

BECKE LOUIS

SARRÉO

Louis Becke

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Louis Becke Sarréo / 1901

"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 me—not 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 habits—they're too fond o' the water. Look at these Rotumah chaps aboard here—if 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 trade—lazy, dirty, useless brutes; a Kanaka is worth three of any one of 'em. Did you notice that photograph in my cabin—that 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 about—a chap named Sarréo. 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 Sarréo 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 Sarréo.

"Got your dollars, Sarréo?' 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 Sarréo (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 Sarréo 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 Sarréo, 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 Sarréo and the other native—they were going for'ard for their dinner.

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

"Sarréo 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, Sarréo,' 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 Sarréo 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 Sarréo 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 Sarréo 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, Sarréo 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*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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