

FICTION

Louis Becke

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A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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From "The Tapu Of Banderah and Other Stories"

By Louis Becke

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"Well, there's niggers an' niggers, some just as good as any white man," said Mr. Thomas Potter as he, the second mate of the island-trading barque *Reconnaissance*, and Denison the supercargo, walked her short, stumpy poop one night, "though when I was before the mast I couldn't stand one of 'em bunking too close to menot for a long time. But after awhile I found out that a Kanaka or a Maori is better than the usual run of the paint-scrubbing Jack Dog who calls himself a sailorman nowadays. Why, I've never seen a native sailor yet as was dirty in his habitsthey're too fond o' the water. Look at these Rotumah chaps aboard hereif there's a calm they'll jump overboard and take a swim instead of turning in when it's their watch below. Bah, white sailors ain't worth feeding in this Island tradelazy, dirty, useless brutes; a Kanaka is worth three of any one of 'em. Did you notice that photograph in my cabinthat one showing a ship's company standing on deck?"

"Yes, I did," replied Denison.

"Well, that's the crew of the *Fanny Long*, and amongst 'em is a fellow I'm goin' to tell you abouta chap named Sarreo. We had that picture taken in Hobart after we had come back from a sperm whaling cruise. We had been very lucky, and the skipper and owners had all our photographs taken in a group. I was second mate, and this Sarreo was one of the boatsteerers. Him and me had been shipmates before, once in the old *Meteor* barque, nigger-catching for the Fiji planters, and once in a New Bedford sperm whaler, and he had taken a bit of a liking to me, so whenever I got a new ship he generally shipped too.

"Well, I was tired of whaling; I had two ribs broke on that cruise in the *Fanny Lang*, by a boat being stove in by a whale. So after I had got my money I walked out of the office, thinking of going to Sydney by the steamboat, when up comes Sarreo.

"Got your dollars, Sarreo?" I says.

"Yes,' he answers. 'What you goin' to do now, Mr. Potter?"

"Going to Sydney to look for another ship.'

"All right,' he says quietly. 'I come too. I don' want to go whalin' no more.'

"Sure enough, when I went on board the steamer there he was for'ard sitting on his chest, smoking his pipe, an' waiting for me.

"In Sydney there was a fine big lump of a schooner just fitting out for a trading cruise to the Solomon Islands, and I happened to know the skipper, who worked it for me with the owners and I got the berth of chief mate; and Sarreo (who used to come every day to the place I was staying at to ask me not to forget him) was shipped as an A.B.

"What sort of a looking man? Well, he was a short, square-built chap, with a chest like a working bullock. He was rather darker than a Samoan or a Tahiti man, owing to a seafaring life, and had straight, black hair. He only spoke as a rule when he was spoken to, and kept himself pretty much aloof from the rest of the hands, though he wasn't by any means sulky."

"Where did he hail from?" Denison inquired.

"Ah, now you're asking, sir. There was a beast of a supercargo I beg pardon, sir, for forgetting myself a reg'lar flash, bullying pig of a fellow, with us that trip. He put on as many airs as if he owned the whole blooming Pacific. Well, one day he was straightening up his trade-room, and calls for a couple of hands to help, and the skipper sent Sarreo and another native sailor to him. We were then lying at anchor in Marau Sound, in the Solomons, and the sun was hot enough to blister the gates o' hell, and presently the supercargo comes on deck and slings his fat, ugly carcass into a deck chair under the awning and says

"That's a smart fellow, that Sarreo, Potter. Where does he come from?"

"Now I didn't know, and said so; so Mr. Supercargo grunts and says that he'd ask him himself. Presently up comes Sarreo and the other natives they were going for'ard for their dinner.

"Here, I say you,' said the supercargo to Sarreo, touching him on the calf of the leg with his foot as he was passing, 'what island you belong to, eh?'

"Sarreo turned like lightning, and I caught a sight of his face. He had dark, deep-set eyes and they seemed to spit fire at the fat brute in the chair, and his two brown hands shut tight; but he said nothing, not a blessed word, only looked as if all the rest of his body was turned to stone. He stood like that for about ten seconds or so, then he bent his head close to the other man's face and put his two clenched fists out behind him.

"Here, Sarreo,' I says, collaring him by one arm, 'what's all these gymnastics? What's the matter?'

"He pushed me aside as if I was a feather, then he straightens himself up sudden, and, lookin' at the supercargo, spits on the deck at his feet.

"You dog,' he says, 'when we get ashore I will fight you!'

"Warby,' that was the supercargo's name, was no cur, whatever else he was, but though he seemed mighty sick when he heard Sarreo call him a dog, he jumped up at once.

"You damned Kanaka swine! You're drunk! You've been sneaking a bottle of gin in the trade-room, an' I'll give you a pounding,' he says.

"Then before any one could interfere they were at it, and in less than a couple of minutes Sarreo had the supercargo by the throat, lifted him off his feet, and dashes him down on the poop. He lay there stunned, an' I tell you, mister, I was mighty pleased, for we all hated him for his beastly bullyin' ways, and his foul talk. So none of us rushed at him too violently to pick him up. Presently up comes the skipper and orders me to put Sarreo in irons, though I could see he didn't half like doing it. But it had to be done, and I had to do it. However, Sarreo held out his hands to me as quiet as a lamb, and I led him for'ard and told him to keep a stiff upper lip; the captain, I knew, would let him loose again the next morning. He nodded his head quietly and said, 'All right, Mr Potter. But when we get ashore *I mus' kill that man.*'

"Why, Sarreo,' I said, 'you mustn't talk like that, you've nearly cracked his skull as it is. Don't you go on that tack, or it'll be worse for you.'

"He nods again. 'I know. But I have been look for that man for more'n five year.'

"Why, do you know him?"

"Yes, I know him *now*. When I see him roll up his shirt-sleeve in the trade-room, an' I see some tattoo mark on his arm, I know him.'

"Of course I asked him what the supercargo had done to him, but he wouldn't tell me any more. So, telling one of the hands to give him his pipe and tobacco, I went aft again and told the skipper that there seemed to be an old grudge between the two men.

"Like enough/ says the skipper. 'That fellow Warby is the two ends and bight of a howling blackguard. He was only appointed to this ship at the last moment, or else I would have bucked against his coming aboard. He's got a bad name.'

"Warby lay in his bunk for the rest of the day, but in the evening he came on deck and said to the skipper roughly

"What are you going to do with that damned nigger?"

"Keep him in irons for a day or two, I suppose. What more can I do?"

"Warby looked at him for a moment, then he says, with a sneer, that in some ships the captain would have tied such a fellow up and given him six dozen.

"No doubt," says the skipper, looking him full in his ugly face, "no doubt, especially in the sort of ships you've sailed in. But nothing like that is going to happen aboard this hooker."

"The supercargo muttered something under his breath and turned away. Next morning, however, when we were at breakfast, he asked the captain how long he meant to keep Sarreo in irons.

"Till after breakfast"

"Warby jumped up in a rage and said that he protested against such a man being given his liberty. 'Why, he'll murder me,' he says at last with a white look in his face.

"The skipper laughed. 'You make too much of the business, Mr. Warby. Why, he is one of the best and quietest men aboard. If you hadn't kicked him and then swore at him, he wouldn't have tackled you. And I'm not going to keep him in ironsthat's flat.'

"After breakfast I went up for'ard to take the irons off Sarreo. He was sitting against the windlass and smoking.

"Here, Sarreo," I said, "I've come to take off your bracelets; but you must promise not to have any more rows with the supercargo; if you won't promise, then the captain says he'll have to keep you in irons until we get to Fiji, and then send you to jail."

"He promised, and from the quiet, soft manner in which he spoke, I felt sure he was over his burst of passion, and was feeling a bit funky over it. However, he turned to very quietly, and was soon sent ashore with a watering party, he being in charge of the boat which was manned by native sailors. When he came back with the first lot of casks he told me that the bush around the watering-place was full of pigeons. As soon as the captain heard this he said he would go ashore and shoot some, and Mr. Warby said he would like to join him.

"So off they went skipper, supercargo, and Sarreo and his boat's crew. We on board soon heard the two guns firing, and were smacking our chops at the thought of pigeon stew for supper. I did not expect to see them back until about supper-time, knowing that the boat had to tow the casks off to the ship, which lay about half a mile from the beach. But about four o'clock I saw the boat pushing off in a deuce of a hurry, and then pull like mad for the ship. Knowing that there was no danger from natives at that part of the island, I couldn't make it out, but in a few minutes the boat dashes up alongside, and looking over the side I saw that Sarreo was sitting beside the captain, in between him and Mr. Warby; his eyes were closed, and I thought he was dead at first.

"We had him lifted up on deck and then carried into the cabin in a brace of shakes, and I saw that he had a bullet wound in his shoulder; the ball had gone clean through. Then the skipper, who was never much of a talker, told me that Mr. Warby had shot the man accidentally. Of course I looked at Warby. His face was very pale, but his eyes met mine without flinching.

"It didn't take the captain long to dress the wound, and half an hour later, when I came below again, Sarreo was sitting up on some cushions in the transoms smoking one of the captain's Manilas, and looking as if nothing had happened. He smiled when he saw me and put out his hand.

"I'm all right, Mr. Potter," he said; "not going to die this time."

"I was just about to ask him how the thing happened, when Robertson that was our skipper's name called me into his room. He was as solemn as a judge. Closing his cabin door, he said, 'Sarreo will get over it all right, but the business is an ugly one; to cut it short, I believe that it was no accident, but that Warby tried to murder the poor fellow.'

"Then he told me what had occurred. Leaving the rest of the boat's crew to fill the water casks, they set out to shoot pigeons; Sarreo went with them to pick up and carry the birds. About an hour later they saw a wild boar rush by them. Robertson fired both barrels at it and wounded it, but it didn't stop. Warby had one barrel empty. He at once loaded with ball, and the three men gave chase, Sarreo leading, Warby following him close. On reaching some high grass at the river bank Sarreo plunged into it; then, a few seconds later,

Robertson heard Warby call out that he saw the animal lying down, and fired. The captain was a short distance behind, but he and Warby reached the spot together, and there, sure enough, lying in the long grass, was the wounded boar, and Sarreo beside it, with the blood pouring from his shoulder. He was sitting up, supporting himself on his left hand. The skipper assisted him to his feet, and Warby tried to help, but Sarreo turned on him and cursed him, and said that he (Warby) had tried to murder him. The supercargo swore that he had not seen him when he fired, but further talk was cut short by Sarreo going faint through loss of blood, so they carried him to the boat.

"That was the story so far, and Robertson asked me what I thought of it.

"Now I had been shipmates with Sarreo off and on for a matter of five or six years, and I never knew him to tell a lie; but at the same time I couldn't think Warby would be such a brute as to try and murder the man in cold blood. The skipper, however, took a very black view of the matter, and told me that if we met a man-of-war he would put Warby in irons, signal for a boat, and hand him over on a charge of attempted murder. Then we went out into the main cabin and sat down, and Robertson told the steward to call the supercargo.

"Warby came below at once. He gave a quick glance at Sarreo, then at the skipper and myself, and sat down quietly. In less than a minute the captain told him of his suspicions and what he intended doing if we met a man-of-war.

"I thought Warby would bluster and blaspheme in his usual way; but he didn't. He listened in silence. Then he rose and put his hands on the cabin table, and said

"Before God, I swear to you both that I am innocent I did not fire at that man; I did not even see him again after he disappeared into the grasses the Almighty is my judge, I did not... I did mean to take it out of Sarreo for nearly breaking my skull the other day; but then I remembered afterwards that he had cause to hate me, and I was only waiting for a chance to ask him to make it up. And I say again that I am no cowardly murderer; when I fired, I fired at the boar or what I honestly thought was the boar, struggling in the grass. You can put me in irons now if you like; or shut me up in my cabin. I'm not going to sit down at the same table with men who suspect me of attempted murder.'

"There was something in his voice which made us believe him, and then he took a couple of turns up and down the cabin deck, and stepped up to the wounded man.

"Sarreo, I did you a bad turn a long time ago; but I'm sorry for it now I have been sorry for it ever since. But I did not know where to find you, and I would not have known you yesterday if you hadn't looked into my face and spoken. It's ten years since that day, Sarreo.'

"The wounded man looked up, searching-like, into Warby's face all the time he was speaking; then his big black eyes drooped again, but he made no answer. So then Warby went on again, talking to the lot of us.

"I was supercargo on the *Manola* brig, and Sarreo here was one of the hands. One day, in Apia harbour, a bag of dollars was stolen out of my cabin. The steward next morning said he had seen Sarreo ashore at one of the dance houses spending money very freely. The captain and I burst open his chest, and we found about twenty Mexican dollars among his clothes. Now, in the bag which had been stolen there were nearly five hundred Mexican dollars. Sarreo swore he had not stolen the money and that all the money he had spent on shore was five dollars, which he had brought with him from San Francisco. But the skipper and I believed he was the thief, and to make him own up and tell us where the rest of the dollars were, we flogged him. Then we put him in irons and kept him in irons for a week. He still swore he had not taken the money, and I, believing he was lying, gave him another thrashing on my own account. That night he got overboard and swam ashore, and we gave the money up for lost. Well, about a week after this, when the steward was ashore, the mate and I decided to make a thorough search of *his* cabin. We found nothing there, but we did in the pantry we found the missing bag of dollars, all but the twenty which he had put into Sarreo's chest stowed away in the bottom of half a barrel of flour."

"As soon as Sarreo heard this, the poor fellow almost began to cry, and said, 'I told you, Mr. Warby, I no steal that money.'

"No, Sarreo, I know you didn't that is, I knew it when the steward owned up to stealing it; and told us afterward that he took twenty dollars out of the bag, and, seeing your chest lying open in the deck-house, he

slipped in when no one was about and put the money among the clothes at the bottom.'

"Sarreo sighed, pleased-like, and then his brown face lit up.

"The big supercargo came a bit nearer to him, and then held out his hand.

"Look here, Sarreo! The day before yesterday I was wrong, but you got my blood up; and I am sorry, very sorry, for the wrong I did you on board the *Manola*; but so help me God, Sarreo, I *did not* fire at you.'

"Sarreo's eyes seemed to look right through the white man; then they turned towards the skipper and me.

"I believe you, Mr. Warby,' said the skipper, coming up and shaking hands with the supercargo.

"And I believed him too, for he looked terribly distressed and cut up, so I shook hands with him too.

"Then Sarreo put out his big brown tattooed hand.

"And me too, Mr. Warby.'

"The supercargo pressed it gently, so as not to hurt Sarreo's shoulder, then he almost ran past us on deck.

"Well, from that time out, that man Warby changed, and he looked after Sarreo all the time he was laid up, as if he had been his own brother instead of a Kanaka chap before the mast.

"After leaving Marau Sound we stood to the northward, being bound to Bougainville Island. It took us more than a month to get there, and by that time Sarreo was as well and strong as ever he was, and me and the skipper had got quite chummy with the supercargo, for we found out that he had a lot of good points about him. You see, mister, ten or twelve years ago the Solomon Group was the place to show what a man was made of as far as that goes it's not much altered since. If you don't die of fever you're pretty sure to get knocked on the head and go down the nigger's gullets and this chap Warby had rare pluck. He never ran a boat's crew into danger, but would take any risks himself, and somehow we had cruised right up from Marau Sound to the north end of Bougainville without losing a man, or having more than a few arrows or shots fired at the boats.

"Just when we were about to brace up to round Bouka Island, and being about three miles off the land, we sighted the hull of a vessel ashore on the beach of a small bay. We stood in for a mile or so and saw that there was a native village at the head of the bay, and that the vessel was a schooner of about a hundred tons. There were no signs of any boats and she seemed to be stripped of both running and standing gear.

"We manned and armed two boatsone, with Mr. Warby in charge, being the landing-party; and the other as a covering boat in case the natives attacked. I had charge of the second boat and had four white sailors; Warby had Sarreo and four other natives. The skipper told us to have a good look at the vessel, then try and learn what the natives on shore had to say about her, and then come off and report.

"We pulled right in to the wreck as close as we could get, for it was low tide. Then Warby and I got out and walked over to it. We found that she was stripped of everything of value, even the chain-plates having been cut out, the decks were torn up and partly burnt, and the anchors and cables were gone; in fact, she was nothing but a shell.

"'Been looted by the niggers,' I said to Warby. 'Hope the poor chaps that manned her got away in the boat; better for 'em to have been drowned than be eaten by these beggars about here.'

"'We'll soon see,' said he. 'It's my opinion they did get away safely. Look over there, Potter, at those niggers waiting for us on the beach; now if they had cut off this vessel they would have bolted into the bush, or begun firing at us. Come on.'

"We walked back to the boats and then pulled over to the village, which was about eight hundred yards away, Warby's boat, of course, going first. About thirty or forty natives came down to the water's edge and waited. They were all armed with bows, spears, and clubs, but seemed friendly.

"However, Warby jumped boldly out on to the beach, and telling his crew to keep her afloat in case he had to run for it, he went up to the crowd of niggers and shook hands with some of them; I and my chaps in the covering boat keeping our rifles out of view, but quite ready.

"In about five minutes Warby sang out to me that it was all right. The vessel, the natives told him, had parted her cables, gone ashore and bilged on the reef in the night; and the hands being too frightened to come ashore, had gone away next morning in two boats. Then he told me to wait a few minutes, as he was

going to the chief's house to look at the copper and other gear that the natives had taken from the schooner, and very likely he would buy it. First of all, though, he told Sarreo to pass him out a 12 lb. case of tobacco as a present for the chief.

"He took the case from Sarreo and handed it to the chief, and then off they went in the middle of thirty or forty murderous-looking savages; but he had done the same thing so often before that we did not feel any particular alarm.

"We lay there, backed stern on to the beach, for about five minutes, looking at the house into which he had gone with the natives. Suddenly we saw him burst out of the house and fall on his knees, trying to draw his revolver; but in another moment he was being tomahawked and clubbed by a mob of yelling devils! Poor chap, he must have died very quickly.

"We opened fire at once and they disappeared like magic, and then from every bush, tree, and rock they began firing at us in the boats with both muskets and arrows. One of my men was hit, and then, before I could stop him, Sarreo had jumped out of his boat and was running up the beach, rifle in hand, to where Mr. Warby's body was lying.

"He got there, I think, without being hit, just as a big native ran at him with a tomahawk. He hadn't time to put his Snider to his shoulder; but that nigger gave his last jump anyway, for I saw the rifle go off and the nigger topple over. In another five seconds he had lifted the supercargo up, thrown him over his left shoulder, and was running down to the boats.

"By this time, me and two of my crew had jumped out of the boat and ran to meet him, firing as we went. We had just reached him when down he went on to his face in the sand a bullet had smashed his hip.

"Dropping our rifles, we picked him and Mr. Warby's body up, and by God's mercy managed to tumble into the boat together and push off, covered by the fire from the ship, which carried two six-pounders.

"Sarreo lived two days he died the same morning that we were getting ready to take Warby's body ashore to bury on a little island between Bouka and Bougainville. So we made only one trip ashore. Poor chap! He had a good, simple heart, and almost his last words were that he 'was glad Mr. Warby wasn't eaten.'

"Ah, as you say, Mr. Denison, the rotten South Seas ain't no place for a white man. Good-night."