

**BECKE LOUIS**

THE TRADER'S

WIFE

Louis Becke

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# Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	9

# Louis Becke

## The Trader's Wife / 1901

### CHAPTER I

Brabant's wife was sitting on the shady verandah of her house on the hills overlooking Levuka harbour, and watching a large fore and aft schooner being towed in by two boats, for the wind had died away early in the morning and left the smooth sea to swelter and steam under a sky of brass.

The schooner was named the *Maritana*, and was owned and commanded by Mrs. Brabant's husband, John Brabant, who at that moment was standing on the after-deck looking through his glasses at the house on the hill, and at the white-robed figure of his wife.

"Can you see Mrs. Brabant, sir?" asked the chief mate, a short, dark-faced man of about thirty years of age, as he came aft and stood beside his captain.

"Yes, I can see her quite plainly, Lester," he replied, as he handed the glasses to his officer; "she is sitting on the verandah watching us."

The mate took the glasses and directed them upon the house for a few moments. "Perhaps she will come off to us, sir?"

Brabant shook his head. "It is a terribly hot day, you see, Lester, and she can't stand the sun at all. And then we shall be at anchor in another hour or so."

"Just so, sir," replied the mate politely. He did not like Mrs. Brabant, had never liked her from the very first day he saw her a year before, when Brabant had brought her down on board the *Maritana* in Auckland, and introduced her as his future wife. Why he did not like her he could not tell, and did not waste time in trying to analyse his feelings. He knew that his old friend and shipmate was passionately fond of his fair young wife, and was intensely proud of her beauty, and now, at the conclusion of a wearisome five months' voyage among the sun-baked islands of the Equatorial Pacific, was returning home more in love with her than ever. Not that he ever talked of her effusively, even to Lester, tried and true comrade as he was, for was naturally a self-contained and somewhat reserved man, as one could tell by his deep-set, stern grey eyes, and square jaw and chin.

"Damn her!" muttered Lester to himself, as he stood on the topgallant foc'scle watching the two boats with their toiling crews of brown-skinned natives; "nearly five months since she last saw him, and there she sits calmly watching us as if we had only sailed yesterday. Afraid of the sun! She's too selfish and too frightened of spoiling her pretty pink-and-white skin—that's what it is."

An hour later the boats came alongside, and then, as the chain rattled through the hawse-pipes, Brabant came on deck dressed in a suit of spotless white.

"Shall we see you this evening, Jim?" he asked, as he stood waiting to receive the Customs officer and doctor, whose boats were approaching.

"Thank you very much, sir, but I would rather stay on board this evening, as Dr. Bruce is sure to come into town some time to-day, as soon as he hears the *Maritana* is here, and I should not like to miss him."

"Just as you please, Jim. But why not take a run on shore with him, and both of you come up for an hour or two after dinner?"

The mate nodded. "Yes, we could do that, I think; but at the same time, Mrs. Brabant won't much care about visitors this evening, I'm afraid."

"My wife will be only too delighted, Jim," replied the captain in his grave manner; "you and Bruce are my oldest friends—that is quite enough for her."

The port doctor and Customs officer came on board and warmly greeted the captain of the *Maritana* for, apart from his being one of the wealthiest traders in the South Seas, John Brabant was

essentially a man who made friends—made them insensibly, and then his beautiful young wife was the acknowledged belle of the small European community in Fiji, and his house, when he returned from one of his trading voyages, was literally an open house, for every one—traders, storekeepers, cotton planters, naval men or merchant skippers—knew there was a welcome awaiting them in the big bungalow on the hillside at whatever time they called, day or night. Such hospitality was customary in those old Fijian days, when every cotton planter saw before him the shining portals of the City of Fortune inviting him to enter and be rich, and every trader and trading captain made money so easily that it was hard to spend it as quickly as it was made; and Manton's Hotel on Levuka beach was filled night after night with crowds of hilarious and excited people, and the popping of the champagne corks went on from dusk till dawn of the tropic day, and men talked and drank and talked and drank again, and told each other of the lucky strokes they had made; and sun-tanned skippers from the wild and murderous Solomons and the fever-stricken New Hebrides spoke of the cargoes of "blackbirds" they had sold at two hundred and fifty dollars a head, and dashed down a handful of yellow sovereigns on Manton's bar "for a drink all round." And then, sometimes, a long snaky-looking brigantine, with the name *Atlantic* on her stern, and the Stars and Stripes flying from her gaff, would sail into the noisy little port nestling under the verdured hills of Ovalau Island, and a big man, with a black, flowing beard, and a deep but merry voice, would be rowed ashore by a crew of wild-eyed, brown-skinned Polynesians, and "'Bully' Hayes has come! 'Bully' Hayes has come!" would be cried from one end of Levuka to the other, as every one, white, black, and brown, ran to the beach to see the famous and much-maligned "pirate" land, with a smile on his handsome face, his pockets full of gold, and he himself ready for anything or everything—a *liaison* with some other man's wife, a story of his last cruise, a fight "for love" with some recently discovered pugilist of local renown; a sentimental Spanish song to the strumming of his guitar; or the reading of the burial service according to the rites of either the Roman Catholic Church, or that of the Church of England, over the remains of some acquaintance or stranger who had succumbed to fever or a bullet, or Levuka whiskey. Brave, halcyon days were those, when men lived their lives quickly, and then disappeared or were ruined, or committed suicide, and were soon forgotten.

Brabant had gone ashore, and Lester and the second mate—a thin, sallow-faced Chileno named Diaz—were seated under the awning, smoking, and occasionally watching the progress of a small cutter which was about a mile distant, and under the influence of a light air which had sprung up, was heading towards the *Maritana*. She was owned by Dr. Bruce, a planter friend of Lester. His estate was some miles down the coast, and he had been an old shipmate of Lester's ten years before, when Brabant was living in Samoa as manager of the American Plantation Company, and Lester had first made his acquaintance—an acquaintance which had resulted in a firm and lasting friendship. Brabant wanted an overseer—a man who understood the native language—and Lester, then a youth of twenty, and idling about Samoa, waiting a berth as second mate, had been sent to him by an old seafaring friend. For three years they had worked together, and then Brabant, having saved enough money, threw up his shore berth and bought the *Maritana* to resume his former vocation of trader, and took Lester with him as mate, and Diaz, who had also been employed on the plantation, as second mate. That was seven years ago, and the schooner, during that time, had traversed the Pacific from one end to the other over and over again. Sometimes Brabant would take his cargo to San Francisco, sometimes to Singapore, and at rare intervals to Auckland. During one of his ship's visits to Fiji his chief mate found his old friend Bruce settled there as a planter, and Bruce had induced Brabant to make Fiji his head-quarters. So he bought land and built a house, and then, a year before the opening of this story, brought a wife to rule over it, much to the surprise and delight of the white residents of Levuka and the group generally, for John Brabant had always been looked upon as a man whose soul was wrapped up in his extensive business, and as a woman hater. This latter conclusion was arrived at from purely deductive reasoning—he despised and loathed the current idea that living in the South Seas palliated the most glaring licentiousness, and permitted a man to "do as he liked." Therefore

he had been set down as a non-marrying man—"an awfully good fellow, but with queer ideas, you know," his many friends would say, and "Bully" Hayes, who knew him well, said that John Brabant was the only clean-living, single man in Fiji, and that if he ever did marry his wife would be "some bony Scotch person of about forty, with her hair screwed up into a Turk's knot at the back of her long head, and with a cold, steely eye like a gimlet. Nine out of ten of good fellows like Jack Brabant do get mated with ghastly wives."

So when the *Maritana* one day sailed into Levuka harbour, and Brabant brought his young wife ashore, the community simply gasped in pleased astonishment, and even the exclusive wives of the leading merchants and planters made haste to call on Mrs. Brabant when they saw in the marriage announcement, published in the Auckland *Herald*, that she was "a daughter of the late General Deighton Ransome, Commander-in-Chief of the Straits Settlements," etc.

In a few months Mrs. Brabant was equally the best-liked and best-hated woman in Fiji—the men paying her the most undivided attention, because she liked it and was Brabant's wife, and the women hating her because she would be, at times, languidly insolent to them, and practically monopolised even the attentions of the naval officers when a dance was given. That nine out of ten of her lady friends detested her merely afforded her secret pleasure—secret, that is, so far as her husband went, for she feared but one thing in the world, and that was that John Brabant would discover her true and worthless nature.

For some minutes the two mates smoked on in silence, then Diaz made a backward gesture towards the bungalow on the hills: "Are you going there to-night?"

Lester nodded. "I think so. He asked me, you see."

The Chileno remained silent for a minute or so, then said, "She is the most beautiful fair woman I have ever seen."

Again Lester nodded, but made no remark. He was well aware that Pedro Diaz shared his dislike for the captain's wife, though he had never openly said so. The Chileno, morose and grim as he was, was intensely devoted to Brabant, who had twice saved his life—once under a heavy rifle fire in the Solomon Islands, when Diaz and his boat's crew were all but cut off and massacred by the natives, and Brabant came out of the fray with a broken arm and a bullet through his shoulder; and once at sea, when he was knocked overboard by the parting of a boom guy, and his captain sprang overboard after him, though the night was as dark as pitch, and the *Maritana* was like to have been smothered by the heavy, lumping seas which fell upon her decks when she was brought to.

"He is a doomed man," resumed the second mate presently, with a sullen yet emphatic tone; "that woman will be his doom. She is beautiful, and as false as she is beautiful. I can see it in her eyes; *he* cannot see. But were I in his place I should not leave her alone. She is not to be trusted."

Lester thought the same, but said nothing, and he and Diaz rose and went on the main deck to welcome Bruce, whose cutter was now coming alongside.

"How are you, Jim? How are you, Mr. Diaz?" said the doctor, a big, bronzed-faced Scotsman with kindly blue eyes, as he sprang over the side and shook hands with them. "I saw the *Maritana* early this morning in tow of the boats, so I started off in the cutter at once. Brabant gone ashore?"

"Yes, about an hour ago," replied the chief mate. "Almost a newly-married man, you see," he added, with a laugh.

Dr. Bruce gave his friend a quick, penetrating glance, but there was no answering smile on his lips. He knew Brabant well, and knew *of* Mrs. Brabant more than did her husband.

The three men sat down under the awning for nearly an hour, smoking and drinking their whiskey-and-soda, and talking freely together. Bruce—much the oldest man of the three—was aware that both his companions were devoted to Brabant, and knew him far better than himself, and so, being a straightforward, purposeful man, he said what he had to say about Mrs. Brabant in very plain language.

“You, Jim, *can* and ought to give him a hint. I can’t. If I did he would most likely haul off and knock me down. But he ought to stay ashore this time. She may be only a brainless little fool of a flirt, but there’s a lot’ of talk about her, especially since that young sweep of a Danvers came here.”

“Who is he?” asked Lester.

Dr. Bruce leant back in his seat, and flicked the ash off his cigar. “He’s the manager of the new Land and Trading Company here—a little, pretty-faced fellow, with a yellow moustache, curly hair, and as much principle in him as a damned rat. He has the command of any amount of money, and the women here think no end of him. Was in the army—Rifles, I think—but believe, though I can’t be sure of it, was kicked out. Thorough beast, but just the kind of man to get along too well with women who don’t know him. Now I’ll take another whiskey-and-soda after thus traducing Mr. Danvers, who I’m perfectly willing to boot along Levuka beach from one end to the other if he gives me a chance to do it on my own account. And, by Jove, I’ll give him a chance to-night.”

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