

The Shadows of the Dead

Louis Becke

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The Shadows of the Dead

I

"IT is bad to speak of the ghosts of the dead when their shadows may be near," said Tulpé, the professed Christian, but pure, unsophisticated heathen at heart; "no one but a fool—or a careless white man such as thee, Tenisoni—would do that."

Denison laughed, but Kuis, the stalwart husband of black-browed Tulpé, looked at him with grave reproof, and said in English, as he struck his paddle into the water—

"Tulpé speak true, Mr. Denison. This place is a bad place at night-time, suppose you no make fire before you sleep. Plenty men—white men—been die here, and now us native people only come here when plenty of us come together. Then we not feel much afraid. Oh, yes, these two little island very bad places; long time ago many white men die here in the night. And sometimes, if any man come here and sleep by himself, he hear the dead white men walk about and cry out."

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They—Denison, the supercargo of the *Leonora*, Kuis, the head man of the village near by and Tulpé, his wife, and little Kinia, their daughter—had been out fishing on the reef, but had met with but scant success; for in the deep coral pools that lay between the inner and outer reefs of the main island were hundreds of huge blue and gold striped leatherjackets, which broke their hooks and bit their lines. So they had ceased awhile, that they might rest till nightfall upon one of two little islets of palms, that like floating gardens raised their verdured heights from the deep waters of the slumbering lagoon.

Slowly they paddled over the glassy surface, and as the little craft cut her way noiselessly through the water, the dying sun turned the slopes of vivid green on Mont Buache to changing shades on gold and purple light, and the dark blue of the water of the reef-bound lagoon paled and shallowed and turned to bright transparent green with a bottom of shining snow-white sand—over which swift black shadows swept as startled fish fled seaward in affright beneath the slender hull of the light canoe. Then as the last booming notes of the great grey-plumaged mountain-pigeons echoed through the forest aisles, the sun touched the western sea-rim in a flood of misty golden haze, and plunging their paddles together in a last stroke they grounded upon the beach of a lovely little bay, scarce a hundred feet in curve from point to point; and whilst Kuis and Tulpé lit a fire to cook some fish for the white man, Denison clambered to the summit of the island and looked shoreward upon the purpling outline of the mainland a league away.

Half a mile distant he could see the sharp peaks of the grey-thatched houses in Leassé village still standing out plainly in the clear atmosphere, and from every house a slender streak of pale blue smoke rose straight up skywards, for the land-breeze had not yet risen, and the smoky haze of the rollers thundering westward hung like a filmy mantle of white over long, long lines of curving reef. Far inland, the great southern spur of the mountain that the Frenchman Duperrey had named Buache, had cloaked its sides in the shadows of the night, though its summit yet blazed with the last red shafts of gold from the sunken sun. And over the tops of the drooping palms of the little isle, Denison heard the low cries and homeward flight of ocean-roving birds as they sped shoreward to their rookeries among the dense mangrove shrubs behind Leassé. Some pure white, red-footed boatswain birds, whose home was among the foliage of the two islets, muttered softly about as they sank like flakes of falling snow among the branches of the palms and bread-fruit trees around him. All day long had they hovered high in air above the sweeping roll of the wide Pacific, and one by one they were coming back to rest, and Denison could see their white forms settling down on the drooping palm-branches, to rise with flapping wing and sharp, fretful croak as some belated wanderer fluttered noiselessly down and pushed his way to a perch amidst his companions, to nestle together till the bright rays of sunlight lit up the ocean blue once more.

At a little distance from the beach stood a tiny thatched roofed house with sides open to welcome the cooling breath of the land-breeze that, as the myriad stars came out, stole down from the mountains to the islet trees and then rippled the waters of the shining lagoon.

The house had been built by the people of Leassé, who used it as a rest-house when engaged in fishing in the vicinity of the village. Rolled up and placed over the cross-beams were a number of soft mats, and as Denison returned Kuis took these down and placed them upon the ground, which was covered with a thick layer of

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pebbles. Throwing himself down on the mats, Denison filled his pipe and smoked, while Tulpé and the child made an oven of heated stones to cook the fish they had caught. Kuis had already plucked some young drinking coconuts, and Denison heard their heavy fall as he threw them to the ground. And only that Kuis had brave blood in his veins, they had had nothing to drink that night, for no Strong's Islander would ascend a coconut tree there after dark, for devils, fiends, goblins, the ghosts of men long dead, and evil spirits flitted to and fro amid the bosage of the islet once night had fallen. And even Kuis, despite the long years he had spent among white men in his cruises in American whalships in his younger days, chid his wife and child sharply for not hastening to him and carrying the nuts away as they fell.

Then, as Denison and Kuis waited for the oven to be opened, Tulpé and Kinia came inside the hut and sat down beside them, and listened to Kuis telling the white man of a deep, sandy-bottomed pool, near to the islets, which, when the tide came in over the reef at night-time, became filled with big fish, which preyed upon the swarms of minnows that made the pool their home.

"'Tis there, Tenisoni, that we shall go when we have eaten," he said, and he dropped his voice to a whisper, "and there shall we tell thee the story of the dead white men."

So, when the fish was cooked, Tulpé and Kinia hurriedly took it from the oven and carried to the canoe, in which they all sat and ate, and then pushing out into the lagoon again they paddled slowly along in shallow water till Denison saw the white sandy sides of a deep, dark pool glimmering under the starlight of the island night. Softly the girl Kinia lowered the stone anchor down till it touched bottom two fathoms below, on the very edge; and then payed out the kellick line whilst her father backed the canoe out from the quickly shelving sides into the centre, where she lay head-on to the gentle current.

For many hours they fished, and soon the canoe was half-filled with great pink and pearly-hued groper and blue-backed, silver-sided sea salmon, and then Denison, wearying of the sport, stretched himself upon the outrigger and smoked whilst Tulpé told him of the tale of the white men who had once lived and died on the little islets.

"'Twas long before the time that the two French fighting-ships came here and anchored in this harbour of Leassé. Other ships had come to Kusaie,(1) and white men had come ashore at Lêla and spoken with the king and chiefs, and made presents of friendship to them, and been given turtle and hogs in return. This was long before my mother was married, and then this place of Leassé, which is now so poor, and hath but so few people in it, was a great town, the houses of which covered all the flat land between the two points of the bay. She, too, was named I am—Tulpé—and came from a family that lived under the strong arm of the king at Lêla, where they had houses and many plantations. In those days there were three great chiefs on Kusaie, one at Lêla, from where my mother came, one at Utwe, and one here at Leassé. Peace had been between them all for nearly two years, so, when the news came here that there were two ships at anchor in the king's harbour, many of the people of Leassé went thither in their canoes to see the strangers, for these ships were the first the people had seen for, it may have been, twenty years. Among those that went from Leassé was a young man named Kasi-lak—Kasi the big or strong, for he was the tallest and strongest man on this side of the island, and a great wrestler. There were in all nearly two hundred men and women went from Leassé, and when they reached the narrow passage to Lêla, they saw that the harbour was covered with canoes full of the people from the great town there. These clustered about the ships so thickly that those that came from Leassé could not draw near enough to them to look at the white men, so they rested on their paddles and waited awhile. Presently there came out upon a high part of the ship a chief whose name was Malik. He was the king's foster-brother, and a great fighting-man, and was hated by the people of Leassé for having ravaged all the low-lying country from the mountains to the shore ten years before, slaying women and children as well as men, and casting their bodies into the flames of their burning houses.

"But now, because of the peace that was between Leassé and Lêla, he showed his white teeth in a smile of welcome, and, standing upon the high stern part of the ship, he called out, 'Welcome, O friends!' and bade them paddle their canoes to the shore, to the great houses of the king, his brother, where they would be made welcome, and where food would be prepared for them to eat.

"So, much as they desired to go on board the ships, they durst not offend such a man as Malik, and paddled to the shore, where they were met by the king's slaves, who drew their canoes high up on the beach, and covered them with mats to protect them from the sun, and then the king himself came to meet them with fair words and smiles of friendship.

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"'Welcome, O men of Leassé,' he said. 'See, my people have covered thy canoes with mats from the sun, for now that there is no hate between us, ye shall remain here at Lêla with me for many days. And so that there shall be no more blood-letting between my people and thine, shall I give every young man among ye that is yet unmarried a wife from these people of mine. Come, now, and eat and drink.'

"So all the two hundred sat down in one of the king's houses, and while they ate and drank there came boats from the ships, and the white men, whom Malik led ashore, came into the house where they sat, and spoke to them. In those days there were but three or four of the Kusaie men who understood English, and these Malik kept by him, so that he could put words into their mouths when he desired to speak to the white strangers. These white men, so my mother said, wore short, broad-bladed swords in sheaths made of thick black skins, and pistols were thrust through belts of skin around their waists. Their hair, too, was dressed like that of the men of Kusaie—it hung down in a short, thick roll, and was tied at the end.(2)

"Kasi, who was the father of this my husband, Kusi, sat a little apart from the rest of the Leassé people. Beside him was a young girl named Nehi, his cousin. She had never before left her home, and the strange faces of the men of Lêla made her so frightened that she clung to Kasi's arm in fear, and when the white men came into the house she flung her arms around her cousin's neck and laid her face against his naked chest. Presently, as the white men walked to and fro among the people, they stopped in front of Kasi and Nehi, and one of them, who was the captain of the largest of the two ships, desired Kasi to stand up so that he might see his great stature the better. So he stood up, and Nehi the girl, still clinging to his arm, stood up with him.

"'He is a brave-looking man,' said the white officer to Malik. 'Such men as he are few and far between. Only this man here,' and he touched a young white man who stood beside him on the arm, 'is his equal in strength and fine looks.' And with that the young white man, who was an officer of the smaller of the two ships, laughed, and held out his hand to Kasi, and then his eyes, blue, like the deep sea, fell upon the face of Nehi, whose dark ones looked wonderingly into his.

"'Who is this girl? Is she the big man's sister?' he asked of Malik. Then Malik told him, through the mouth of one of the three Kusaie men, who spoke English, that the girl's name was Nehi, and that with many of her people she had come from Leassé to see the fighting-ships.

"By and by the white men with Malik went away to talk and eat, and drank kava in the house of the king, his brother; but presently the younger white man came back with Rijon, a native who spoke English, and sat down beside Kasi and his cousin Nehi, and talked with them for a long time. And this he told them of himself. That he was the second chief of the little ship, that with but two masts; and because of the long months they had spent upon the sea, and of the bad blood between the common sailor men and the captain, he was wearied of the ship, and desired to leave it. Ten others were there on his own ship of a like mind, and more than a score on the larger ship, which had twenty-and-two great cannons on her deck. And then he and Rijon and Kasi talked earnestly together, and Kasi promised to aid him; and so that Rijon should not betray them to Malik or the two captains, the young white man promised to give him that night a musket and a pistol as an earnest of greater gifts, when he and others with him had escaped from the ships, and were under the roofs of the men of Leassé. So then he pressed the hand of Kasi, and again his eyes sought those of Nehi, the girl, as he turned away.

"Then Rijon, who stayed, drew near to Kasi, and said—

"'What shall be mine if I tell thee of a plan that is in the mind of a great man here to put thee and all those of Leassé with thee to death?'

"'Who is the man? Is it Malik?'

"'It is Malik.'

"'Then,' said Kasi, 'help me to escape from this trap, and thou shalt be to me as mine own brother; of all that I possess half shall be thine.'

"And then Rijon, who was a man who hated bloodshed, and thought it hard and cruel that Malik should slay so many unarmed people who came to him in peace-time, swore to help Kasi in his need. And the girl Nehi took his hand and kissed it, and wept.

"By and by, when Rijon had gone, there came into the big house where the people of Leassé were assembled a young girl named Tulpé—she who afterwards became my mother. And coming over to where Kasi and his cousin sat, she told them she brought a message from the king. That night, she said, there was to be a great feast, so that the white men from the ships might see the dancing and wrestling that were to follow; and the king had sent her to

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say that he much desired the people from Leassé to join in the feasting and dancing; and with the message he sent further gifts of baked fish and turtle meat and many baskets of fruit.

"Kasi, though he knew well that the king and Malik, his brother, meant to murder him and all his people, smiled at the girl, and said, 'It is good; we shall come, and I shall wrestle with the best man ye have here.'

"Then he struck the palm of his hand on the mat upon which he sat, and said to the girl Tulpé, 'Sit thou here, and eat with us,' for he was taken with her looks, and wanted speech with her.

"'Nay,' she said, with a smile, though her voice trembled strangely, and her eyes filled with tears as she spoke. 'Why ask me to sit with thee when thou hast so handsome a wife?' And she pointed to Nehi, whose hand lay upon her cousin's arm.

"'Tis but my sister Nehi, my father's brother's child,' he answered. 'No wife have I, and none do I want but thee. What is thy name?'

"'I am Tulpé, the daughter of Malik.'

"Then Kasi was troubled in his mind; for now he hated Malik, but yet was he determined to make Tulpé his wife, first because he desired her for her soft voice and gentle ways, and then because she might be a shield for the people of Leassé against her father's vengeance. So drawing her down beside him, he and Nehi made much of her; and Tulpé's heart went out to him; for he was a man whose deeds as a wrestler were known in every village on the island. But still as she tried to eat and drink and to smile at his words of love, the tears fell one by one, and she became very silent and sad; and presently, putting aside her food, she leant her face on Nehi's shoulder and sobbed.

"'Why dost thou weep, little one?' said Kasi, tenderly.

"She made no answer awhile, but then turned her face to him.

"'Because, O Kasi the Wrestler, of an evil dream which came to me in the night as I lay in my father's house.'

"'Tell me thy dream,' said Kasi.

"First looking around her to see that none but themselves could hear her, she took his hand in hers, and whispered—

"'Aye, Kasi, I will tell thee. This, then, was my dream: I saw the bodies of men and women and children, whose waists were girt about with red and yellow girdles of oap, floating upon a pool of blood. Strange faces were they all to me in my dream, but now two of them are not. And it is for this I weep; for those two faces were thine own and that of this girl by my side.'

"Then Kasi knew that she meant to warn him of her father's cruel plot, for only the people of Leassé wore girdles of the bark of the plant called oap. So then he told her of that which Rijon had spoken, and Tulpé wept again.

"'It is true,' she said, 'and I did but seek to warn thee, for no dream came to me in the night; yet do I know that even now my father is planning with his brother the king how that they may slaughter thee all to-night when ye sleep after the dance. What can I do to help thee?'

"They talked together again, and planned what should be done; and then Tulpé went quietly away lest Malik should grow suspicious of her. And Kasi went quickly about among his people telling them of the treachery of Malik, and bade them do what he should bid them when the time came. And then Rijon went to and fro between Kasi and the big white man, carrying messages and settling what was to be done.

"When darkness came great fires were lit in the dance-house and the town square, and the great feast began. And the king and Malik made much of Kasi and his people, and placed more food before them than even was given to their own people. Then when the feast was finished the two ship captains came on shore, and sat on a mat beside the king, and the women danced and the men wrestled. And Kasi, whose heart was bursting with rage though his lips smiled, was praised by Malik and the king for his great strength and skill, for he overcame all who stood up to wrestle with him.

"When the night was far gone, Kasi told Malik that he and his people were weary, and asked that they might sleep. And Malik, who only waited till they slept, said, 'Go, and sleep in peace.'

"But as soon as Kasi and those with him were away out of sight from the great swarm of people who still danced and wrestled in the open square, they ran quickly to the beach where their canoes were lying, and Kasi lit a torch and waved it thrice in the air towards the black shadows of the two ships. Then he waited.

"Suddenly on the ships there arose a great commotion and loud cries, and in a little time there came the sound

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of boats rowing quickly to the shore. And then came a great flash of light from the side of one of the ships and the thunder of a cannon's voice.

"'Quick,' cried Kasi; 'launch the canoes, lest we be slain here on the beach!' And ere the echoes of the cannon-shot had died away in the mountain caves of Lêla, the men of Leassé had launched their canoes and paddled swiftly out to meet the boats.

"As the boats and canoes drew near, Rijon stood up in the bows of the foremost boat, and the white sailors ceased rowing so that he and Kasi might talk. But there was but little time, for already the sound of the cannon and the cries and struggling on board the ships had brought a great many of the Lêla people to the beach; fires were lit, and conch shells were blown, and Malik and his men began to fire their muskets at the escaping canoes. Presently, too, the white men in the boats began to handle their muskets and fire back in return, when their leader bade them cease, telling them that it was but Malik's men firing at Kasi's people.

"'Now,' said he to Rijon, 'tell this man Kasi to lead the way with his canoes to the passage, and we in the boats shall follow closely, so that if Malik's canoes pursue and overtake us, we white men shall beat them back with our musket-fire.'

"So then Kasi turned his canoes seaward, and the boats followed; and as they rowed and paddled, all keeping closely together, the great cannons of the two ships flashed and thundered and the shot roared above them in the darkness. But yet was no one hurt, for the night was very dark; and soon they reached the deep waters of the passage, and rose and fell to the ocean swell, and still the iron cannon-shot hummed about them, and now and again struck the water near; and on the left-hand shore ran Malik's men with cries of rage, and firing as they ran, till at last they came to the point and could pursue no farther; and soon their cries grew fainter and fainter as the canoes and boats reached the open ocean. Then it happened that one of the white sailors, vexed that a last bullet had whistled near his head, raised his musket and fired into the dark shore whence it came.

"'Thou fool!' cried his leader, and he struck the man senseless with the boat's tiller, and then told Rijon to call out to Kasi and his people to pull to the left for their lives, for the flash of the musket would be seen from the ships. Ah, he was a clever white man, for scarce had the canoes and boats turned to the left more than fifty fathoms, when there came a burst of flame from all the cannons on the ships, and a great storm of great iron shot and small leaden bullets lashed the black water into white foam just behind them. After that the firing ceased, and Rijon called out that there was no more danger; for the cunning white man had told him that they could not be pursued—he had broken holes in all the boats that remained on the ships.

"When daylight came, the boats and canoes were far down the coast towards Leassé. Then, as the sun rose from the sea, the men in the boats ceased rowing, and the big white man stood up and beckoned to Kasi to bring his canoe alongside. And when the canoe lay beside the boat, the white man laughed and held out his hand to Kasi and asked for Nehi; and as Nehi rose from the bottom of Kasi's canoe, where she had been sleeping, and stood up beside her cousin, so did Tulpé, the daughter of Malik, stand up beside the white man in his boat, and the two girls threw their arms around each other's necks and wept glad tears. Then as the canoes and boats hoisted their sails to the wind of sunrise, the people saw that Tulpé sat beside Kasi in his canoe, and Nehi, his cousin, sat beside the white man in his boat, with her face covered with her hands so that no one should see her eyes.

"As they sailed along the coast Tulpé told Kasi how she and Rijon had gone on board the smaller of the two ships, and seen the tall young white man whispering to some of the sailors. Then, when they saw the flash of Kasi's torch, how these sailors sprang upon the others and bound them hand and foot while a boat was lowered, and muskets and food and water put in. Then she and Rijon and the young white leader and some of the sailors got in, and Rijon stood in the bows and guided them to the shore to where Kasi and his people awaited them on the beach.

