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# PÂKIA

From "The Tapu Of Banderah and Other Stories"

By Louis Becke

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Late one evening, when the native village was wrapped in slumber, Temana and I brought our sleeping-mats down to the boat-shed, and spread them upon the white, clinking sand. For here, out upon the open beach, we could feel a breath of the cooling sea-breeze, denied to the village houses by reason of the thick belt of palms which encompassed them on three sides. And then we were away from Malepa's baby, which was a good thing in itself.

Temana, tall, smooth-limbed, and brown-skinned, was an excellent savage, and mine own good friend. He and his wife Malepa lived with me as a sort of foster-father and mother, though their united ages did not reach mine by a year or two.

When Malepa's first baby was born, she and her youthful husband apologised sincerely for the offence against my comfort, and with many tears prepared to leave my service. But although I was agreeable to let Malepa and her little bundle of red-skinned wrinkles go, I could not part with Temana, so I bade her stay. She promised not to let the baby cry o' nights. Poor soul. She tried her best; but every night—or rather towards daylight—that terrible infant would raise its fearsome voice, and wail like a foghorn in mortal agony.

We lit our pipes and lay back watching a moon of silvered steel poised 'midships in a cloudless sky. Before us, unbroken in its wide expanse, save for two miniature islets near the eastern horn of the encircling reef, the glassy surface of the sleeping lagoon was beginning to quiver and throb to the muffled call of the outer ocean; for the tide was about to turn, and soon the brimming waters would sink inch by inch, and foot by foot from the hard, white sand, and with strange swirlings and bubblings and mighty eddyings go tearing through the narrow passage at eight knots an hour.

Presently we heard a footfall upon the path which led to the boat-shed, and then an old man, naked but for his *titi*, or waist-girdle of grass, came out into the moonlight, and greeted us in a quavering, cracked voice.

"*Aue!* white man, my dear friend. So thou and Temana sit here in the moonlight!"

"Even so, Pâkfa, most excellent and good old man. Sit ye here beside us. Nay, not there, but here on mine own mat. So. Hast thy pipe with thee?"

The ancient chuckled, and his wrinkled old face beamed as he untwisted a black and stumpy clay from his perforated and pendulous ear-lobe, which hung full down upon his shoulder, and, turning it upside down,

tapped the palm of his left hand with it.

"See!" he said, with another wheezing, half-whispered, half-strangled laugh, "see and hear the emptiness thereof! Nothing has been in its belly since cockcrow. And until now have I hungered for a smoke. Twice did I think to come to thee to-day and ask thee for *kaitalafu* (credit) for five sticks of tobacco, but I said to my pipe, 'Nay, let us wait till night time.' For see, friend of my heart, there are ever greedy eyes which watch the coming and going of a poor old man; and had I gotten the good God-given tobacco from thee by daylight, friends would arise all around me as I passed through the village to my house. And then, lo, the five sticks would become but one!"

"Pâkia," I said in English, as I gave him a piece of tobacco and my knife, "you are a philosopher."

He stopped suddenly, and placing one hand on my knee, looked wistfully into my face, as an inquiring child looks into the eyes of its mother.

"Tell me, what is that?"

I tried to find a synonym. "It means that you are a *tagata poto*—a wise man."

The old, brown, bald head nodded, and the dark, merry eyes danced.

"Aye, aye. Old I may be, and useless, but I have lived—I have lived. And though when I am dead my children and grandchildren will make a *tagi* over me, I shall laugh, for I know that of one hundred tears, ninety and nine will be for the tobacco and the biscuit and the rice that with me will vanish!"

He filled and lit his pipe, and then, raising one skinny, tattooed arm, pointed to the moon.

"Hast such a moon as that in *papalagi* land?"

"Sometimes."

"Aye, sometimes. But not always. No, not always. I know, I know. See, my friend; let us talk. I am full of talk to-night. You are a good man, and I, old Pâkfa, have seen many things. Aye, many things and many lands. Aye, I, who am now old and toothless, and without oil in my knees and my elbows, can talk to you in two tongues besides my own.... Temana!"

"*Oi*, good father Pâkia."

"Go away. The white man and I would talk."

I placed my hand on the bald head of the ancient "Temana shall go to the house and bring us a bottle of grog. We will drink, and then you shall talk. I am one who would learn."

The old man took my hand and patted it "Yes, let us talk to-night And let us drink grog. Grog is good to drink, sometimes. Sometimes it is bad to drink. It is bad to drink when the swift blood of youth is in our veins and a hot word calls to a sharp knife. Ah! I have seen it! Listen! Dost hear the rush of the lagoon waters through the passage? That is the quick, hot blood of youth, when it is stirred by grog and passion, and the soft touch of a woman's bosom. I know it I know it. But let Temana bring the bottle. I am not afraid to drink grog with *thee*, Ah, thou art not like some white men. Thou can't drink, and give some to a poor old man, and if prying eyes and babbling tongues make mischief, and the missionary sends thee a *tusi* (letter), and says 'This drinking of grog by Pâkia is wrong,' thou sendest him a letter, saying, 'True, O teacher of the Gospel. This drinking of grog is very wrong. Wherefore do I send thee three dollars for the school, and ask thy mercy for old Pâkfa, who was my guest.'"

I slapped the ancient on his withered old back.

"To-night ye shall drink as much grog as ye like, Pâkfa. The missionary is a good man, and will not heed foolish talk."

Pâkfa shook his head. "Mareko is a Samoan. He thinketh much of himself because he hath been to Sini (Sydney) and stood before many white gentlemen and ladies, and told them about these islands. He is a vain fool, though a great man here in Nukufetau, but in Livapoola{\*} he would be but as a pig. Livapoola is a very beautiful place, full of beautiful women. Ah! you laugh.... I am bent and old now, and my bones rattle under my skin like pebbles in a gourd. Then I was young and strong. Listen! I was a boat-steerer for three years on a London whaleship. I have fought in the wars of Chile and Peru. I can tell you many things, and you will understand.... I have seen many lands."

Temana returned with a bottle of brandy, a gourd of water, and three cups.

"Drink this, Pâkfa, *taka ta-ina*\*\*} And talk. Your talk is good to hear. And I can understand."

\* *Liverpool*.

\*\**Lit, dear crony*.

He drank the liquor neat, and then washed it down with a cupful of water.

"*Tapa!* Ah, the good, sweet grog! And see, above us is the round moon, and here be we three. We three—two young and strong, one whose blood is getting cold. Ah, I will talk, and this boy, Temana, will learn that Pâkia is no boasting old liar, but a true man." Then, suddenly dropping the Nukufetau dialect in which he had hitherto spoken, he said quietly in English—

"I told you I could speak other languages beside my own. It is true, for I can talk English and Spanish." Then he went back into native: "But I am not a vain old man. These people here are fools. They think that because on Sundays they dress like white men and go to church five times in one day, and can read and write in Samoan, that they are as clever as white men. Bah! they are fools, fools! Where are the strong men of my youth? Where are the thousand and two hundred people who, when my father was a boy, lived upon the shores of this lagoon? They are gone, gone!"

"True, Pâkfa. They are gone."

"Aye, they are perished like the dead leaves. And once when I said in the hearing of the *kaupule* (head men) that in the days of the *po-uri* (heathen times) we were a great people and better off than we are now, I was beaten by my own grand-daughter, and fined ten dollars for speaking of such things, and made to work on the road for two months. But it is true—it is true. Where are the people now? They are dead, perished; there are

now but three hundred left of the thousand and two hundred who lived in my father's time. And of those that are left, what are they? They are weak and eaten up with strange diseases. The men cannot hunt and fish as men hunted and fished in my father's time.

"*Tah!* they are women, and the women are men, for now the man must work for the woman, so that she can buy hats and boots and calicoes, and dress like a white woman. Give me more grog, for these things fill my belly with bitterness, and the grog is sweet. Ah! I shall tell you many things to-night."

"Tell me of them, old man. See, the moon is warm to our skins. And as we drink, we shall eat. Temana here shall bring us food. And we shall talk till the sun shines over the tops of the trees on Motu Luga. I would learn of the old times before this island became *lotu* (Christianised)."

"*Oi.* I will tell you. I am now but as an old, upturned canoe that is used for a sitting-place for children who play on the beach at night. And I am called a fool and a bad man, because I sometimes speak of the days that are dead. Temana, is Malepa thy wife virtuous?"

"*Se kau iloā*" ("I do not know"), replied Temana, with a solemn face.

"Ah, you cannot tell! Who can tell nowadays? But you will know when some day she is fined five dollars. In my time if a man doubted his wife, the club fell swiftly, or the spear was sped, and she was dead. And, because of this custom, wives in those days were careful. Now, they care not, and are fined five dollars many times. And the husband hath to pay the fine!" He laughed in his noiseless way, and then puffed at his pipe. "And if he cannot pay, then he and his wife, and the man who hath wronged him, work together on the roads, and eat and drink together as friends, and are not ashamed. And at night-time they sing hymns together!"

"People must be punished when wrong is done, Pâkia," I said lamely.

"Bah! what is five dollars to a woman? Is it a high fence set with spears over which she cannot climb? If a man hath fifty dollars, does not his wife know it, and tell her lover (if she hath one) that he may meet her ten times! Give me more water in this grog, good white man with the brown skin like mine own!"

The old fellow smoked his pipe in silence for a few minutes; then again he pointed to the moon, nodded and smiled.

"*Tah!* What a moon! Would that I were young again! See, in the days of my youth, on such a night as this, all the young men and women would be standing on the outer reef fishing for *malau*, which do but take a bait in the moonlight. *Now*, because to-morrow is the Sabbath day, no man must launch a canoe nor take a rod in his hand, lest he stay out beyond the hour of midnight, and his soul go to hell to burn in red fire for ever and ever. Bah!"

"Never mind these things, Pâkia. Tell me instead how came ye to serve in the wars of Chile and Peru, or of thy voyages in the *folau manu* (whaleship)."

His eyes sparkled. "Ah, those were the days! Twice in one whaleship did I sail among the ice mountains of the far south, where the wind cuts like a knife and the sea is black to look at *Tapa!* the cold, the cold, the cold which burneth the skin like iron at white heat! But I was strong; and we killed many whales. I, Pâkfa, in one voyage struck thirteen! I was in the mate's boat.... Look at this now!" He held up his withered arm and peered at me. "It was a strong arm then; now it is but good to carry food to my mouth, or to hold a stick when I walk." The last words he uttered wistfully, and then sighed.

"The mate of that ship was a good man. He taught me many things. Once, when we had left the cold seas and were among the islands of Tonga, he struck me in his rage because I threw the harpoon at a great sperm whale, and missed. That night I slipped over the side, and swam five miles to the land. Dost know the place called Lifuka? 'Twas there I landed. I lay in a thicket till daylight, then I arose and went into a house and asked for food. They gave me a yam and a piece of bonito, and as I ate men sprang on me from behind and tied me up hand and foot. Then I was carried back to the ship, and the captain gave those pigs of Tongans fifty dollars' worth of presents for bringing me back."

"He thought well of thee, Pâkia, to pay so much."

He nodded.

"Aye, for I was a good man, and worth much to him. And I was not flogged, for the mate was my friend always. All the voyage I was a lucky man, till we came to a place called Amboyna. Here the mate became sick and died, so I ran away. This time I was not caught, and when the ship was gone, I was given work by an Englishman. He was a rich merchant—not a poor trader like thee. He had a great house, many servants, and many native wives. Thou hast but two servants, and no wife. Why have ye no wife? It is not proper!"

I expressed my deep sense of the insignificance of my domestic arrangements, and gave him another nip of brandy.

"But, like him, thou hast a big heart. May you live long and become a *mau koloa* (rich man). Ah! the grog, the good grog. I am young again to-night... And so for two years I lived at Amboyna. Then my master went to Peretania—to Livapoola—and took me with him. I was his servant, and he trusted me and made much of me.

"Ah, Livapoola is a fine place. I was six months there, and wherever my master went I went with him. By and by he married, and we went to live at a place by the sea, in a fair white house of stone, with rich lands encompassing it. It was a foreign place, and we crossed the sea to go there. There were many women servants there, and one of them, named Lissi, began to smile at, and then to talk to me. I gave her many presents, for every week my master put a gold piece in my hand. One day I asked him to give me this girl for my wife. He laughed, and said I was foolish; that she was playing with me. I told her this. She swore to me that when I had fifty gold pieces she would be my wife, but that I must tell no one.... Ah! how a woman can fool a man! I was fooled. And every gold piece I got I gave to her to keep for me.

"I have said that there were many servants. There was one young man, named Harry, whose work it was to take my master about in his *puha tia tia* (carriage). Sometimes I would see him talking to the girl, and then looking at me. Then I began to watch; but she was too cunning. Always had she one word for me. Be patient; when we have the fifty gold pieces all shall be well. We shall go away from here, and get married."

"One night, as I lay upon the grass, smoking my pipe, I heard voices, the voices of the man Harry and Lissi.

They were speaking of me. They spoke loudly, and I heard all that was said. 'He is but a simple fool,' she said, with a laugh; 'but in another month I shall have the last of his money, and then thou and I shall go away quietly. Faugh! the tattooed beast!' and I heard her laugh again, and the man laughed with her, but bade her be careful lest I should suspect."

"She was a bad woman, Pâkfa," I began, when he interrupted me with a quick gesture.

"I crept back into the house and got a knife, and waited. The night was dark, but I could see. Presently they came along a narrow path which led to the house. Then I sprang out, and drove my knife twice into the man's chest. I had not time to kill the woman, for at the third blow the knife broke off at the hilt, and she fled in the darkness. I wanted to kill her because she had fooled me and taken my money—forty-six gold pieces.

"There was a great wood which ran from my master's house down to the sea. I ran hard, very hard, till I came to the water. I could see ships in the harbour, quite near. I swam to one, and tried to creep on deck and hide, but heard the sailors talking. Presently I saw a vessel—a schooner—come sailing slowly past. There was a boat towing astern. I swam softly over, and got into the boat, and laid down till it was near the dawn. There was but little wind then, and the ship was not moving fast, so I got into the water again, and held on to the side of the boat, and began to cry out in a loud voice for help. As soon as they heard me the ship was brought to the wind, and I got back into the boat I was taken on board and given food and coffee, and told the captain that I had fallen overboard from another ship, and had been swimming for many hours. Only the captain could speak a little English—all the others were Italians. It was an Italian ship.

"I was a long time on that ship. We went first to Rio, then down to the cold seas of the south, and then to Callao. But the captain never gave me any money, so I ran away. Why should a man work for naught? By and by an American whaleship came to Callao, and I went on board. I was put in the captain's boat. We sailed about a long time, but saw no whales, so when the ship came to Juan Fernandez I and a white sailor named Bob ran away, and hid in the woods till the ship was gone. Then we came out and went to the Governor, who set us to work to cut timber for the whaleships. Hast been to this island?"

"No," I replied; "'tis a fair land, I have heard."

"Aye, a fair, fair land, with green woods and sweet waters; and the note of the blue pigeon soundeth from dawn till dark, and the wild goats leap from crag to crag."

"Didst stay there long, Pâkia?"

He rubbed his scanty white beard meditatively. "A year—two years—I cannot tell. Time goes on and on, and the young do not count the days. But there came a ship which wanted men, and I sailed away to Niu Silani. {\*} That, too, is a fair land, and the men of the country have brown skins like us, and I soon learnt their tongue, which is akin to ours. I was a long time in that ship, for we kept about the coast, and the Maoris filled her with logs of *kauri* wood, to take to Sydney. It was a good ship, for although we were paid no money every man had as much rum as he could drink and as much tobacco as he could smoke, and a young Maori girl for wife, who lived on board. Once the Maoris tried to take the ship as she lay at anchor, but we shot ten or more. Then we went to Sydney, where I was put in prison for many weeks."

\* *New Zealand*

"Why was that?"

"I do not know. It was, I think, because of something the captain had done when he was in Sydney before; he had taken away two men and a woman who were prisoners of the Governor had seen them on board at Juan Fernandez; they went ashore there to live. But the Governor of Sydney was good to me. I was brought before him; he asked me many questions about these islands, and gave me some silver money. Then the next day I was put on board a ship, which took me to Tahiti. But see, dear friend, I cannot talk more to-night, though my tongue is loose and my belly warm with the good grog. But it is strong, very strong, and I fear to drink more, lest I disgust thee and lose thy friendship."

"Nay, old man. Have no fear of that. And see, sleep here with us till the dawn. Temana shall bring thee a covering-mat."

"Ah-h-h! Thou art good to old Pâkfa. I shall stay till the dawn. It is good to have such a friend. To-morrow, if I weary thee not, I shall tell thee of how I returned to Chile and fought with the English ship-captain in the war, and of the woman he loved, and of the great fire which burnt two thousand women in a church."

"*Tah!*" said Temana incredulously; "two thousand?"

"Aye!" he snapped angrily, "dost think I be drunk, boy? Go and watch thy wife. How should an ignorant hog like thee know of such things?"

"'Sh, 'sh, old man. Be not so quick to anger. Temana meant no harm. Here is thy covering-mat. Lie down and sleep."

He smiled good-naturedly at us, and then, pulling the mat over him to shield his aged frame from the heavy morning dew, was soon asleep.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PÂKIA \*\*\*

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