

MAUDSLEY'S LAST CRUISE

By Louis Becke

Author of "Rodman the Boat Steerer" etc.

THE Montara, barque, of Sydney, from the New Hebrides to Samoa with a cargo of black labor, was lying becalmed upon a sea of glass, with the pitch bubbling up between its deck seams. Ten miles away to the eastward the wooded slopes of two islands—Fotuna and Alofi—which an hour before had shown a vivid and enchanting green, were now changing to a dulled purple under the last rays of an angry, blood red sun.

As four bells struck John Maudsley, the chief mate, came up on deck from the main hold and, walking quickly aft, joined the captain on the poop.

"Packerham," he said wearily, as he took off his broad straw hat and fanned his heated face, "there's another poor devil just pegged out—one of the Santa Cruz boys. Thirteen in twenty-one days! and unless we get a breeze soon they'll begin to die like rotten sheep. Look here, old man, it's no use talking, we must let a batch of say thirty up on deck at once. It will at least give the rest some more air."

The two men looked into each other's faces for a few moments in silence, then Packerham spoke.

"It's terribly risky, Maudsley. There are only three sound men in the ship besides you and I, and it would simply be asking those Tanna and Pentecost niggers to cut our throats and take the ship. What chance should we have, old man, with even only a dozen of them if they know our weaknesses? Can't you get the sick men to come up on deck?"

"No. They are sulky and savage, and would rather die down there with suffocation. There are now quite half a dozen of them sickening. Tried to get one fellow up on his feet to bring him on deck, but his countrymen looked so threateningly at me that I had to desist."

"Any of the Tanna and Pentecost boys sick yet?"

"No; it would be a deuced good thing for us if they were. They're the crowd who are bent on mischief. So far only the Banks Islanders have been attacked, and they are the least dangerous of the lot. Something must be done, Packerham. Always thought measles was a baby's complaint, didn't you? I say, old man, look out for the deck for a bit and send for some coffee. I've got a bit of a twister coming on. O, this is a lovely trip! All hands but five down with fever, measles among the 'cargo'—the greater portion of which is only waiting its chance to cut our throats; and a beastly, furious calm to boot."

"Steward, bring some coffee, quick," cried Packerham, as Maudsley, with chattering teeth and shaking limbs, crawled up between the upended wings of the skylight, and drawing his knees to his chest, lay down on his side, whilst the captain hastily covered him with rugs and blankets until the ague fit was past and the bone wracking agonies of the fever began.

The steward brought the coffee, and Maudsley raised himself on his elbow and caught sight of the captain standing over him.

"Hang you, Packerham, what the devil are you doing here?" he chattered, in querulous, irritable tones; "I'm all right. You go and get that 'ween deck ladder up—if the boys mean to make a push one man with a gun won't go down. Take a look below first, and see what they're doing. If it wasn't murder to do so in such weather I'd clap the latches on."

The skipper of the Montara was well used to his mate's language, for the two men were old and tried comrades; and in all matters concerning natives Packerham always gave way to his subordinate, for Maudsley was not only his chief officer but "recruiter" as well, and no man who ever sailed the Pacific had more nerve and a greater knowledge of native custom and character, nor had displayed it so often in the face of the deadliest danger.

Packerham walked along to the main deck and looked down the hatchway. The fast gathering darkness prevented him from discerning more than the recumbent figures of his "cargo," with here and there the gleam of a surptitious pipe or a cigaret of negrohead tobacco rolled in a dried banana leaf. A sailor, armed with a revolver and cutlass, was pacing to and fro across the foreward end of the hatchway, and presently Packerham motioned him to haul up the light ladder without noise; and then he went to the cabin door, addressed the occupants (six A. B.) which it contained.

"Here, I say, you fellows, can't you shake off a bit of fever? Why, these the mate, who is worse than any of you, and whose teeth are going like a cotton gin at full speed, dancing a jig on the poop to himself. Come, buck up, my lads."

Then raising the lamp he surveyed the place, examined the men's carbines and pistols, and then went on his usual nightly round along the deck of the disease smitten ship. Ten minutes later he rejoined Maudsley, who was now sitting up, clad only in his pyjama trousers, and pressing his throbbing head between his hands as the fever ran fiercely through his boiling veins.

"Pack!" he began excitedly, "there's a bit of an air up aloft. Look over the side and you'll see we're moving. Does it stir, Harry?"

"No, sir, not yet," answered the helmsman.

Packerham looked aloft, and then over the side.

"You're right, Maudsley, a breeze is coming sure enough, and a breeze means everything to us; we can run into Singavi bay on Fotuna. One of the two French priests there



bright light of myriad stars the little barque glided over the silent sea.

An hour before the dawn Maudsley, who was feeling better, had taken the wheel, whilst Packerham and the others were ranging the cable ready for anchoring. The clang and thump of the heavy iron links as they fell on deck seemed to put new life into the crew, and even those lying sick in the house came out into the cooling morning air, with weakened arms and trembling knees helped to take the chain along, ship shape.

Just as they had finished, and as the first yellow lights of the rising sun were dispersing the thick mists of Schouten mountains on Fotuna Island, the steward came softly up to Maudsley and touched his arm.

"The second mate is dead, sir."

"Was he conscious, steward?"

"Yes, sir he was—just at the last. He arst fur you, sir, an' when I told 'im that you was at the wheel, an' the skipper an' the rest of the hands were gettin' ready for anchorin', he say to me, 'Don't call the mate, steward, but tell 'im as there's a letter under my pillow for some one as he's a-boards

me a-speakin' of. An' without another word, sir, he turns on his side, an' dies nice and quiet."

"All right, steward. Go below and get me a stiff glass of brandy. And, look, while I think of it, put that letter of Mr. Belton's in the captain's cabin. Hurry up now, you little cockney swab, and bring me that brandy—I want it."

The white man was losing patience, the wound on his face made him feel sick and faint, and a sudden spasm of ague shook his frame. He took his pistol from his belt.

"I promise you that no harm shall be done to you if you come down quickly and so into the hold with your countrymen. Have I ever lied to you?"

"No," replied the other man of the four—a wild eyed, vicious faced brute, with his hair twisted into countless tiny curls, which hung in a greasy tangle down his neck.

"Then do as I bid you, or I shall kill you from where I stand—quick!" and he raised his right hand.

Steadily and suspiciously they descended, still grasping their blood stained knives and tomahawks. As they reached the deck they stopped and glared about them with the ferocity and fear of hunted beasts.

"Keep back there, men," said Maudsley to the crew, who were standing near the main hatch, "they'll want a bit of coaxing. Hang a line over the foreward end of the hatch so that they can get down." Then putting his revolver back into its pouch, he unbuckled the belt and laid it down on the windlass.

"Now, come with me, men of Tanna," he said quietly, "no one shall hurt you. See, I hold no weapon in my hand, and the rest of the white men, too, have laid down their guns." Beckoning to them to follow, he walked to the hatchway, then turned and faced them.

"Now listen, 'Taka, 'Taka, 'Taka, 'Taka, and go down one by one. And tell your countrymen and the men of Pentecost that if they sit down quietly until the sun is high in the sky they shall have food and water given them. Then when all the badness is out of their minds they shall come on deck, ten at a time, and the smell of blood will no longer be in our nostrils. But before food and water is given every tomahawk and every club must be brought on deck to me by two men. Now give me these," and he reached his hands out for the weapons they themselves carried.

Two heavy butcher knives and one tomahawk were, after a little hesitation, given up, and were at once thrown over the side, and the three disarmed savages went below; the fourth man sat clutching his tomahawk tightly.

"Come to me quick," said Maudsley, "give it to me!"

"Take it, white man," and the native, swinging the keen edged weapon swiftly above his head, struck it deep into the officer's side, and with a yell of triumph he sprang over the side and swam for the shore—only to throw up his arms and sink, as Packerham sent a bullet through his head before he was twenty yards from the ship.

"I'm done for, Packerham, old man. No, don't carry me aft, time's too short. There's a letter for poor Belton's girl, Pack, which you must give to her. Tell her she must forgive me for tempting him to ship on this cruise—my last cruise, old man."

Gently he lifted and carried him aft, and quickly rigged an awning, for the sun was blazing hot and fiercely upon the vessel's decks. Then Packerham, with the quick falling tears coursing down his bronzed and bearded face, knelt beside the dying man and took his last words.

Maudsley opened his eyes and smiled at his captain and gave a faint answering pressure. "Don't you worry, old fellow. Somehow I don't much care. But it was hard for poor Belton to die—he was a bright young shaver, and a gentleman. I've got my gruel this time, and I'm not going to 'Taka' over it. And I'm no man to my own."

Then in slow, labored words he told Packerham what should be done. The sick natives should be put ashore as soon as possible; the rest disarmed and kept confined till aid could be obtained from the white traders in Fotuna, who would find him native sailors to help to sail the barque to Samoa. Nothing escaped him, nothing was forgotten.

"Jack," he whispered, "send it all to Belton's girl."

Packerham bent his head, and then Maudsley, the recruiter, gave a long, heavy sigh and closed his eyes—his last words were ended.

"Steward, bestow, come here; I want you fellows to witness that I have said that all money coming to me for this cruise is to be paid to Capt. Packerham." Then he sank back again and motioned to the captain to come closer.

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"You're ill, sir. I can see that. Can't I call one of the hands, sir, to take the wheel?"

"No, you can't. Go below and get that £20 piece and stow it away—and clap a stopper on your jaw tackle, you silly old fool!"

Presently Packerham came aft, and stood beside him.

"We're all ready for'd, Maudy."

"Right you are, Pack. We'll go about presently; another half hour will bring us close enough, I think, though I can't see where we are well as yet. Take a cast of the lead, will you, and then let me know what we are staying at. O, God! Look there!" and he sprang down to the main hatch and tried to beat back the upward rush of three score or more of naked savages with his clenched fists.

Packerham and the three seamen ran to his aid, and then began a deadly struggle—the white men trying to hurl back the savages into the hold instead of using their revolvers. But in less than ten seconds one of the sailors was thrown down upon his back and his brains dashed out with a tomahawk; then, and not till then, was a shot fired. Packerham was the first to bring his pistol into play, and none too soon, for a huge Tanna man had seized him by the beard with his left hand and in another moment would have driven a knife into his heart. The sharp crack of the revolver saved him from further mischief, and each time a native went down; then came the loud reports of the seamen's carbines, and the last of slaughter had seized upon them all, as flinging aside their firearms, they drew their heavy cutlasses and slashed, and cut, and stabbed the naked figures of the now maddened islanders. Up to this time not more than thirty had succeeded in actually gaining the deck by means of the ladder they had so cunningly made and placed in position, and of these eight or ten were lying either dead or dying.

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THE ANGEL OF THE WARD : : : By Robert Halifax.

HOW comes it she's never got married?" I ask.

"Explains it! A woman with that face that looks like that, you can't tell me! Call her a walking iceberg here, don't they? Know what I call her? It's written on this here wall, in letters they can't rub out—'Angel of the Ward.' Laughin', are you? 'Seuse me, mate, you're a born fool! I'm old, I'm things go, and I know what I know. There's a secret somewhere—a mystery with a heart still beatin' in it; and time'll bear me out."

Outside lay a deep, darkening reach of the river that wound away toward the sea and eternity. Here inside all was light, hope, and warmth; subdued whisperings and low ripples of laughter came from the group of nurses at the far end of the main ward. Presently the "angel" was not among them; the grizzled, brown old nurse in the corner bed sniffed and resumed his husky, strenuous mutterings to the wide eyed young fellow in the bed adjoining.

Grimly crude, but terribly earnest, the old salt had sprung a subtlety upon the other patients.

"Your hospital nurse," he insisted with warmth, "was a woman—and something infinitely more than that. What! It sounded in her steady step, in her clear, quiet voice! It was the something deep in her calm eyes that could make the boldest man feel somehow less than a man." And he said this after Sister Lou had hovered over his bed for two silent, burning, awful nights in succession, while fever struggled for a grip, and the pendulum swung between life and death. Unknown to her, he had noted many little facts that led him wondering whether life was what it seemed, after all. Anyway, a great knot stopped all the words in his throat, when, one cool morning, she put a hand on his forehead and whispered:

"There! Doctor says you are to have your leave renewed. Thankful! Going to make the most of it this time? No dead mother to remember?"

"Such a hand," he muttered in awe; "like a wisp of oost snow strayed on to a gushing desert. And such a whispe, as if she read all his past and his bit of a future! As long as he lived he's never understand why—why—she wasn't wedded, to make some man's life a paradise."

That was his queer point of view. There was another of course. Women live for reasons when a man is content to bask in the mere effect. The other nurses were definitely agreed that stately, silent Sister Lou had a past of her own,

and was living with the sole determination to forget it. They loved her at a distance—and, possibly, were jealous of her glorious calm, and of the many touching little keepsakes furtively left in the lobby "for Sister Lou."

That night—that particular night, when, as they say, she came back to life—Sister Lou had been assigned to relieve the 9 o'clock nurse in charge of the incipient fever ward.

It was fifteen minutes to the hour when she came into the main ward, bathed hands and face in antiseptic fluid, donned the gown and hood that made her look like a pale nun, took her instructions in mechanical silence, and rustled down the long corridor for the night as softly as a breath of summer wind. There was just one new case, matron had said. It might mean anything or nothing; developments must be watched and recorded. All was so quiet in the building now that a sound from the world outside could be felt.

Perhaps sixty seconds had elapsed when, after gauging the temperature of the main ward the matron stepped down that corridor to open a window. She paused to glance out at the river lying like a web of silver sequins in the moonlight; and in that brief moment something happened.

She heard a swift confused little rush of feet and a succession of suffocating gasps. Then one of the dividing curtains had flashed back, and was framing a never forgotten picture. Sister Lou, her slight figure drawn up in trembling rigidity, her face white as whitest marble, queer little sob clicking her teeth, her wide eyes staring back as if at something that breathed and waited beyond the next curtain. That suggestion, indeed, came so naturally, so vividly, that the matron swept past and found herself plucking back the folds in wonder, before she thought of asking a simple question.

"There was nothing—nothing at all!" said Lou.

"Sister Lou!" she whispered, with chilling dignity. "I am surprised! What on earth am I to think?"

"No, no; I don't wish any one to know! Let me stand here a minute; just a minute. You are a woman, too; you can see it is real! Yes; I may be mistaken, but I thought I saw—I was—don't leave me! the breathless gasp broke off.

"You won't leave me? You won't leave me, will you?"

The matron reflected, stepped back, and turned the key in the main ward door. Perhaps she understood physical agony better than mental.

"Now! I must either knock, or ring up the house surgeon. You saw what? Turn your eyes away from that curtain; look straight at me!" She put her hand on the slight, shrinking shoulder. "Come, dearie; it is not time you told just one woman what shadow lies over your life? Tell—trust me!"

A moment more, and then came the calm—too calm—whisper:

"I loved him! I was living for him, and would have died for him! I was so happy, so sure! It almost broke my heart to let him sign away for three years more at sea, but a wouldn't let him know that. It was to be his last trip; he had promised. He was to write often; I was to be his dear wife; I had only to wait and wait; I had only to be as brave as thousands of women had been before me. . . . He wrote—just two letters. Think of a woman waiting all those years for a step and a voice that were never to sound! He had forgotten me! He had seen some one whose face was more beautiful than mine. That was the man who had made me love him until I lived upon the hope of his truth! He went away yet again; he had watched and waited outside in the dark, ashamed to face me and ask my forgiveness. Did he know—did he know the white wedding dress here in its tissue paper sheets, every stitch drawn by my own fingers? He knew at least, he had taken all the light from a woman's life. I have lived only to forget him, to hate him, to pray that I might never see him again. Because if I saw him—!" The calm breath broke off. She pointed. "And he is there!"

Deepest silence, within and without, broken at last by the matron's lowered voice.

"And you have won your battle? you hate him—you can forget?"

It was part pity, part vague misgiving, that prompted the question.

Sister Lou had not seemed to hear. Drawn up rigidly still, she pointed along the corridor. Tragedy's own was fingers seemed to be following lines on her face as she stood.

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"Now! I must either knock, or ring up the house surgeon. You saw what? Turn your eyes away from that curtain; look straight at me!" She put her hand on the slight, shrinking shoulder. "Come, dearie; it is not time you told just one woman what shadow lies over your life? Tell—trust me!"

A moment more, and then came the calm—too calm—whisper:

"I loved him! I was living for him, and would have died for him! I was so happy, so sure! It almost broke my heart to let him sign away for three years more at sea, but a wouldn't let him know that. It was to be his last trip; he had promised. He was to write often; I was to be his dear wife; I had only to wait and wait; I had only to be as brave as thousands of women had been before me. . . . He wrote—just two letters. Think of a woman waiting all those years for a step and a voice that were never to sound! He had forgotten me! He had seen some one whose face was more beautiful than mine. That was the man who had made me love him until I lived upon the hope of his truth! He went away yet again; he had watched and waited outside in the dark, ashamed to face me and ask my forgiveness. Did he know—did he know the white wedding dress here in its tissue paper sheets, every stitch drawn by my own fingers? He knew at least, he had taken all the light from a woman's life. I have lived only to forget him, to hate him, to pray that I might never see him again. Because if I saw him—!" The calm breath broke off. She pointed. "And he is there!"

Deepest silence, within and without, broken at last by the matron's lowered voice.

"And you have won your battle? you hate him—you can forget?"

It was part pity, part vague misgiving, that prompted the question.

Sister Lou had not seemed to hear. Drawn up rigidly still, she pointed along the corridor. Tragedy's own was fingers