

## *South Pacific*

a synopsis  
by Jeffrey Mason

**time:** late 1942, early in World War II

**place:** two tropical islands modeled after the New Hebrides, now Vanuatu, northeast of Australia, about 1200 miles south of the equator

**situation:** Most of the action takes place on the island that has become a base for the United States Navy; the officers, men and nurses are all passing the time while waiting to be sent into the next big offensive.

### Act One

**Nellie Forbush** is a Navy nurse from Little Rock, Arkansas, who is falling in love with **Emile de Becque**, a planter who fled France sixteen years earlier after killing the town bully. He proposes marriage, and she promises to think about it, not knowing that he has two small children by his late Polynesian wife.

**Bloody Mary** sells her souvenirs on a beach where the enlisted men—sailors, Seabees and Marines—hang out with their informal leader, **Luther Billis**, and his sidekicks, **Stewpot** and **the Professor**. Billis is a wheeler-dealer, exceeded in cunning only by Bloody Mary, and he would do anything to visit Bali Ha'i, the off-limits neighboring island where the natives celebrate the mysterious ceremonial of the boar's tooth. The men sing "There is Nothin' Like a Dame" about how they have everything they need except women.

The men greet a newcomer: **Joe Cable**, a Marine lieutenant who's actually been in combat. Bloody Mary decides that he is a "damn sexy man," and with ulterior motives, she sings the haunting "Bali Ha'i" to seduce his interest in that forbidden island. The naval commander, **Captain Brackett**, arrives with his executive officer, **Commander Harbison**, to attempt (unsuccessfully) to shut down Bloody Mary's operation. Cable informs his new superior officers that he's been sent here under orders to set up a very risky coast watch on a nearby island in order to provide information about Japanese fleet movements.

Billis is determined to get Cable to check out a boat so they can visit Bali Ha'i, but the officer brushes him off to meet with Brackett and ask Nellie to give them information about Emile, whom they've identified as the best man to work with Cable on the coast watch because he knows all the islands.

Nellie meets her friends on the beach to make use of Billis' "bath club"—a homemade shower that the nurses appreciate a great deal—and while she washes her hair, she assures the other women that she's calling off her affair with Emile because she doesn't know enough about him. Emile shows up, the other nurses leave, and he soon convinces Nellie to marry him. He departs, and she joyously sings, "I'm in Love With a Wonderful Guy."

Brackett asks Emile to join in Cable's mission, but the Frenchman refuses, knowing full well that they'll probably be discovered and killed, and not wanting to give up the life he hopes to make with Nellie. Left at loose ends, Cable goes to Bali Ha'i with Billis, where Bloody Mary introduces him to **Liat**, her exotically beautiful daughter. The officer and the girl fall in love at first sight.

Emile hosts a dinner party in Nellie's honor. His guests depart, and the two are very much in love, dreaming about their future together, but Emile introduces Nellie to his children,

**Ngana** and **Jerome**. She is shocked: her background and upbringing have taught her that for a white man to live with a Polynesian woman is completely unacceptable, even shameful and loathsome. She runs off, and the act concludes as Emile sings of his determination not to let her go.

## Act Two

Under Nellie's leadership, the nurses and enlisted men put on a variety show called "The Thanksgiving Follies," featuring Billis in drag wearing a grass skirt, coconut "brassiere," and a battleship tattooed on his midriff, dancing with Nellie, who is costumed in an oversized sailor suit.

Backstage, Emile arrives with flowers for Nellie, but Billis asks him to leave her alone because she's been so upset that she asked for a transfer. Cable appears, having sneaked out of the hospital bed where he's been suffering from malaria, and Bloody Mary brings Liat to see him. Bloody Mary sings about the happy life they'll have on the island, but Cable, too tied to his upper middle-class Princeton background, painfully confesses that he can't marry Liat. Bloody Mary denounces him as a "stingy bastard" and drags Liat away to marry a corrupt French planter who is much older.

Emile finds Nellie, who struggles to explain why she can't marry a man who has had children with a Polynesian woman. She runs off, and Cable and Emile sing about the agony of losing what they care about most. Now that Nellie has refused him, Emile agrees to join Cable on his mission.

Brackett eagerly awaits the first transmissions from Cable and Emile, pausing only to furiously reprimand Billis for stowing away on the plane that dropped the two spies. The Seabee managed to fall into the ocean and create a major incident; Brackett lets him off only because **Adams**, the pilot, assures his superior that Billis' escapade created a distraction that ensured the safety of the two brave men as they were delivered to their station. We hear the first radio messages from Cable and Emile, who provide intelligence that enables the American pilots to start making progress on stopping the Japanese advance.

After several days, Nellie pleads with Brackett to tell her what's become of Emile, and he reveals that he's on a desperate mission behind enemy lines. Nellie has no time to absorb this news before they hear Emile, on the radio, informing them that Cable has died of wounds, and that he and his native associates must run because they think the Japanese know where they are.

Alone on the beach, Nellie agonizes over the possibility of losing Emile. Bloody Mary approaches her with Liat, explaining that her daughter loves Cable and won't marry anyone else, not realizing that the Marine has been killed.

Most of the naval personnel mobilize to leave the island and participate in the next big offensive; Brackett has been given command of a ship, and Harbison gloats that Billis and his friends have been assigned as part of the crew, where he hopes the rascals will get their just deserts.

Fearing the worst, Nellie goes back to Emile's plantation to care for Ngana and Jerome and watch the ships steam out of the bay. She is about to serve the children their supper when an exhausted Emile appears, having been rescued by Adams, and the lovers are reunited.