

BECKE LOUIS

ÂMONA; THE CHILD;
AND THE BEAST; AND
OTHERS

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Содержание

ÂMONA; THE CHILD; AND THE BEAST

4

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

13

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**ÂMONA; THE CHILD;
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Âmona was, as his master so frequently told him—accentuating the remark with a blow or a kick—only “a miserable kanaka.” Of his miserableness there was no doubt, for Denison, who lived in the same house as he did, was a daily witness of it—and his happiness. Also, he was a kanaka—a native of Niué, in the South Pacific; Savage Island it is called by the traders and is named on the charts, though its five thousand sturdy, brown-skinned inhabitants have been civilised, Christianised, and have lived fairly cleanly for the past thirty years.

Âmona and Denison had the distinction of being employed by Armitage, one of the most unmitigated blackguards in the Pacific. He was a shipowner, planter, merchant, and speculator; was looked upon by a good many people as “not a bad sort of a fellow, you know—and the soul of hospitality.” In addition, he was an incorrigible drunken bully, and broke his wife’s heart within four years after she married him. Âmona was his cook. Denison was one of his supercargoes, and (when a long boat of drunkenness made him see weird visions of impossible creatures) manager of the business on shore, overseer, accountant, and Jack-of-all-trades. How he managed to stay on with such a brute I don’t know. He certainly paid him well enough, but he (Denison) could have got another berth from other people in Samoa, Fiji, or Tonga had he wanted it. And, although Armitage was always painfully civil to Denison—who tried to keep his business from going to the dogs—the man hated him as much as he despised Âmona, and would have liked to have kicked him, as he would have liked to have kicked or strangled any one who knew the secret of his wife’s death and his child’s lameness. And three people in Samoa did know it—Âmona, the Niué cook, Dr. Eckhardt, and Denison. Armitage has been dead now these five-and-twenty years—died, as he deserved to die, alone and friendless in an Australian bush hospital out in the God-forsaken Never-Never country, and when Denison heard of his death, he looked at the gentle wife’s dim, faded photograph, and wondered if the Beast saw her sweet, sad face in his dying

moments. He trusted not; for in her eyes would have shown only the holy light of love and forgiveness—things which a man like Armitage could not have understood—even then.

She had been married three years when she came with him to Samoa to live on Solo-Solo Plantation, in a great white-painted bungalow, standing amid a grove of breadfruit and coco-palms, and overlooking the sea to the north, east, and west; to the south was the dark green of the mountain-forest.

“Oh! I think it is the fairest, sweetest picture in the world,” she said to Denison the first time he met her. She was sitting on the verandah with her son in her lap, and as she spoke she pressed her lips to his soft little cheek and caressed the tiny hands. “So different from where I was born and lived all my life—on the doll, sun-baked plains of the Riverina—isn’t it, my pet?”

“I am glad that you like the place, Mrs. Armitage,” the supercargo said as he looked at the young, girlish face and thought that she, too, with her baby, made a fair, sweet picture. How she loved the child! And how the soft, grey-blue eyes would lose their sadness when the little one turned its face up to hers and smiled! How came it, he wondered, that such a tender, flower-like woman was mated to such a man as Armitage!

Long after she was dead, Denison heard the story—one common enough. Her father, whose station adjoined that of Armitage, got into financial difficulties, went to Armitage for help, and practically sold his daughter to the Beast for a couple of thousand pounds. Very likely such a man would have sold his

daughter's mother as well if he wanted money.

As they sat talking, Armitage rode up, half-drunk as usual. He was a big man, good-looking.

"Hallo, Nell! Pawing the damned kid as usual! Why the hell don't you let one of the girls take the little animal and let him tumble about on the grass? You're spoiling the child—by God, you are."

"Ah, he's so happy, Fred, here with me, and—"

"Happy be damned—you're always letting him maul you about. I want a whisky-and-soda, and so does Denison—don't you?" And then the Beast, as soon as his wife with the child in her arms had left the room, began to tell his subordinate of a "new" girl he had met that morning in Joe D'Acosta's saloon.

"Oh, shut up, man. Your wife is in the next room."

"Let her hear—and be damned to her! She knows what I do. I don't disguise anything from her. I'm not a sneak in that way. By God, I'm not the man to lose any fun from sentimental reasons. Have you seen this new girl at Joe's? She's a Manhiki half-caste. God, man! She's glorious, simply glorious!"

"You mean Laea, I suppose. She's a common beacher—sailor man's trull. Surely you wouldn't be seen ever speaking to *her*?"

"Wouldn't I! You don't know me yet! I like the girl, and I've fixed things up with her. She's coming here as my nursemaid—twenty dollars a month! What do you think of that?"

"You would not insult your wife so horribly!"

He looked at Denison sullenly, but made no answer, as the

supercargo went on:

“You’ll get the dead cut from every white man in Samoa. Not a soul will put foot inside your store door, and Joe D’Acosta himself would refuse to sell you a drink! Might as well shoot yourself at once.”

“Oh, well, damn it all, don’t keep on preaching. I—I was more in fun than anything else. Ha! Here’s Amona with the drinks. Why don’t you be a bit smarter, you damned frizzy-haired man-eater?”

Amona’s sallow face flushed deeply, but he made no reply to the insult as he handed a glass to his master.

“Put the tray down there, confound you! Don’t stand there like a blarsted mummy; clear out till we want you again.”

The native made no answer, bent his head in silence, and stepped quietly away. Then Armitage began to grumble at him as a “useless swine.”

“Why,” said Denison, “Mrs. Armitage was only just telling me that he’s worth all the rest of the servants put together. And, by Jove, he *is* fond of your youngster—simply worships the little chap.”

Armitage snorted, and turned his lips down. Ten minutes later, he was asleep in his chair.

Nearly six months had passed—six months of wretchedness to the young wife, whose heart was slowly breaking under the strain of living with the Beast. Such happiness as was hers lay in the companionship of her little son, and every evening Tom

Denison would see her watching the child and the patient, faithful Æmona, as the two played together on the smooth lawn in front of the sitting-room, or ran races in and out among the mango-trees. She was becoming paler and thinner every day—the Beast was getting fatter and coarser, and more brutalised. Sometimes he would remain in Apia for a week, returning home either boisterously drunk or sullen and scowling-faced. In the latter case, he would come into the office where Denison worked (he had left the schooner of which he was supercargo, and was now “overseering” Solo-Solo) and try to grasp the muddled condition of his financial affairs. Then, with much variegated language, he would stride away, cursing the servants and the place and everything in general, mount his horse, and ride off again to the society of the loafers, gamblers, and flaunting unfortunates who haunted the drinking saloons of Apia and Matafele.

One day came a crisis. Denison was rigging a tackle to haul a tree-trunk into position in the plantation saw-pit, when Armitage rode up to the house. He dismounted and went inside. Five minutes later Æmona came staggering down the path to him. His left cheek was cut to the bone by a blow from Armitage’s fist. Denison brought him into his own room, stitched up the wound, and gave him a glass of grog, and told him to light his pipe and rest.

“Æmona, you’re a *valea* (fool). Why don’t you leave this place? This man will kill you some day. How many beatings has he given you?” He spoke in English.

“I know not how many. But it is God’s will. And if the master some day killeth me, it is well. And yet, but for some things, I would use my knife on him.”

“What things?”

He came over to the supercargo, and, seating himself cross-legged on the floor, placed his firm, brown, right hand on the white man’s knee.

“For two things, good friend. The little fingers of the child are clasped tightly around my heart, and when his father striketh me and calls me a filthy man-eater, a dog, and a pig, I know no pain. That is one thing. And the other thing is this—the child’s mother hath come to me when my body hath ached from the father’s blows, and the blood hath covered my face; and she hath bound up my wounds and wept silent tears, and together have we knelt and called upon God to turn his heart from the grog and the foul women, and to take away from her and the child the bitterness of these things.”

“You’re a good fellow, *Âmona*,” said Denison, as he saw that the man’s cheeks were wet with tears.

“Nay, for sometimes my heart is bitter with anger. But God is good to me. For the child loveth me. And the mother is of God... aye, and she will be with Him soon.” Then he rose to his knees suddenly, and looked wistfully at the supercargo, as he put his hand on his. “She will be dead before the next moon is *ai aiga* (in the first quarter), for at night I lie outside her door, and but three nights ago she cried out to me: ‘Come, *Amona*, Come!’ And I

went in, and she was sitting up on her bed and blood was running from her mouth. But she bade me tell no one—not even thee. And it was then she told me that death was near to her, for she hath a disease whose roots lie in her chest, and which eateth away her strength. Dear friend, let me tell thee of some things... This man is a devil... I know he but desires to see her die. He hath cursed her before me, and twice have I seen him take the child from her arms, and, setting him on the floor to weep in terror, take his wife by the hand—”

“Stop, man; stop! That’ll do. Say no more! The beast!”

“*E tonu, e tonu* (true, true),” said the man, quietly, and still speaking in Samoan. “He is as a beast of the mountains, as a tiger of the country India, which devoureth the lamb and the kid... And so now I have opened my heart to thee of these things—”

A native woman rushed into the room: “Come, *Âmona*, come. *Misi Fafine* (the mistress) bleeds from her mouth again.”

The white man and the brown ran into the front sitting-room together, just as they heard a piercing shriek of terror from the child; then came the sound of a heavy fall.

As they entered, Armitage strode out, jolting against them as he passed. His face was swollen and ugly with passion—bad to look at.

“Go and pick up the child, you frizzy-haired pig!” he muttered hoarsely to *Amona* as he passed. “He fell off his mother’s lap.”

Mrs. Armitage was leaning back in her chair, as white as death, and trying to speak, as with one hand she tried to stanch

the rush of blood from her mouth, and with the other pointed to her child, who was lying on his face under a table, motionless and unconscious.

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