

Ben

By Lloyd Osbourne

I was in the bark Ransom, with twenty tons of trade aboard, and looking for a station up in the Westward, when I fixed it up with Tom Feltenshaw at Arorai Island to buy him out. It was a good little station, and far better than I could have hoped for at the money I had to offer, with a new tin roof and a water tank and a copra shed with a cement floor, and an imported banana in an imported ton of earth to give a natty effect to the back view--the front being all reef and dazzle and Pacific Ocean.

Lonesome? Coffin-lid, nail-her-down, lonesome--why, of course! Was there ever a coral island that wasn't? But there was copra in plenty; only one other trader and him a boozier; quite a bit of pearl shell, and Tom's book showing how he had cleared thirty-three hundred dollars in a year. He had boils something awful, and for the last two years it had just been a fight to stick it out. I came along when the boils had won all along the line, with Tom ready to leave everything all standing in order to get away.

There hadn't been a ship in five months, and he had come mighty near pegging out, having made his will and tacked it to the shed door, besides giving the natives receipts in advance that he had died a natural death, they being afraid some passing man-of-war might hold them responsible and shoot up the island.

We had settled everything, counted out the money, and shook hands when Tom says, over a good-by nip of Square-face: "Oh, that girl of mine, Ben,--you'll take care her, won't you?"

"Girl?" says I.

"She's broke in to cooking and washing and white ways," explains Tom, "and it'd go against my conscience to feel I hadn't left her comfortable."

"Let's see her," I said.

He called her in, and one glance at her settled the matter. She was about eighteen, as slim and straight as a dart, and, by far and away, the prettiest woman I had seen in the group. She stood there mighty sullen

as I sized her up, and admired her splendid black hair that was bound by a red ribbon at the nape of her neck, very coquettish and attractive. I've always liked that proud, to-hell-with-you look in a girl, and it seemed to make her better worth having, like there was something to master before you could have your will with her. Yes, it was bargain day for me all right, and the store wasn't the only thing I was getting cheap.

"What she saying?" I asked, as she spoke something in Kanaka to Tom, showing real pretty teeth.

"She won't stay if you whip her," grins Tom.

"Bless her heart, I won't whip her," I says, thinking to break the ice by pulling her down on my knee. But she struggled like a wildcat, and Tom, he suddenly turns red-hot jealous.

"Leave that till I'm gone," he says, kind of choking. "If it wasn't for these damn boils I should never have parted with her or the station." Then after another nip he takes his bag of money, and calls out to the Kanakas at the porch to carry his two chests down to the boat that was laying there ready to take him aboard. He ups as though to kiss the girl good-by, but she sprang back from him, as fierce as she had been with me--fiercer, I guess; and when he caught her she turned away her head like she hated him. Then he swore and stumbled out of the house without another word or anything, while me and the girl stood side by side, both of us in our different ways deserted, and slung together by the fate of things. She didn't fight this time when I made free with her again, but began to sob like her heart would break, while I squeezed and cuddled her and watched the sinking topsails of the Ransom.

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Women are always alike at bottom; it is only men that are different. A bit of finery would make Rosie happy for a week. Her hair was an everlasting job, so was her skin, which she kept out of the sun and rubbed down very careful with oil. She took walks to see how the other women wore the single bushy garment that they do in the Gilberts, the fashion varying from time to time: now it is swung very jaunty from side to side, now it's low and now it's high, and sometimes it's thick and sometimes it's thin, and sometimes the modest-and-quiet is the dressy way of it. She took care of the house very nice, and what few clothes and things we had were

arranged most tidy in three chests with bell locks. I never hear a little bell ting-a-ling to-day but what it brings those days back to me, with her so busy at our funny housekeeping. When I coasted around the island, trading, she 'ud stay behind and guard the place like a bulldog, and never took a thing except a little soap or tobacco or maybe a tin of meat for her Pa, a nosing old gentleman dressed in a mat, who always bobbed up when I was out of the way, being discouraged at other times from living and dying with us.

Yes, I got very fond of her--loved her, you might call it, for all she was a little savage, and ate squid, and carried a shark-tooth dagger against any of the girls that might show a fancy for me. In time I taught her to play cribbage and checkers and dominoes, so that at night we would sit very sociable under the lamp, she and I, with the surf groaning on the outer reef, and it was more like a home than I'd ever had in my wandering, lonely, up-and-down life. She was quick to learn, and loving to beat the band, yet ever kind of imperious and saucy like I belonged to her instead of its being the other way around. She had no idea of white people--used to say they looked like Kanakas who had been drowned for a week--and was most scornful how it was always copra, copra, copra with us. It was just her way to tease me and make me cross, for then she would snuggle up and ripple over with laughter and hold me tight in her soft, round girlish arms, and say that I was her copra--a whole ship of it, and how she 'ud hang herself from a coconut tree if I were to die--and by God, she would have done it, too, them Gilbert women being great on love, and the thing happening often enough.

Several years passed, and I can't recall a single word of disagreement between us. She was all the world to me in those days, and I doubt if in the whole group there was a pair so happy. Ben's Rosie, they called her--the captains and supercargoes and mates that came our way--and they all thought a lot of her, and brought her many a little present that made her eyes sparkle--such pretty eyes as they were, and so full of fun--gold fish, and rolls of silk, and music boxes or a trade hat. It was always a standing joke that she was tired of me, and was going to run away with them; and if they were quite old, like Captain Smith or Billy Baker, there wasn't any length she wouldn't go to, even to hugging them and playing with their whiskers right before me, and saying in her sweet, broken English: "Oh, you poor old captain, with nobody to love you--but never mind, I go with you this time, sure I go, and Bennie can get a girl from Big Muggin, oh, so pretty, who bite him like a dog!"

Then little Ben came, and for a time it looked as though he was going to be quite a boy, and grow up. But at the end of twenty-one months, as he was nearing his second birthday, he sickened and died; and we dressed him up in his poor little best, and put him away forever in the coral. Rosie took on about it terrible--so terrible that I think something must have broken in her brain. She was never the same afterwards; not that she was always mourning, I don't mean that--but she grew cranky and queer and changed in every way. She would start into a fury at a word, and throw things about, and scream. She would tell the most awful lies about how I had treated her, and invent things that never took place. Even on a dot of a coral island there is gossip and slander and a Kanaka Mrs. Grundy, and Rosie was doing her best to ruin me, so that I was avoided, and the King and the other high muck-a-mucks went to Tyson's, the opposition trader, and tabooed my store till I didn't know which way to turn.

I ought to have sold out and quit, and left Rosie on the other fellow like Feltenshaw had done me. But I loved her for what she had been to me, and for the poor mite moldering under ground, and so just took my medicine for a whole miserable year and let it go at that. Every misfortune I've had in life I seem to trace to what was good and generous in me. Certainly if I'd shaken her off then and there, I would have been a happier man, and been saved things that have since almost drove me mad.

The upshot of it was that finally I did sell the station to a couple of Chinamen--brothers--and I would like to say right here there never was a whiter pair than these two, or any that stood up straighter to a bargain. Once the main price was fixed, there was no haggling over valuations, nor any backwardness or suspicion, though in the rush I was in not to hold the schooner over long, it would have been easy to beat me out of a hundred dollars or two. They pulled us off to the vessel--me and Rosie and them three camphor-wood chests with the bell locks and a big roll of mats and a keg of silver dollars--and an hour later six years of my life had sunk with the palms, as lost and disappeared as the schooner's wake in the sea behind us.

After the Line Apia struck me as a wonderfully bustling, busy little place, and I took to it like a man does who's had nothing but coral and coconuts to look at till all the world seems nothing else. It came over me what a

prisoner I'd been up there, and how much I had paid in unthought-of ways for that keg of Chile money. Rosie, too, brightened up considerably with the novelty of it all, and was so gay and laughing and like her old self that I was gladder than ever at having made the change.

It didn't take me long to size up conditions; and the better part of that keg soon put me in possession of a two-story house and store in the center of the town on the main street, with a pretty good stock taken over from the widow of the man who had lately died there. I was hardly what could be called a trader any more, what with a place so big and fine, with a tramway running down to a shaky wharf, and a busted bookkeeper coming in every Tuesday night to post my books. I was a South Sea merchant now, and was reaping the fruit of all them lonely slaving days on the Line. No more pajamas neither, but a clean, white suit every day, and with Rosie perking up like she did, them were real good times for me, and pleasant to look back on; and though I do say it myself, my neighbors liked me and I was respected and looked up to, and I was called the Gilbert Island Consul from the way I was always ready to befriend anybody from there, whether white or native, even once going before the Supreme Court and being complimented by the Chief Justice on behalf of some Nonootch people whose wages were being held back.

Then my ward run me for the Municipal Council, and I was elected by twenty-two votes to four over Grevsmuhl; and I can tell you it made me feel a mighty proud man to be honored like that and placed so high; and if my head didn't swell I guess my heart did, to almost bursting, at such a rise in life, and one so unexpected and undreamed of. It hardly seemed it could be me the police touched their caps to, or the consuls confabbed with about local affairs as they dropped in to buy a toothbrush or a pair of socks--me who had landed there so short a time before in my pajamas and kind of dazed at the size and noise of the place after the silence of the Line--just common old me, with earrings in my ears and gaping like a Rube.

It meant a big uplift to me in every kind of a way, and I was a better man for all that confidence and trust, and wanted like hell to show I was worth it. The week after I was elected to the Council I married Rosie proper and right, thinking a Councillor ought to set an example in his community; and every one was very cordial to me about it, especially in my own ward, where two or three of them even followed my lead, saying that with the mail steamers now calling and the town generally on the up grade, it was

time to let go on the old, wrong way of things, and get into line with civilization.

Whether it was the change from the coral islands or the lavish new diet or what, Rosie had been laying on flesh for a long time in a quiet, unnoticed kind of way till finally she suddenly plumped up like a balloon. My, but she grew something awful, a waddling, monstrous mountain of a woman, with her eyes burying like a pig's, and the whole of her shaking as she walked. She was ashamed to go out any more except by night, sulking all day indoors, instead, and rocking in a hammock. As I said before, she'd never been right since Benny's death, and though she had pulled up for a time and acted very much improved she slumped at last, and slumped worse than she ever had been. Her old surly fits on the Line were nothing compared with the rampageous way she went on now, and if there was ever a she devil on earth or a man driven plumb distracted it was Rosie and me in our splendid house.

When she was taken with those spells of hers she was nothing less than a cursing, snarling, foaming maniac, and stopped at nothing to make me a spectacle and a byword. Again and again she chased me out with an ax; she would fling into the store with nothing over her but a single dirty garment, and pull down whole shelves of stuff out of sheer devilment, screaming with rage. She slandered everybody, and reflected on every woman who was unfortunate enough to know us, so that I was sued twice for defamation--or rather she--with verdict and damages, all that I could do being to hold up my hands and tell the judge she wasn't answerable for her actions. Hell, that was what it was--straight, unadulterated hell--with no way out that I could see till I died or she.

It was about this time I began to notice a fellow named Tyne on the beach--a thin, tall, hungry-looking man in a derby hat, very shabby black clothes, and no socks--who was said to be a busted doctor landed off of a French bark. His name came up before the Council, but as he had no papers or diplomas to show, and was hazy besides where he came from and how, we refused to let him practice, and were insulted besides at his daring to ask us.

Well, one day this Tyne, he comes into my store, very hang-dog, and so famished and shaky that I couldn't but feel sorry for him, and he asks for the job of pushing my handcart around the beach, getting stuff out of

Customs, and making deliveries--he having heard I had fired my Nieuw boy for pilfering.

"Fifty cents a day, Doc," I says. "It's hardly fit for a white man."

"My God," he says, in a real gentleman's voice, "I'm starving. I'd push anything anywhere for a bite of bread and a corner of a shed to sleep in. Ain't there a spark of charity in this town for a white man who is down on his uppers?"

I answered him with a can of sardines and some pilot break, which he went out and wolfed right there on the front stoop, and then came back wanting to know where was the cart and what was he to do? This was first how we got acquainted, Doc and me; and a remarkably finely educated man he was, too, and I don't doubt for a minute all that he represented himself. I fixed up a small shed for him with some mats, a tin basin and a lamp; and after a day or two, seeing how willing he worked and how faithful in spite of every one staring at a white man between the shafts, I let him take his meals regular with me and Rosie like one of the family.

For all he was down and out, and trundled my things about the beach like a donkey, in knowledge and everything he was miles above me and I knew it--and he made it plain he knew it, too. He was not at all a genial man, but had a rasping, bitter way about him, and a tongue as sharp as a razor, and a line of talk as to how the world was made up of flats and sharpers, all of them hypocrites, and how there wasn't but one sin--and that was to be found out. He talked like the devil might be expected to talk, there being no goodness or honor anywhere; and in some ways he wasn't unlike him in looks as generally represented, being tall and thin, with keen gray eyes that seemed to bore right through you, and a wicked, sneering mouth like a slit across his face.

Very soon he was doctoring natives on the sly for quarters and half dollars and bonito hooks and tappa, and quite a row of bottles and drug-store stuff began to accumulate along the ledges of the shed walls. I didn't think it was my business to interfere as long as he let white people alone, besides feeling sorry for him, and appreciating the way he paid no attention to Rosie's outbreaks, sitting there like he was air, and not passing a single remark--being, for all his faults, a gentleman through and through. At last he chucked the handcart altogether, though he went

on messing with me and living in my shed, his Kanaka practice growing very extensive. It grew and grew till finally the regular doctor called a halt, and he was warned in an official letter, and told he would get three months' imprisonment if he persisted. At this I thought he would go back to the shafts again, though I didn't care to propose it lest it should hurt his feelings. But instead he bought an accordion and did nothing but play and play on it for days, beginning awful bad like he didn't know one end of it from another, but improving wonderful till it was dandy to hear him.

I guess there was nothing Doc couldn't do if he tried, though why accordion was more than I could answer. But it wasn't loafing that kept him stuffed in a hot shed all day, wheezing polkas out of the hurdy-gurdy, but a real good idea of improving on the handcart. What if he didn't make a whole band out of himself, with a harness holding a comb across his mouth, and a bass drum for him to kick with one foot and a tambourine to frisk with the other. My, when he started off with "The Stars and Stripes Forever" you might have thought he was six, with a drum major prancing along in front! He give a demonstration that night in the Tivoli Hotel, and drew the town; and when he come home it was with a pocketful of silver and a couple of dates for a wedding and the Kaiser's birthday.

After that Doc became an institution, with a pretty Kanaka girl to carry the drum and pass round the saucer; and every night when he hadn't a special engagement he would make the round of the bars, picking up what little he could. If there was a ship to be sold at auction, or a public meeting to protest against a high-handed something, it got to be the fashion to plaster the notice of it on Doc's back, him playing under a tree for all he was worth with the sweat pouring down his face, while all hands turned out to see what was the rumpus. He made money hand over fist, and would have paid for his keep only I wouldn't have it. We had grown to be sort of friends, him and me, from both having so much to bear--for he was too proud and highly educated a man to like making a monkey of himself, and it ground into him hard, and with me it was Rosie, Rosie, Rosie.

Oh, God, what things I had to put up with! What endless mortifications! What everlasting, heartbreaking scenes and scandals! She got to following me to Council meetings, bellowing like a wildcat, and clawing the policeman who was ordered to put her out; and again and again I had

to leave in the middle to try and get her home, half the beach tagging along with us, laughing and jeering till I could have died of shame.

The day I resigned from the Council, being unable to stand it any longer, I was sitting in the front room, with my head in my hands, when Doc came in, and patted me on the back.

"Too bad," he says, "too bad."

"Oh, Doc," I says, "I'm the most miserable chap alive."

"It's bound to end some time," he remarked.

I shook my head. We had no means of taking care of lunatics, and that was about what Rosie was. The Colonies all had laws, barring out undesirables and such, even if a steamer would have taken her, which none of them would. "I'll tell you what I'd do," said Doc. "I'd give five hundred dollars to a labor-ship captain, put her aboard at night, and leave it to him to land her in one of those islands where they eat you for dinner."

"I couldn't do that," I said.

"Too fond of your money, eh?" he sneers.

"Oh, Doc," I answered, "I'd give everything I possess, lock, stock and barrel--and ten years of my life thrown in--to be decently quit of her."

He smiled a bit incredulous. "Suppose an angel came down from heaven and took you at your word," he says. "The next day you'd be beating Mr. Angel out of his price--you know you would, and screaming worse than she does at being held to your bargain."

"Perhaps I would, Doc," I agreed, his manner of speaking somehow making it feel very real; "it's hard to begin without a dollar and nothing but the clothes you stand in. But downstairs in my safe I have two thousand dollars in hard cash, American money, which the angel could take and welcome."

"That's a lot of money," he says, wondering like, "but it would be worth it to you, wouldn't it?"

"My God, yes," I says, rather regretting I told him about the safe, for there was a shine in his eyes and a calculating look I didn't like.

"And you wouldn't bilk the angel when he handed in his bill?" he went on.

"Oh, hell, Doc," I said, "what's the use of talking of angels? I've just got to grin and bear it."

"But you'd pay, wouldn't you?" he persisted.

I said yes, just to stop his pestering; and after a couple of drinks off of the sideboard he went away. That evening I locked myself in the store, took the money out of the safe, and carried it up to the attic where I hid it under an old mattress. I smeared a little varnish around the combination lock with a rag, and next day I looked for finger marks, but there weren't none. Yet I was still suspicious, and the money stayed in the attic. Doc was too bright a man to have left home without a reason.

Things went on as usual for a long time--business middling, Doc rounding up the bars, Rosie raising Cain occasionally, or snarling and muttering in the hammock just as the humor took her. It was the damndest life for a man to lead, just pigging it and worse every day, with no order and anything--a can of meat for lunch, a can of meat for dinner, and the table left slovenly like it was. Then she fell kind of sick, and though I felt sorry to see her doubled up and groaning, it had a good side to it, for I got a Chinaman in to cook at forty dollars a month, and he straightened things out fine and cleaned up the dirt of ages. I called in Doctor Funk, the regular physician, and for a time Rosie improved, getting well enough to nearly bite the cook's finger off when he tried to stop her giving away a consignment of hams. But after a while she took sick again, the cramps coming back worse than ever, and I let Doc do what he could for her, which wasn't much, though better than Funk, whose stuff didn't seem any more good and had lost its effect.

Finally, early one morning, she was taken most awful bad, vomiting blood, and twisting and twitching in a way horrible to see, she being so mountainous fat, and gibbering crazily in the Gilbert language--all about me and little Benny, and devils snapping at her toes, and a giant squid what was dragging her down to drown. Then of a sudden she grew very quiet, and Doc, looking close to her face, said, "Good God, she is dead!"

Yes, dead, just as Doctor Funk hurried in, glaring to see Doc there, and saying something out loud about God damn quacks, and looking and smelling savagely at the different bottles. Doc slunk out of sight, and then Funk, he calmed down, and spoke to me very sympathetic and kind as to what I was to do, and how, after all, it was a merciful release.

I buried her the same day, that being the rule in the tropics, and the better part of the town followed her to the grave in the foreign cemetery, that being a kind of rule or custom, too, in Apia, as well as everybody getting tight afterwards at the Tivoli bar.

It was a strange feeling to come back to the house and to know that Rosie was gone out of it forever, and that I had passed another big landmark in my life. For all it was such a release, I was bluer than blue, yet I won't deny I was glad, too, but in a frightened kind of way, and half wishing again and again that she was back. Her running on about Benny and me before she died stuck in my throat, and seemed awful pitiful; and I remembered how pretty she once had been, and always such a good, true wife, and how me and the little store was all the world to her before sorrow broke her heart.

I went upstairs, and sat looking out on the bay, thinking it all over, and how in time death comes to every one of us, high or low; thinking, too, that I was a free man now--a prosperous, respected, looked-up-to man, and an ex-Councillor with a home that many a woman would consider well worth sharing. I wondered if Miss Nelson up at the Mission would consider a man as unrefined as I was and thirty-seven years old, she so sweet and young and with such gentle, winning ways. She was a governess to their children, and that made me think she would, for no woman likes to be a dependent and at the beck and call of another. I sat there dreaming of her, and of the place nicely fixed up, and of us driving out of a Sunday to Vailele in a smart little buggy, with me reelected to the Council, and people saying: "How d'ye do, won't you drop in a moment"--to me and Miss Nelson, married.

If this sounds wrong, remember Rosie had been no wife to me for three years--only a torment and a disgrace--and I deserved some credit for having stood it like I did. I had never dared have such thoughts before, though I'd often remarked what a pretty creature Miss Nelson was, just like a man does without anything further in his head. Yet looking back on it, and the few times she had been in the store when we had spoken

together, I kind of felt she liked me, and she had certainly never been in any hurry to leave; with this much to go on, and the fact that she always smiled at me most winsome the few times we passed each other on the street, I couldn't help thinking I had made a start without my knowing it, and that if I followed it up hard this dream of her and me might be made to come true.

I was turning this over in my mind when a squall of rain came tearing along, the sky all black with it, and the roof hammering like a boiler factory. In Samoa you needn't look out of the window to see if it is raining. It comes down deafening, and the iron roars with the weight and smash of it. This was how I didn't notice Doc till he stood right there beside me. There was something awful strange and grave about him, and I give a little jump I was that taken by surprise.

He lit a cigar, and waited very impatient for the squall to pass; and as he went to the window and beat a little tattoo on it with his finger nail, I noticed he was all dressed up like I'd never seen him before. Then he came back, looking at me very steadfast, and says: "Well, Ben, you're out of the woods at last."

"Yes, thank the Lord!" says I.

"Same here," he says, meaning himself. "When the mail comes in to-night, I'm off to San Francisco."

"Why, Doc!" I cried out, utterly flabbergasted.

"Yes," he says, "and for all I care, the whole damned island may sink in the sea, and stay there, with nothing but coconuts and my old accordion to mark the place and maybe one of the wheels of that bloody handcart."

I was still knocked silly.

"But, Doc," I says, "you can't have enough to pay your passage."

Then he laughs.

"A hundred and seventy-five ain't much out of two thousand," he says.

"Two thousand?" I says, more mystified than ever.

"Yes," he answers, facing me square. "The two thousand that you owe me, Mr. Ben."

I was just going to answer I didn't owe him nothing when the words stopped midway on my tongue. I began to tremble instead--tremble till my hands could hardly hold to my chair, till I couldn't keep my mouth from dribbling.

"It's a debt of honor," he went on. "You can repudiate it if you want to, and snap your fingers in my face, but I trusted you, I got you out of your mess, and now I ask you for my money."

I couldn't answer anything, but looked at him speechless while he goes to the door, peeks outside of it very careful lest any one might be listening, and then comes tiptoeing back. It was so plain what he meant to tell me that I managed to cry out, "No, no," and shook worse nor ever.

"You're a straight man, Ben," he says. "What you owe, you pay. I wouldn't have risked it if I had had any doubt about that."

I stumbled to the sideboard, poured myself out a big drink, never minding what I spilled, and then went up to the attic where the bag of money was still lying under the old mattress. I brought it down and give it to him, only asking him not to count it as that was more than I could bear.

He made a grab for it, never saying a word, and as he went out of the doorway that was the last I ever saw of him.

Was I a fool to have paid him? Was it all a bluff, and just his hellish ingeniousness for turning everything to account? Funk never questioned she had died a natural death. Yet true or untrue, paying Doc that two thousand dollars made me a murderer. In the bottom of my heart I believe he did it, and there are nights when I wake up in a sweat of horror. But wouldn't it have been a dirty act to bilk him of his money, all the more as it would have been so easy? To this day I don't know whether I ought to have paid or not, though if I hadn't it would have lightened my conscience of a frightful load. But when I think that I always see him closing the door and tiptoeing back, ready to whisper the truth.

If it was the truth.

Well, what would you have done?