

BECKE LOUIS

"OLD MARY"

Louis Becke

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Louis Becke «Old Mary» / 1901

I

Early one morning, just as the trade wind began to lift the white mountain mist which enveloped the dark valleys and mountain slopes of the island, Denison, the supercargo of the trading schooner *Palestine*, put off from her side and was pulled ashore to the house of the one white trader. The man's name was Handle, and as he heard the supercargo's footstep he came to the door and bade him good morning.

"How are you, Randle?" said the young man, shaking hands with the quiet-voiced, white-haired old trader, and following him inside. "I'm going for a day's shooting while I have the chance. Can you come?"

Randle shook his head. "Would like to, but can't spare the time to-day; but Harry and the girls will be delighted to go with you. Wait a minute, and have a cup of coffee first. They'll be here presently."

Denison put down his gun and took a seat in the cool, comfortable-looking sitting-room, and in a few minutes Hester and Kate Randle and their brother came in. The two girls were both over twenty years of age. Hester, the elder, was remarkably handsome, and much resembled her father in voice and manner. Kate was of much smaller build, full of vivacity, and her big, merry brown eyes matched the dimples on her soft, sun-tanned cheeks. Harry, who was Randle's youngest child, was a heavily-built, somewhat sullen-faced youth of eighteen, and the native blood in his veins showed much more strongly than it did with his sisters. They were all pleased to see the supercargo, and at once set about making preparations, Harry getting their guns ready and the two girls packing a basket with cold food.

"You'll get any amount of pigeons about two miles from here," said the old trader, "and very likely a pig or two. The girls know the way, and if two of you take the right branch of the river and two the left you'll have some fine sport."

"Father," said the elder girl, in her pretty, halting English, as she picked up her gun, "don' you think Mr. Denison would like to see ol' Mary? We hav' been tell him so much about her. Don' you think we might stop there and let Mr. Denison have some talk with her?"

"Ay, ay, my girl. Yes; go and see the poor old thing. I'm sure she'll be delighted. You'll like her, Mr. Denison. She's as fine an old woman as ever breathed. But don't take that basket of food with you, Kate. She'd feel awfully insulted if you did not eat in her house."

The girls obeyed, much to their brother's satisfaction, inasmuch as the basket was rather heavy, and also awkward to carry through the mountain forest. In a few minutes the four started, and Hester, as she stepped out beside Denison, said that she was glad he was visiting old Mary. "You see," she said, "she hav' not good eyesight now, and so she cannot now come an' see us as she do plenty times before."

"I'm glad I shall see her," said the young man; "she must be a good old soul."

"Oh, yes," broke in Kate, "she *is* good and brave, an' we all love her. Every one *mus'* love her. She hav' known us since we were born, and when our mother died in Samoa ten years ago old Mary was jus' like a second mother to us. An' my father tried so hard to get her to come and live with us; but no, she would not, not even fo' us. So she went back to her house in the mountain, because she says she wants to die there. Ah, you will like her... and she will tell you how she saved the ship when her husband was killed, and about many, many things."

Two hours later Denison and his friends emerged out upon cultivated ground at the foot of the mountain, on which stood three or four native houses, all neatly enclosed by low stone walls formed

of coral slabs. In front of the village a crystal stream poured swiftly and noisily over its rocky bed on its way seaward, and on each thickly wooded bank the stately boles of some scores of graceful coco-palms rose high above the surrounding foliage. Except for the hum of the brawling stream and the cries of birds, the silence was unbroken, and only two or three small children, who were playing under the shade of a breadfruit-tree, were visible. But these, as they heard the sound of the visitors' voices, came towards them shouting out to their elders within the huts that "four white people with guns" had come. In a moment some grown people of both sexes came out and shook hands with the party.

"This is Mary's house," said Hester to Denison, pointing out the largest; "let us go there at once. Ah, see, there she is at the door waiting for us."

"Come, come inside," cried the old woman in a firm yet pleasant voice, and Denison, looking to the right, saw that "Mary," in spite of her years and blindness, was still robust and active-looking. She was dressed in a blue print gown and blouse, and her grey hair was neatly dressed in the island fashion. In her smooth, brown right hand she grasped the handle of a polished walking-stick, her left arm she held across her bosom—the hand was missing from the wrist.

"How do you do, sir?" she said in clear English, as, giving her stick to Kate Randle, she held out her hand to the supercargo. "I am so glad that you have come to see me. You are Mr. Denison, I know. Is Captain Pakenham quite well? Come, Kitty, see to your friend. There, that cane lounge is the most comfortable. Harry, please shoot a couple of chickens at once, and then tell my people to get some taro, and make an oven."

"Oh, that is just like you, Mary," said Kate, laughing, "before we have spoken three words to you you begin cooking things for us."

The old woman turned her sunburnt face towards the girl and shook her stick warningly, and said in the native tongue—

"Leave me to rule in mine own house, saucy," and then Denison had an effort to restrain his gravity as Mary, unaware that he had a very fair knowledge of the dialect in which she spoke, asked the two girls if either of them had thought of him as a husband. Kate put her hand over Mary's mouth and whispered to her to cease. She drew the girl to her and hugged her.

Whilst the meal was being prepared Denison was studying the house and its contents. Exteriorly the place bore no difference to the usual native house, but within it was plainly but yet comfortably furnished in European fashion, and the tables, chairs, and sideboard had evidently been a portion of a ship's cabin fittings. From the sitting-room—the floor of which was covered by white China matting—he could see a bedroom opposite, a bed with snowy white mosquito curtains, and two mahogany chairs draped with old-fashioned antimacassars. The sight of these simple furnishings first made him smile, then sigh—he had not seen such things since he had left his own home nearly six years before. Hung upon the walls of the sitting-room were half a dozen old and faded engravings, and on a side-table were a sextant and chronometer case, each containing instruments so clumsy and obsolete that a modern seaman would have looked upon them as veritable curiosities.

From the surroundings within the room Denison's eyes wandered to the placid beauty of the scene without, where the plumes of the coco-palms overhanging the swift waters of the tiny stream scarce stirred to the light air that blew softly up the valley from the sea, and when they did move narrow shafts of light from the now high-mounted sun would glint and shine through upon the pale green foliage of the scrub beneath. Then once again his attention was directed to their hostess, who was now talking quietly to the two Randle girls, her calm, peaceful features seeming to him to derive an added but yet consistent dignity from the harmonies of Nature around her.

What was the story of her infancy? he wondered. That she did not know it herself he had been told by old Randle, who yet knew more of her history and the tragedy of her later life than any one else. Both young Denison, the supercargo of five-and-twenty, and Randle, the grizzled wanderer and veteran of sixty-five, had known many tragedies during their career in the Pacific; but the story of

this half-blind, crippled old woman, when he learnt it in full, appealed strongly to the younger man, and was never forgotten in his after life.

They had had a merry midday meal, during which Mary Eury—for that was her name—promised Denison that she would tell him all about herself after he and the Randles came back from shooting, “but,” she added, with her soft, tremulous laugh, “only on one condition, Mr. Denison—only on one condition. You must bring Captain Pakenham to see me before the *Palestine* sails. I am an old woman-now, and would like to see him. I knew him many years ago when he was a lad of nineteen. Ah, it is so long ago! That was in Samoa. Has he never spoken of me?”

“Often, Mrs. Eury—”

“Don’t call me Mrs. Eury, Mr. Denison. Call me ‘Mary,’ as do these dear friends of mine. ‘Mary’—‘old’ Mary if you like. Every one who knew me and my dear husband in those far, far back days used to call me ‘Mary’ and my husband ‘Bob Eury’ instead of ‘Mrs. Eury’ and ‘Captain Eury.’ And now, so many, many years have gone... and now I am ‘Old Mary’... and I think I like it better than Mrs. Eury. And so Captain Pakenham has not forgotten me?”

Denison hastened to explain. “Indeed he has not. He remembers you very well, and would have come with me, but he is putting the schooner on the beach to-day to clean her. And I am sure he will be delighted to come and see you to-morrow.”

“Of course he must. Surely every English and American in the South Seas should come and see me; for my husband was ever a good friend to every sailor that ever sailed in the island trade—from Fiji to the Bonins. There now, I won’t chatter any more, or else you will be too frightened to come back to such a garrulous old creature. Ah, if God had but spared to me my eyesight I should come with you into the mountains. I love the solitude, and the sweet call of the pigeons, and the sound of the waterfall at the side of Taomaunga. And I know every inch of the country, and blind as I am, I could yet find my way along the mountain-side. Kate, and you, Harry, do not keep Mr. Denison out too late.”

By sunset the shooting party had returned, and after a bathe in the cool waters of the mountain stream Denison returned to the house. Kate Handle and her sister, assisted by some native women, were plucking pigeons for the evening meal. Harry was lying down on the broad of his back on the grassy sward with closed eyes, smoking, and their hostess was sitting on a wide cane bench outside the house. She heard the young man’s footstep, and beckoned him to seat himself beside her. And then she told him her story.

II

"I don't know where I was born—for, as I daresay Randle has told you, I was only five years of age when I was picked up at sea in a boat, the only other occupant of which was a Swedish seaman. The vessel which rescued us was one of the transports used for conveying convicts to New South Wales, and was named the *Britannia*, but when she sighted the boat she was on a voyage to Tahiti in the Society Islands. I imagine this was sometime about 1805, so I must now be about seventy years of age.

"The Swedish sailor told the captain of the *Britannia* that he and I were the only survivors of a party of six—among whom were my father and mother—belonging to a small London barque named the *Winifred*, She was employed in the trade between China and Valparaiso, and my father was owner as well as captain. On the voyage from Canton, and when within fifty miles of Tahiti, and in sight of land, she took fire, and the Chinese crew, when they saw that there was no hope of the ship being saved, seized the longboat, which had been prepared, and was well provisioned, and made off, although the cowardly creatures knew that the second boat was barely seaworthy. My father—whose name the Swede did not know—implored them to return, and at least take my mother and myself and an officer to navigate their boat to land. But they refused to listen to his pleadings, and rowed off. The second boat was hurriedly provisioned by my father and his officers, and they, with my mother and myself and the Swede—all the Europeans on board—left the burning ship at sundown. A course was steered for the eastern shore of Tahiti, which, although the wind was right ahead, we hoped to reach on the evening of the following day. But within a few hours after leaving the barque the trade wind died away, and fierce, heavy squalls burst from the westward upon the boat, which was only kept afloat by constant bailing. About dawn the sea had become so dangerous, and the wind had so increased in violence, that an attempt was made to put out a sea-anchor. Whilst this was being done a heavy sea struck the boat and capsized her. The night was pitchy dark, and when the Swede—who was a good swimmer—came to the surface he could neither see nor hear any of the others, though he shouted loudly. But at the same moment, as his foot touched the line to which the sea anchor was bent, he heard the mate's voice calling for assistance.

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