and weary)** Is it lunchtime yet?

Mullington: Soon, sir.

Postles: **(To Mullington)** Don't suppose your project covered the rescuing of anthropologists?

Mullington: I'm afraid not, sir.

(Mullington collects the cups. Postles sighs again.)

Mullington: But I did once watch a film...

Postles: Mm...

Mullington: ...featuring a similar scenario...

Postles: Don't have time to watch films myself.

Mullington: ...in which the personal touch worked where all else had failed.

Postles: This is real life, I'm afraid: not a feel-good movie.

Egton: What *personal touch* do you suggest?

Mullington: Well... why not send one or two of the anthropologists to Blot. They could meet the museum authorities and entreat them to help their fellow men of learning as a matter of

academic fellowship. And perhaps one of our Embassy staff could be there to arrange and supervise.

Egton: Fresh, tearful faces in the flesh will be more persuasive than faceless phone calls.

Postles: Good thinking, Egton.

Mullington: And perhaps Professor Freeman... if you are in contact with the man who found the Idol...?

Freeman: Of course! I shall call Zebrinovo. He gave the Idol to the museum; he could ask for it back, I suppose.

Postles: Excellent proposals, gentlemen. **(Getting up with resolve)** And I suggest we move fast.

Egton: Absolutely. Speed is of the essence here.

Postles: Quite. We're in danger of being late for lunch. Who am I meeting today, Jenny?

Mullington: The Foreign Secretary.

Postles: Perfect. He'll be agog to hear about this Essex business. Tell you what...

Egton: Sir?

Postles: **(To Egton and Freeman)** Why don't you two join us – and we can thrash out arrangements over the *filet mignon au poivre*?

Egton: That's very kind of you, sir.

Postles: Followed by *poire à la Beaujolaise* and a selection of French cheeses.

Freeman: Perhaps the resourceful Miss Mullington could join us?

Postles: Very well. **(Aside to Freeman)** Though conversation may be rather over her head.

(All move Left. Exeunt Mullington and Freeman. Egton holds back Postles.)

Egton: I ought to disclose to you, sir, that I have a personal interest in this matter.

Postles: Oh? Did *you* do a school project on these islands?

Egton: No, sir. One of the captured anthropologists happens to be my godson.

Postles: Good gracious! So I imagine you'd like to see him again.

Egton: Yes, sir.

Postles: Alive and all that.

Egton: **(Nods)** And so would his family.

Postles: Then we must do the best we can... Get one of our top men in... What's the capital of Slothia?

Egton: Skavnits. I'll contact the Embassy straightaway, sir.

Postles: First things first, Egton. **(With a sweeping gesture Left)** Lunch!

(Exeunt Postles and Egton.)