

THE SEA DEVIL

BY PAUL MASON



James took the path that led from the internment camp down to the bay. The northerly was getting up, but here, on the south side of the island, the limestone cliffs provided shelter, and it was still. Just beyond the long arm of the wharf, the camp's launch, *Pearl*, tugged at its mooring. The thought of a big fish jutting on his line quickened James's pace, and it wasn't until he was on the wharf that he saw he was not alone. A dark figure leant against one of the piles – it was one of the Germans, staring at the boat.

James thought nothing of it. The internees on Motuihe were respectable types, father said. Schultz had been the governor of Sāmoa. There were also several doctors. The Germans wandered where they liked during the day, working in the vegetable gardens and feeding their chooks. The camp commandant even let the keen ones take *Pearl*'s helm on their trips to Auckland.

The man on the wharf heard James's step and turned, startled. He recovered quickly and gave James a smile. "A lovely afternoon, yes?" he said.

The man wore a uniform jacket and leather riding boots. A naval captain's hat sat tilted on his head, and in his hand, he held a pipe. His stare was intense. James had noticed him before. "You're the count, aren't you?" he said.

The man bowed. "Felix von Luckner."

"James Mullins. My father's one of the guards."

"Of course," said the count, shaking James's hand. He nodded at the fishing rod. "And what will you use for bait?"

James pointed to the shells stuck to the piles like a dark, glistening carpet. "Mussels."

"Show me," the count said, at once interested.

James took the steps, taking care not to slip on the slimy wood. *Pearl*'s dinghy bobbed nearby. In the summer, he sometimes swam out to it and climbed inside. James reached over to a pile and wrestled a shell back and forth till it came free. Back on the wharf – while the count looked on – he crushed the mussel with the sole of his boot, pulled out some meat, and skewered his hook. Then he cast out.

"I think you are a good fisherman," the count said.

"I never catch much," said James.

"It is the endeavour that matters."

James and the count watched the line. "Is it true they call you the Sea Devil?"

James finally asked.

The count took out his pipe. "*Seeteufel* in German – but I prefer it in English.

More dramatic."

This was no surprise. The count had a reputation for drama. "I heard you destroyed twelve of our ships," James said.

"Fourteen actually."

"But you try to avoid harming people?"

The count nodded.

"Well, you're still the enemy," James said.

The count shrugged. "I was not always the captain of a German ship. I have been a wrestler. I have hunted kangaroos. For a time, I was even a strongman in a circus."

"A strongman?" James looked the count up and down and smiled. This seemed unlikely.

"I will show you." The count reached into a trouser pocket and pulled out a coin.

"Perfectly flat, yes?"

James nodded.

The count gripped the coin with his fingers and strained until the skin on his face turned red and his arm trembled. At last he stopped and handed James the coin. The metal bowed into a shallow curve. It was warm.

"Good trick," James said.

"Keep it."

James pocketed the coin, and they watched the line some more.

"I'm coming next week," James said, breaking the silence.

"You are coming?" The count looked at him, startled.

"To your Christmas show."

The count relaxed. He smiled. "Oh, I see. The Christmas show."

"Father says you've been making props – fake guns and such. Doesn't sound very Christmassy to me," James remarked. "Father thinks it's a bit off, too."

The count was about to respond when the tip of James's rod dipped and trembled. He quickly wound the reel. The handle jerked in his hand.

"Here it comes," encouraged the count.

Sure enough, a flicker of red and silver splashed at the surface. James lowered his rod and reeled in the line. Slowly, he pulled the rod back up. There was another jerk, and before James could act, the fish dropped back into the water. With a thrash of its tail, it was gone.

James kicked the wharf in frustration.

"Gone," the count said. "But it was a big one, yes?"

"A big one," James agreed.



Later that week, James thought he'd have another go at a snapper. The day was far from perfect, but he was in the mood to try. As he left the cottage, something caught his eye out in the channel. A boat. It was *Pearl*. A heavy swell pounded the hull, and James could see men at the stern, bravely holding on. Had anyone else seen them? What were they doing? He dropped his rod and ran back inside.

At first, Father was perplexed. He stood beside James and peered out to where the boat fought the waves. "I don't like the look of this," he decided. Father strode over to the guard building, and after a quick moment inside, walked briskly down the hill towards the wharf. James followed.

At the end of the wharf, they spotted *Pearl*'s dinghy, barely floating above the surface. "She's been scuppered," Father said.

Now came the sound of heavy boots. James turned to see the commandant and some guards marching towards them. "What the blazes is going on?" the commandant shouted. "I ordered the *Pearl* tied and the spark plugs removed. What are those men playing at?"

James's father pointed. "The dinghy, sir."

The commandant glared at the ruined boat. A dark look spread across his face.

"Who's missing?"

"Not sure, sir."

"I want a head count. Find Von Luckner," the commandant ordered. "Now!"

A pair of guards sprinted off. Soon, across the island came the sound of whistles blowing and dogs barking.



The commandant stared out into the bay, as if willing the launch to round the point and chug towards them. He rapped the end of his swagger stick in an impatient rhythm. Suddenly, he turned and strode back along the wharf. "Follow me," he shouted.

Up on the hill, they met a guard at the perimeter gate. Breathlessly, he gave his report. "Eleven missing, sir. Von Luckner is with them."

"Get Auckland on the telephone immediately," the commandant ordered.

The guard shook his head. "The lines have been cut, sir."

The commandant spun around in a rage, fists clenched. He saw James standing there, taking it all in. "Get that boy inside, Mullins," he hissed.

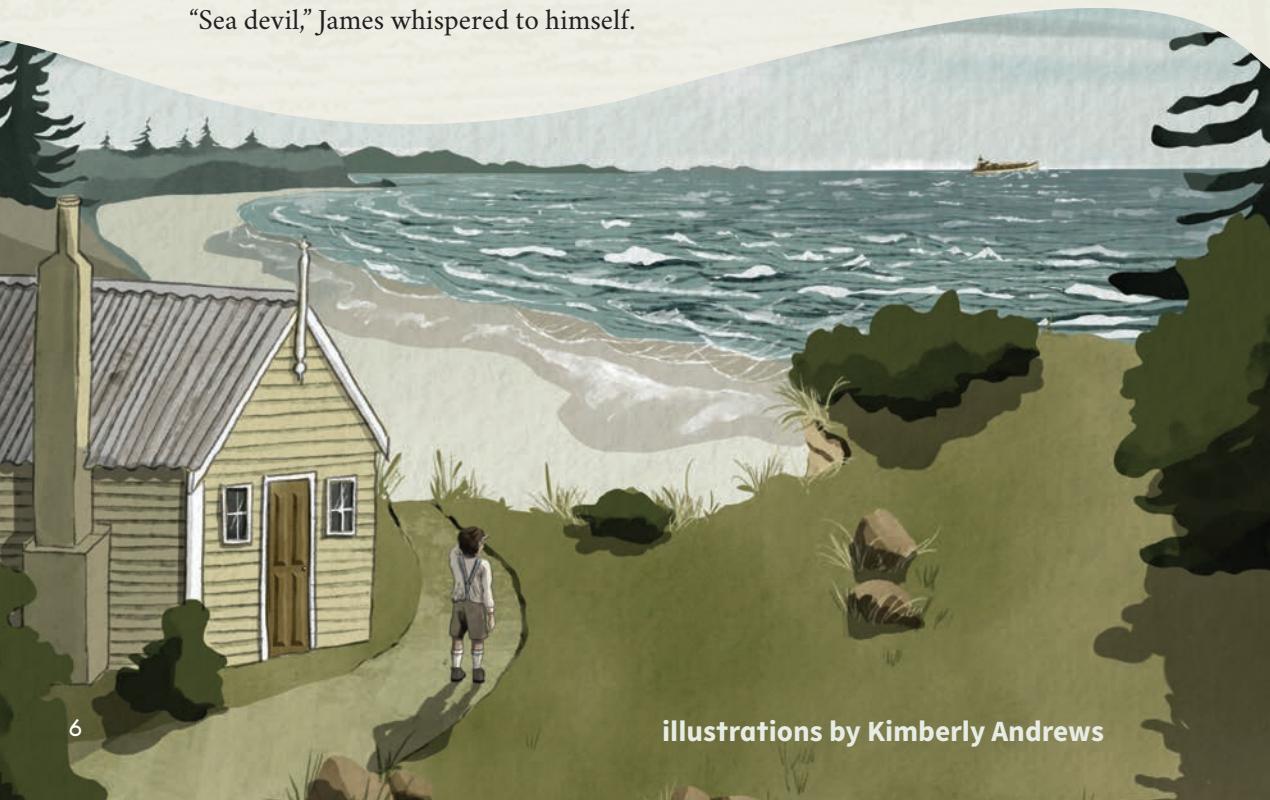
"Yes, sir." James's father took him by the arm, and together they walked to the family cottage. Behind them, the commandant continued to bark desperate orders.

"That ruddy play," muttered Father. "I told them those new stage curtains looked like a sail. And the prop gun ... why would you need guns in a Christmas play?"

James felt cold. He thought back to that day on the wharf, the way the count had been so startled, the worry that crossed his face. It made sense now; he'd been thinking about the escape. There was no point saying anything to his father. It was too late. The man was gone. Another big one had got away.

James remembered something. He felt in his pocket and found the coin. The twisted metal was still warm, as if Von Luckner had just bent it.

"Sea devil," James whispered to himself.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY KIMBERLY ANDREWS

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In October 1917, Count Felix von Luckner was sent to Motuihe Island internment camp as a prisoner of war. A larger-than-life figure, Von Luckner was famed not only for his daring raids as a naval captain but for also treating his prisoners with respect. He was nicknamed the Sea Devil after sending fourteen Allied ships to the bottom of the ocean.

Von Luckner's imprisonment on Motuihe, in the Hauraki Gulf, was quite a prize for the New Zealand government. His arrival was also welcomed by fellow internees, several of whom had been planning an escape. With the famous count now in camp, events gathered pace. Using the excuse of preparing for a Christmas play, sails were made from canvas and disguised as stage curtains and backdrops. A sheet was turned into German naval flags. Fake weapons were made. Chickens were stolen and preserved. Ingeniously, one internee – Walter von Zatorski – had already made a sextant.

There are many accounts of the escape. Von Luckner – a natural storyteller – often added to the legend. But the truth was quite simple: security was relaxed on the island and escape relatively easy. On 13 December 1917, the camp commandant left some of the internees to secure the launch after a trip to Auckland. They were to bring him the spark plugs. Once the commandant was out of sight, the Germans gave the signal. The telephone line was cut, and the escape party met on the wharf. The Germans wrecked *Pearl*'s dinghy with an axe and boarded the launch. They wasted no time heading out to sea.

The plan was to use the fake gun to take control of a bigger vessel and escape into the Pacific. Eventually, via South America, they would reach Germany. The men did capture another boat, and they used their sextant and a map to reach the Kermadec Islands, a thousand kilometres from New Zealand. It was here, on 21 December, that Von Luckner and his men were eventually tracked down. News of their capture made headlines.

When the war ended, Von Luckner returned to Germany – but not without leaving a colourful footprint on the history of New Zealand. And Von Zatorski's sextant? You can see it at Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington.



The Sea Devil

by Paul Mason

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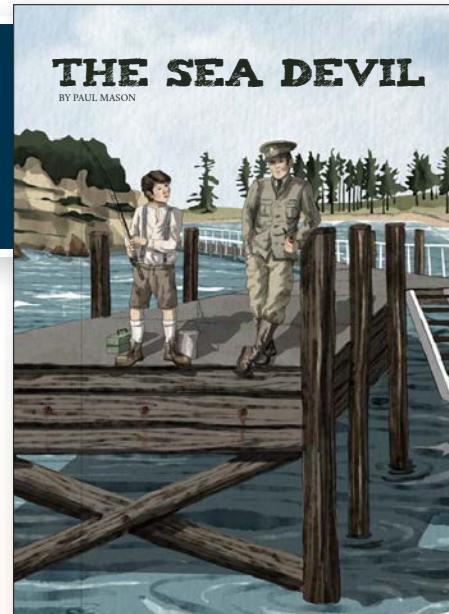
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