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(Curiosities, games and riddles of world history)

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, Christmas will become the property of an immensely rich man, a businessman who will develop l'exploitation of coconut farms. It is a ... priest! Father Emmanuel Rougier, born in La Chomette near Lavaudieu and Paulhaguet, Haute-Loire in 1864 spent his childhood at Château des Isles, found himself at the head of a great bonanza following a legacy: when he was a missionary in Fiji, a New Caledonian ex-convict he had collected with charity made him his heir. Before a notary in Suva, December 4, 1906, Father finds himself at the head of about 900 000 gold francs, a nice little sum!

Where the money came, by what means the ex-convict had accumulated such a pile of money, the story does not say ... and Father Rougier does not seem to be too concerned. The money was given to him, and probably without the expressed wishes or requests as to the destination of these funds: the abbot stores the cents.

Did Emmanuel Rougier really have a vocation when, in 1888, he became a priest? Once in the order he may have been not very fond of ... orders! His conflicts with his superiors indicate this.

This is the time of the bitter rivalry between Catholic and Protestant missionaries. Rougier, sent to Fiji, to Vitu Levu, to Naililili, to Fanning and to Pentecost Island, deploys a great activity.

Then comes this strange legacy.

Now then our Marist Brother retains for his own benefit ... the gift fallen from heaven. He begins his new career as a business man by buying Fanning and Washington Islands, where he will develop coconut groves. This first commercial success allows him after the successful resale of these islands, the outright purchase of Christmas Island, it will turn into a coconut plantation model. He buys indeed from Lever's Pacific Plantations Limited the coconut groves of the island for 10,000 pounds, plus 100 pounds a year to pay annually to the British Crown until 2001

In 1916, our Croesus in cassocks has a beautiful sailboat refurbished in Canada and names it *Ysabel-May*. The abbot indeed needs a fleet to transport materials, production of coconut ... and mail. Emmanuel Rougier, during a visit to San Francisco, where the local press did not fail to mention the stopover of this very rich man, had ordered the printing of stamps sheets representing *Ysabel-May* amid lagoon and coconut trees. The endorsements printed on the vignettes were as follows printed in capitals:



Small pleasure thus granted to a philatelist? Megalomania? Or even business sense, collaborating with big stamp traders (this last branch is not to be neglected, apparently)? This initiative aroused the wrath of the Universal Postal Union and postal offices of the major powers with territories and interests in the area: France and Britain. But, curiously, it never went very far, though Christmas, a Crown colony, would have even been bought by Rougier,. Does the priest pay fines? Is he protected by his political and economic weight?

"Governor & Director of Central Pacific Cocoanut Plantations Limited" - this is the name Emmanuel Rougier adopted in contracts for work he was signing - the religious man had the commercial mail of his company and the mail of his staff franked with his stamps and his employees were forced to pay for the transport of their letters by boat between Christmas and the recipients post offices, or transit, in New Zealand, Fiji, Samoa, Tahiti, the Cook Islands, the United States ... There, in the event of further transport, new stamps, local and legal, were glued to the covers.

What were the arrangements, then, between Rougier and official foreign postal administrations? For these, although the philatelic emissions of the priest were illegal, have indeed sent the mail from the Central Pacific Cocoanut. The first stamps (1916) carry for everything, as face value, the figure "5". It is estimated that this meant "5 cents" (US), or 2.5 pence, or 25 cents French.

In 1926, the "5" gives way to "10", and a clear red overprint states that that means "10 cents."

Emmanuel Rougier died in 1932, and the company is now run by a nephew, until the Second World War, which will lead to the cessation of activity. The latest stamp issues dating back to 1938. overprinted or not, obviously contained in numbers of "mixed" postage, which sometimes served as tax stamps. Rougier's vignettes - with their color varieties, paper, gumming ... - were sought by philatelists, marketed by dealers and therefore have certainly participated in the augmentation of the bonanza.

A bonanza that had fattened by the exploitation of copra, guano, pearls and beads... Father manages the island at will, and rather well: building villages, road building, development plantations ... Certainly the Marist has a church on Christmas, but his road to Damascus led him to be more adventurous, a businessman, a promoter, a captain of industry, and less and less a priest. His superior in the Marist Brothers, the Bishop of Fiji expelled him from the congregation, which had to Rougier the effect of a completely useless action!

The former abbot then moves to Tahiti, where he directs his multiple affairs better, becoming a weight of economic personality. He does not hesitate, during Prohibition, smuggling alcohol into the United States.

The island being elected for "welcome" nuclear tests Britain expels Christmas' Rougier heir at the dawn of World War II. Where was then the fortune amassed by the Father? Although the UK has not compensated the family very generously, he had to be well compensated. And, besides the plantations, warehouses, etc., bank accounts should be well filled, right?