

== FICTION ==

Louis Becke

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# Susani

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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# SUSANI

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By Louis Becke

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A few weeks ago I was reading a charmingly written book by a lady (the wife of a distinguished savant) who had spent three months on Funafuti, one of the lagoon islands of the Ellice Group. Now the place and the brown people of whom she wrote were once very familiar to me, and her warm and generous sympathy for a dying race stirred me greatly, and when I came across the name "Funafala," old, forgotten memories awoke once more, and I heard the sough of the trade wind through the palms and the lapping of the lagoon waters upon the lonely beaches of Funafala, as Senior, the mate of the *Venus*, and myself watched the last sleep of Susani.

Funafala is one of the many islands which encircle Funafuti lagoon with a belt of living green, and to Funafala "the island of the pandanus palm" Senior and I had come with a party of natives from the village on the main island to spend a week's idleness. Fifty years ago, long before the first missionary ship sailed into the lagoon, five or six hundred people dwelt on Funafala in peace and plentynow it holds but their bones, for they were doomed to fade and vanish before the breath of the white man and his civilisation and "benefits," which to the brown people mean death, and as the years went by, the remnant of the people on Funafala and the other islets betook themselves to the main islandafter which the lagoon is namedfor there the whale-ships and trading schooners came to anchor, and there they live to this day, smitten with disease and fated to disappear altogether within another thirty years, and be no more known to man except in the dry pages of a book written by some learned ethnologist.

But twice every year the people of Funafuti betake themselves to Funafala to gather the cocoa-nuts, which in the silent groves ripen and fall and lie undisturbed from month to month; then for a week or ten days, as the men husk the nuts, the women and children fish in the daytime among the pools and runnels of the inner reef, and at night with flaring torches of palm-leaf they stand amid the sweeping surf on the outer side of the narrow islet, and with net and spear fill their baskets with blue and yellow crayfish. Then when all the work is done, the canoes are filled with the husked cocoanuts, and with laughter and songfor they are yet a merry-hearted though vanishing peoplethey return to the village, and for another six months Funafala is left to the ceaseless call of the restless sea upon the outer reef, and the hoarse cry of the soaring frigate birds.

One afternoon Senior and myself, accompanied by a young, powerfully-built native named Suka, were returning to the temporary village on Funafala after a collection of rude huts thatched with palm leaves from a fishing excursion on the outer reef, when we were overtaken by a series of sudden squalls and downpours of rain. We were then walking along the weather shore of the island, which was strewn with loose slabs of coral stone, pure white in colour and giving forth a clear, resonant sound to the slightest disturbing movement. On our right hand was a scrub of *puka* trees, which afforded no shelter from the torrential rain; on our left the ocean, whose huge, leaping billows crashed and thundered upon the black, shelving reef, and sent swirling waves of whitened foam up to our feet.

For some minutes we continued to force our way against the storm, when Suka, who was leading, called

out to us that a little distance on along the beach there was a cluster of *papa* (coral rocks), in the recesses of which we could obtain shelter. Even as he spoke the rain ceased for a space, and we saw, some hundreds of yards before us, the spot of which he had spoken a number of jagged, tumbled-together coral boulders which some violent convulsion of the sea had torn away from the barrier reef and hurled upon the shore, where, in the course of years, kindly Nature had sent out a tender hand and covered them with a thick growth of a creeper peculiar to the low-lying atolls of the mid-Pacific, and hidden their rugged outlines under a mantle of vivid green.

As we drew near, the bright, tropic sun shone out for a while, and the furious wind died away, seeming to gather fresh strength for another sweeping onslaught from the darkened weather horizon.

"Quick," said Suka, pointing to the rocks, "tis bad to be smitten with such rain as this. Let us rest in the *papa* till the storm be over."

Following our all but naked guide, who sprang from stone to stone with the surefootedness of a mountain goat, we soon reached the cluster of rocks, the bases of which were embedded in the now hard and stiffened sand, and almost at the same moment another heavy rain squall swept down and blurred sea and sky and land alike.

Bidding us to follow, Suka began to clamber up the side of the highest of the boulders, on the seaward face of which, he said, was a small cave, used in the olden days as a sleeping place by fishermen and seabird catchers. Suddenly, when half-way up, he stopped and turned to us, and with a smile on his face, held up his hand and bade us listen. Some one was singing.

"It is Susani," he whispered, "she did not sleep in the village last night. She comes to this place sometimes to sing to the sea. Come, she is not afraid of white men."

Grasping the thick masses of green vine called *At At* which hung from the summit of the rock, we at last reached the foot of the cave, and looking up we saw seated at the entrance a young native girl of about twelve years of age. Even though we were so near to her she seemed utterly unconscious of our presence, and still sang in a low, soft voice some island chant, the words of which were strange to both my companion and myself although we were well acquainted with nearly all the *Tokelauan* dialects.

Very quietly we stood awaiting till she turned her face towards us, but her eyes were bent seaward upon the driving sheets of rain, and the tumbling surf which thrashed upon the shore.

"Wait," said Suka in a low voice; "she will see us soon. 'Tis best not to disturb her. She is afflicted of God and seeth many things."

Her song ceased, and then Suka, stepping forward, touched her gently upon the arm. She looked up and smiled into his face, and then she let her full, dark eyes rest upon the strangers who stood behind, then again she turned to Suka in mute, inquiring wonder.

He bent down and placed his cheek against hers, "Be not afraid, Susani; they be good friends. And see, little one, sit thee further back within the cave, for the driving rain beats in here at the mouth and thy feet are wet and cold."

She rose without a word and stood whilst the kindly-hearted native unrolled an old mat which lay at the end of the cave and spread it out in the centre.

"Come, Susani, dear one," he said gravely, and his usually harsh and guttural voice sounded soft and tender. "Come, sit thee here, and then in a little while shall I get wood and make a fire so that we may eat. Hast eaten to-day, little one?"

She shook her head; a faint smile parted her lips, and then her strange, mournful eyes for a moment again sought ours as she seated herself on the mat Suka beckoned us to approach and sit near her, himself sitting a little apart and to one side.

"Susani," he said, bending forward and speaking slowly and carefully, "*fealofani tau lima i taka soa*" ("give your hand to my friends").

The girl held out her left hand, and Senior and I each took it in turn gently within our own, and uttered the native greeting of "*Fakaalofa*."

"She can talk," said Suka, "but not much. Sometimes for many days no word will come from her lips. It is

then she leaveth the village and walks about in the forest or along the beaches when others sleep. But no harm can come to her, for she is *tausi mau te Atua*.{\*} And be not vexed in that she gave thee her left hand, for, see"

\* *In God's special keeping.*

He touched the girl's right arm, and we now saw that it hung limp and helpless upon her smooth, bared thigh.

"Was she born thus?" asked Senior, as he placed his strong, rough hand upon her head and stroked her thick, wavy hair, which fell like a mantle over her shoulders and back.

"Nay, she was born a strong child, and her mother and father were without blemish, and good to look upon the man was as thick as me" (he touched his own brawny chest), "but as she grew and began to talk, the bone in her right arm began to perish. And then the hand of God fell upon her mother and father, and they died. But let me go get wood and broil some fish, for she hath not eaten." Then he bent forward and said

"Dost fear to stay here, Susani, with the white men?"

She looked at us in turn, and then said slowly

"Nay, I have no fear, Suka."

"Poor little beggar!" said Senior pityingly.

Ten minutes later Suka had returned with an armful of dry wood and some young drinking cocoanuts. Fish we had in plenty, and in our bags were some biscuits, brought from the schooner. As Senior and I tended the fire, Suka wrapped four silvery sea mullet in leaves, and then when it had burnt down to a heap of glowing coals he laid them in the centre and watched them carefully, speaking every now and then to the child, who seemed scarcely to heed, as she gazed at Senior's long, yellow beard, and his bright, blue eyes set in his honest, sun-tanned face. Then, when the fish were cooked, Suka turned them out of their coverings and placed them on broad, freshly plucked *puka* leaves, and Senior brought the hard ship biscuits, and, putting one beside a fish, brought it to the child and bade her eat.

She put out her left hand timidly, and took it from him, her strange eyes still fixed wonderingly upon his face. Then she looked at Suka, and Suka, with an apologetic cough, placed one hand over his eyes and bent his head for he was a deacon, and to eat food without giving thanks would be a terrible thing to do, at least in the presence of white men, who, of course, never neglected to do so.

The child, hungry as she must have been, ate her food with a dainty grace, though she had but one hand to use, and our little attentions to her every now and then seemed at first to increase her natural shyness and timidity. But when the rude meal was finished, and my companion and myself filled our pipes and sat in the front of the cave, she came with Suka and nestled up against his burly figure as he rolled a cigarette of strong, black tobacco in dried banana leaf. The rain had ceased, but the fronds of the coco-palms along the lonely shore swayed and beat together with the wind, which still blew strongly, though the sun was now shining brightly upon the white horses of the heaving sea.

For nearly half an hour we sat thus, watching the roll and curl of the tumbling seas upon the reef and the swift flight of a flock of savage-eyed frigate birds which swept to and fro, now high in air, now low down, with wing touching wave, in search of their prey, and listening to the song of the wind among the trees. Then Suka, without speaking, smiled, and pointed to the girl. She had pillow'd her head upon his naked bosom and closed her long-lashed eyes in slumber.

"She will sleep long," he said. "Will it vex thee if I stay here with her till she awakens? See, the sky is clear and the rain hath ceased, and ye need but walk along the beach till"

"We will wait, Suka," I answered; "we will wait till she awakens, and then return to the village together. How comes it that one so young and tender is left to wander about alone?"

Suka pressed his lips to the forehead of the sleeping girl. "No harm can come to her. God hath afflicted, but yet doth He protect her. And she walketh with Him and His Son Christ, else had she perished long ago, for sometimes she will leave us and wander for many days in the forest or along the shore, eating but little

and drinking nothing, for she cannot open a cocoanut with her one hand, and there are no streams of fresh, sweet water here as there be in the fair land of Samoa. And yet God is with her always, always, and she feeleth hunger and thirst but little."

Senior placed his hand on mine and gripped it so firmly that I looked at him with astonishment He was a cold, self-contained man, making no friends, never talking about himself, doing his duty as mate of the *Venus* as a seaman should do it, and never giving any oneeven myself, with whom he was more open than any other manany encouragement to ask him why he, a highly educated and intelligent man, had left civilisation to waste his years as a wanderer in the South Seas. Still grasping my hand, he turned to me and spoke with quivering lips

" She walketh with God! 'Did you hear that? Did you look into her eyes and not see in them what fools would call insanity, and what I *know* is a knowledge of God above and Christ and the world beyond. 'God has afflicted her,' so this simple-minded native, whom many men in their unthinking moments would call a canting, naked kanaka, says; but God has *not* afflicted her. He has blessed her, for in her eyes there is that which tells me better than all the deadly-dull sermons of the highly cultured and fashionable cleric, who patters about the Higher Life, or the ranting Salvationist who bawls in the streets of Melbourne or Sydney about the Blood of the Lamb, that there *is* peace beyond for all.... 'God has afflicted this poor child!' Would that He might so afflict me physically as He has afflicted herif He but gave me that inner knowledge of Himself which so shines out and is glorified in her face."

His voice, rising in his excitement, nearly awakened her; so Suka, with outstretched hand, enjoined silence.

"She sleeps, dear friends."

A year had come and gone, and the *Venus* again lay at anchor in the broad lagoon of Funafuti. Suka had come aboard whilst the schooner was beating up to the anchorage, and said that there had been much sickness on the island, that many people had died, and that Susani with other children was *tali mate* (nearly dead). Could we give them some medicine? for it was a strong sickness this, and even the "thick"<sup>{\*}</sup> man or woman withered and died from it. Soon they would all be dead.

\* I.e., strong, stout.

Alas! we could not help them much, for our medicine chest was long since depleted of the only drug that would have been of service. At every island in the group from Nanomea southwards we had found many of the people suffering and dying from a malignant type of fever introduced by an Hawaiian labour vessel. Then an additional misfortune followed a heavy gale, almost of hurricane force, had set in from the westward and destroyed countless thousands of cocoanut trees, so that with the exception of fish, food was very scarce.

We sent Suka on shore in the boat at once with a few mats of rice and bags of biscuitall the provisions we could spare. Then as soon as the vessel was anchored the captain, Senior, and myself followed. The resident native teacher met us on the beach, his yellow face and gaunt frame showing that he, too, had been attacked. Many of the people, he told us, had gone to the temporary village on Funafala, where a little more food could be obtained than on the main island, the groves of palms there not having suffered so severely from the gale. Among those who had gone were Susani and the family who had adopted her, and we heard with sorrow that there was no hope of the child living, for that morning some natives had arrived from Funafala with the news that nearly all the young children were dead, and those remaining were not expected to live beyond another day or two.

After spending an hour with the teacher, and watching him distribute the rice and biscuit among his sick and starving people, we returned to the ship with the intention of sailing down to Funafala in the boat and taking the natives there some provisions. The teacher thanked us warmly, but declined to come with us, saying that he could not leave the many for the few, "for," he added sadly, "who will read the service over those who die? As you sail down the lagoon you will meet canoes coming up from Funafala bringing the dead. I cannot go there to bury them."

It was nearly midnight when we put off from the schooner's side, but with Suka as pilot we ran quickly

down to the island. A few natives met us as we stepped on shore, and to these we gave the provisions we had brought, telling them to divide them equally. Then with Suka leading, and carrying a lighted torch made from the spathe of the cocoanut tree, we made our way through the darkened forest to the house in which Susani and her people were living. It was situated on the verge of the shore, on the weather side of the narrow island, so as to be exposed to the cooling breath of the trade wind, and consisted merely of a roof of thatch with open sides, and the ground within covered with coarse mats, upon which we saw were lying three figures.

Making as little noise as possible Suka called out a name, and a man threw off his sleeping mat and came out; it was Susani's adopted father.

"No," he said in his simple manner, in answer to our inquiries, "Susani is not yet dead, but she will die at dawn when the tide is low. 'Tis now her last sleep."

Stepping very softly inside the house so as not to disturb her, we sat down to wait her awakening. Suka crouched near us, smoking his pipe in silence, and watching the sleeping girl to see if she moved.

Just as the weird cries of the tropic birds heralded the approach of dawn, the woman who lay beside Susani rose and looked into her face. Then she bade us come nearer.

"She is awake."

The child knew us at once, even in that imperfect light, for the moment Senior and myself stood up she tried to raise herself into a sitting posture; in an instant Suka sprang to her aid and pillow'd her head upon his knees; weak as she was, she put out her hand to us, and then let it lie in the mate's broad palm, her deep, mysterious eyes resting upon his face with a strange look of happiness shining in them. Presently her lips moved, and we all bent over her to listen; it was but one word

*"Fakaalofa!"*{\*}

\* *"My love to you."*

She never spoke again, but lay breathing softly, and as the sun shot blood red from the sea and showed the deathly pallor of her face, poor Suka gave way, and his stalwart bosom was shaken with the grief he tried in vain to suppress. Once more she raised her thin, weak hand as if she sought to touch his face; he took it tremblingly and placed it against his cheek; in another moment she had ceased to breathe.

As I walked slowly along the beach to the boat I looked back; the White Man and the Brown were kneeling together over the little mat-shrouded figure.