

A Basket of Breadfruit

By Louis Becke

It was in Steinberger's time. A trader had come up to Apia in his boat from the end of Savaii, the largest of the Samoan group, and was on his way home again when the falling tide caused him to stop awhile at Mulinu'u Point, about two miles from Apia. Here he designed to smoke and talk and drink kava at the great camp with some hospitable native acquaintances during the rising of the water. Soon he was taking his ease on a soft mat, watching the bevy of *aua luma* [the local girls] "chawing" kava.

Now the trader lived at Falealupo, at the extreme westerly end of Savaii; but the Samoans, by reason of its isolation and extremity, have for ages called it by another name—an unprintable one—and so some of the people present began to jest with the trader for living in such a place. He fell in with their humor, and said, that if those present would find him for a wife a girl unseared by the breath of scandal, he would leave Falealupo for Safune, where he had bought land.

"Malie!" said an old dame, with one eye and white hair, "the *papalagi* [foreigner] is inspired to speak wisdom tonight; for at Safune grow the sweetest nuts and the biggest taro and breadfruit; and, lo! here among the kavachewers is a young maid from Safune—mine own granddaughter Salome. And against her name can no one in Samoa laugh in the hollow of his hand;" and the old creature, amid laughter and cries of *Isa! e le ma le lo matua* [the old woman is without shame], crept over to the trader, and, with one skinny hand on his knee; gazed steadily into his face with her one eye.

The trader looked at the girl—at Salome. She had, at her grandmother's speech, turned her head aside, and taking the "chaw" of kava root from her pretty mouth, dissolved into shamefaced tears. The trader was a man of quick perceptions, and he made up his mind to do in earnest what he had said in jest—this because of the tears of Salome. He quickly whispered to the old woman, "Come to the boat before the full of the tide and we will talk."

When the kava was ready for drinking, the others present had forgotten all about the old woman and Salome, who had both crept away unobserved, and an hour or two was passed in merriment, for the trader was a man well liked. Then, when he rose and said *to fa*, they begged him not to attempt to pass down in his boat inside the reef, as he was sure to be fired upon, for how were their people to tell a friend from an enemy in the black night? But he smiled, and said his boat was too heavily laden to face the ocean swell. So they bade him *to fa*, and called out *manuia oe!* [Bless you!] as he lifted the door of thatch and went.

The old woman awaited him, holding the girl by the hand. On the ground lay a basket, strongly tied up. Salome still wept, but the old woman angrily bade her cease and enter the boat, which the crew had now pushed bow-on to the beach. The old woman lifted the basket and carefully put it on board.

"Be sure," she said to the crew, "not to sit on it, for it is but ripe breadfruit I am taking to my people in Manono."

"Give them here to me," said the trader, and he put the basket in the stern out of the way. The old woman came aft, too, and crouched at his feet and smoked a *sului*. The cool land-breeze freshened as the sail was hoisted, and then the crew besought the trader not to run down inside the reef. Bullets, they said, if fired in plenty, always hit something, and the sea was fairly smooth

outside the reef. And old Lupetea grasped his hand and muttered in his ear, "For the sake of this my little daughter, go outside. See, now, I am old, and to lie when so near death as I am is foolish. Be warned by me and be wise; sail out into the ocean, and at daylight we will be at Salua in Manono. Then thou canst set my feet on the shore—land the basket. But the girl shall go with thee. Thou canst marry her, if that be to thy mind, in the fashion of the *papalagi*, or take her *fa'a Samoa*. Thus will I keep faith with thee. If the girl be false, her neck is but little and thy fingers strong."

Now the trader thought in this wise: "This is well for me, for if I get the girl away thus quietly from all her relations I will save much in presents," and his heart rejoiced, for although not mean he was a careful man. So he steered his boat between the seething surf that boiled and hissed on both sides of the boat passage.

As the boat sailed past the misty line of cloud-capped Upolu, the trader lifted the girl up beside him and spoke to her. She was not afraid of him, she said, for many had told her he was a good man, and not a *ula vale* [scamp], but she wept because now, save her old grandmother, all her kinsfolk were dead. Even but a day and a half ago her one brother was killed with her cousin. They were strong men, but the bullets were swift, and so they died. And their heads had been shown at Matautu. For that she had grieved and wept and eaten nothing, and the world was cold to her.

"Poor little devil!" said the trader to himself—"hungry." Then he opened a locker and found a tin of sardines. Not a scrap of biscuit. There was plenty of biscuit, though, in the boat, in fifty-pound tins, but on these mats were spread, whereon his crew were sleeping. He was about to rouse them when he remembered the old dame's basket of ripe breadfruit. He laughed and looked at her. She, too, slept, coiled up at his feet. But first he opened the sardines and placed them beside the girl, and motioned her to steer. Her eyes gleamed like diamonds in the darkness as she answered his glance, and her soft fingers grasped the tiller. Very quickly, then, he felt among the packages aft till he came to the basket.

A quick stroke of his knife cut the sennit that lashed the sides together. He felt inside. "Only two, after all, but big ones, and no mistake. Wrapped in cloth, too! I wonder—Hell and furies, what's this?"—as his fingers came in contact with something that felt like a human eye. Drawing his hand quickly back, he fumbled in his pockets for a match, and struck it.

Breadfruit? No. Two heads with closed eyes, and livid lips blue with the pallor of death, showing their white teeth. And Salome covered her face and slid down in the bottom of the boat again, and wept afresh for her cousin and brother, and the boat came up in the wind, but no one awoke.

The trader was angry. But after he had tied up the basket again, he put the boat on her course once more and called to the girl. She crept close to him and nestled under his overcoat, for the morning air came across the sea from the dew-laden forests and she was chilled. Then she told the story of how her grandma had begged the heads from those of Malietoa's troops who had taken them at Matautu, and then gone to the camp at Mulinu'u in the hope of getting a passage in some boat to Manono, her country, where she would fain bury them. And that night he had come, and old Lupetea had rejoiced and sworn her to secrecy about the heads in the basket. And that also was why Lupetea was afraid for the boat to go down inside the passage, for there were many enemies to be met with, and they would have shot old Lupetea because she was of Manono. That was all. Then she ate the sardines, and, leaning her head against the trader's bosom, fell asleep.

As the first note of the great grey pigeon sounded the dawn, the trader's boat sailed softly up to the Salua beach, and old Lupetea rose, and, bidding the crew goodbye, and calling down blessings on the head of the good and clever white man as she rubbed his and the girl's noses against her own, she grasped her basket of breadfruit and went ashore. Then the trader, with Salome by his side, sailed out again into the ocean.