

BECKE LOUIS

THE TAPU OF

BANDERAH

Louis Becke

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Louis Becke

The Tapu Of Banderah / 1901

I ~ THE “STARLIGHT”

As the rising sun had just begun to pierce the misty tropic haze of early dawn, a small, white-painted schooner of ninety or a hundred tons burden was bearing down upon the low, densely-wooded island of Mayou, which lies between the coast of south-east New Guinea and the murderous Solomon Group—the grave of the white man in Melanesia.

The white population of Mayou was not large, for it consisted only of an English missionary and his wife—who was, of course, a white woman—a German trader named Peter Schwartzkoff and his native wife; an English trader named Charlie Blount, with his two half-caste sons and daughters; and an American trader and ex-whaler, named Nathaniel Burrowes, with his wives.

Although the island is of large extent, and of amazing fertility, the native population was at this time comparatively small, numbering only some three thousand souls. They nearly all lived at the south-west end of the island, the rendezvous of the few trading ships that visited the place. Occasionally a surveying vessel, and, at longer intervals still, a labour-recruiting ship from Hawaii or Fiji, would call. At such times the monotony of the lives of the white residents of Mayou was pleasantly broken. Once a year, too, a missionary vessel would drop anchor in the little reef-bound port, but her visit was of moment only to the Rev. Mr. Deighton, his wife, and their native converts, and the mission ship's presence in the harbour was taken no notice of by the three white traders; for a missionary ship is not always regarded by the average trader in the South Seas as a welcome visitor.

Almost with the rising of the sun the vessel had been sighted from the shore by a party of natives, who were fishing off the south end of the island, and in a few minutes their loud cries reached other natives on shore, and by them was passed on from house to house along the beach till it reached the town itself. From there, presently, came a deep sonorous shout, “*Evaka! Evaka!*” (“A ship! A ship!”), and then they swarmed out of their thatched dwellings like bees from a hive and ran, laughing and shouting together, down to the beach in front of the village.

As the clamour increased, the Rev. Wilfrid Deighton opened the door of his study and stepped out upon the shady verandah of the mission house, which stood upon a gentle, palm-covered rise about five hundred yards from the thickly clustering houses of the native village. He was a tall, thin man with a scanty brown beard, and his face wore a wearied, anxious expression. His long, lean body, coarse, toil-worn hands, and shabby clothing indicated, too, that the lines of the Rev. Wilfrid had not been cast in a pleasant place when he chose the wild, unhealthy island of Mayou as the field of his labours. But if he showed bodily traces of the hard, continuous toil he had undergone during the seven years' residence among the people of Mayou, his eye was still full of the fire of that noble missionary spirit which animated the souls of such earnest men as Moffat and Livingstone, and Williams of Erromanga, and Gordon of Khartoum. For he was an enthusiast, who believed in his work; and so did his wife, a pretty, faded little woman of thirty, with a great yearning to save souls, though at times she longed to return to the comforts and good dinners of semi-civilisation in other island groups nearer the outside world she had been away from so long.

The missionary stepped out on the verandah, and shaded his eyes from the glare with his rough, sun-tanned hands, as he looked seaward at the advancing vessel. Soon his wife followed him and placed her hand on his shoulder.

“What is it, Wilfrid? Surely not the *John Hunt*. She is not due for months yet.”

“Not her, certainly, Alice,” he answered, “and not a trading vessel either, I should think. She looks more like a yacht. Perhaps she may be a new man-of-war schooner. However, we will soon

see. Put on your hat, my dear, and let us go down to the beach. Already Blount, Schwartzkoff, and Burrowes have gone; and it certainly would not do for me to remain in the background when the newcomers land.”

Mrs. Deighton, her pale face flushing with gentle excitement at the prospect of meeting Europeans, quickly retired to her room, and making a rapid toilette, rejoined her husband, who, white umbrella in hand, awaited her at the gate.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” said the reverend gentleman, a few minutes later, as, accompanied by Mrs. Deighton, he joined the three white traders, “what vessel is it? Have you any idea?”

“None at all,” answered Blount, with a short nod to Mr. Deighton, but lifting his leaf hat to his wife, “we were just wondering ourselves. Doesn’t look like a trader—more like a gunboat.”

Meantime the schooner had worked her way in through the passage, and, surrounded by a fleet of canoes, soon brought up and anchored. Her sails were very quickly handled, then almost as soon as she swung to her anchor a smart, white-painted boat was lowered, and the people on shore saw the crew haul her up to the gangway ladder.

Presently a white man, who, by his dress, was an officer of the ship, followed by another person in a light tweed suit and straw hat, entered the boat, which then pushed off and was headed for the shore. As she approached nearer, the traders and the missionary could see that the crew were light-skinned Polynesians, dressed in blue cotton jumpers, white duck pants, and straw hats. The officer—who steered with a steer-oar—wore a brass-bound cap and brass-buttoned jacket, and every now and then turned to speak to the man in the tweed suit, who sat smoking a cigar beside him.

“By jingo! she’s a yacht, I believe,” said Charlie Blount, who had been keenly watching the approaching boat; “I’m off. I don’t want to be bothered with people of that sort—glorified London drapers, who ask ‘Have you—ah—got good shooting heah?’”

Then turning on his heel, he raised his hat to Mrs. Deighton, nodded to the other white men, and sauntered along the beach to his house.

“I guess Blount’s kinder set again meetin’ people like these,” said Burrowes, nodding in the direction of the boat and addressing himself to Mr. and Mrs. Deighton. “Reckon they might be some all-powerful British swells he knew when he was one himself. Guess they won’t scare *me* a cent’s worth.”

“Id was brober dadt he should veel so,” remarked the German; “if some Yerman shentle-mans vas to come here und zee me dresd like vom dirty sailor mans, den I too vould get me home to mein house und say nodings.”

“My friends,” said Mr. Deighton, speaking reproachfully, yet secretly pleased at Blount’s departure, “no man need feel ashamed at meeting his countrymen on account of the poverty of his attire; I am sure that the sight of an English gentleman is a very welcome one to me and Mrs. Deighton.”

“Wal,” said Burrowes with easy but not offensive familiarity, “I guess, parson, thet you and Mrs. Deighton hed better form yourselves inter a committee of welcome, and tell them so; I ain’t much in the polite speechifying line myself, neither is ‘Schneider’ here,” nodding at the German, “and you can sling in somethin’ ornymantal ‘bout me bein’ the representative of the United States—a gentleman a-recrootin’ of his health in the South Sea Islands doorin’ a perlitercal crisis in Washington.”

By this time the boat had run her bows up on to the white, sandy beach, and the straw-hatted, tweed-suited gentleman jumped lightly out. Taking off his hat with a graceful, circular sweep, which included every one on the beach, white and native, he said with languid politeness—

“Good-day, gentlemen; I scarcely hoped to have the pleasure of meeting Europeans at this place—and certainly never imagined that pleasure would be enhanced by the presence of a lady,” he added as he caught sight of Mrs. Deighton standing apart some little distance from the others.

“I am pleased to meet you, sir,” said the missionary, constituting himself spokesman for the others; “you are welcome, sir, very welcome to Mayou, and to anything that it lies in our power to

furnish you with for your—schooner, or should I say yacht, for such, by her handsome appearance, I presume she is.”

The visitor, who was a handsome, fair-haired man, with a blonde moustache and blue eyes, bowed his thanks, and then said, “May I have the honour to introduce myself. My name is De Vere.”

“And I am the Rev. Wilfrid Deighton, missionary in charge of this island. My two—” (here he hesitated a moment before the next word) “friends are Mr. Peter Schwartzkoff and Mr. Nathaniel Burrowes.”

“Delighted to meet you,” said Mr. de Vere, bowing politely to the lady, but extending a white, shapely hand to the men; “and now I must tell you that I shall be very glad to avail myself, Mr. Deighton, of your kind offer. We are in want of water, and anything in the way of vegetables, etcetera, that we can get. We intend, however, to stay here a few days and refit. Having been in very bad weather coming through the southern part of the Solomon Group we must effect repairs.”

“Might I inquire, mister,” asked Burrowes, “ef your vessel is a trader, or jest a pleasure schooner, as the parson here says?”

“Mr. Deighton is quite correct,” said Mr. de Vere, with another graceful bow; “the *Starlight* is a yacht I can quite understand your not being able to make her out She was originally built for the navy as a gunboat, but was sold in Sydney, after some years’ service. I bought her and had her altered into a yacht to cruise about these delightful and beautiful South Sea Islands. My friend, the Honourable John Morcombe-Lycett, accompanies me. Our English yachting experience had much to do with our determination to make a cruise down here. In fact,” and here Mr. de Vere showed his white, even teeth in a smile, and stroked his drooping blonde moustache, “we left London with the intention of chartering a vessel in Sydney for a cruise among the islands. Mr. Morcombe-Lycett is, however, very unwell to-day, and so has not landed, but here am I; and I am very happy indeed to make your acquaintance.”

Then, turning towards the boat, he called out to the officer who had brought him, “Come ashore for me at dinner-time, Captain Sykes.”

II ~ A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

A few hours later Mr. de Vere was on very friendly terms with Mr. and Mrs. Deighton, who had carried him off to the mission house, after the boat returned to the schooner. Before he accompanied them, however, he told Messrs. Burrowes and Schwartzkoff, as he shook hands, that he would not fail to visit them later on in the day at their respective houses. And both Peter, and the American, who on any other occasion would have been justly indignant at any white visitor not a missionary himself foregoing, even for a short time, the pleasure of their society for that of a “blarsted missionary,” shook hands with him most vigorously, and said they would be proud to see him. Then they hurried off homewards.

Peter’s house and trading station lay midway between that of Charlie Blount and the American’s, but instead of making for his own place, Peter, to the surprise of Blount, who was now standing at his door watching them, went inside Burrowes’ house.

“That’s d–d curious, now,” said Blount, in English, to one of his half-caste daughters, a girl of eighteen; “those two fellows hate each other like poison. I’ve never known the Dutchman go into the Yankee’s house, or the Yankee go into his, for the past two years, and here they are now as thick as thieves! I wonder what infernal roguery they are up to?”

Charlie Blount’s amazement was perfectly natural, The German and American did dislike each other most intensely. Neither of them had lived so long on Mayou as Blount, but each was trying hard to work the other man off the island by accusing him to the natives of cheating them. As a matter of fact they were both scoundrels, but Banderah, the chief of Mayou, who was fond of white men, managed to keep a hollow peace between them. *He* was perfectly well aware that both of them cheated himself and his people, but as long as their cheating was practised moderately he did not mind. In Blount, however, he had the fullest confidence, and this good feeling was shared with him by every native on the island.

Perhaps, had Blount been a witness of what occurred when the boat landed, his suspicion of his fellow-traders’ honesty would have been considerably augmented. For while the missionary and Mr. de Vere were bandying compliments, the German and American were exchanging signs with the officer who was in charge of the boat, and whom De Vere addressed as “Captain Sykes.” The American, indeed, had started down the beach to speak to him, when Mr. de Vere called out to him to return to the ship, and Captain Sykes, with a gesture signifying that he would see Burrowes later on, swung round the boat’s head and gave the word to his Kanaka crew to give way. As if quite satisfied with this dumb promise, the American returned to the group he had just left, and then the moment the missionary, Mrs. Deighton, and De Vere had gone, he and the German started off together.

The moment they entered the American’s house, Burrowes sat down on the table and the German on a gin case.

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