

CHAPTER X

Daylight saw the Arangi under way, her sails drooping heavily in the dead air while the boat's crew toiled at the oars of the whaleboat to tow her out through the narrow entrance. Once, when the ketch, swerved by some vagrant current, came close to the break of the shore-surf, the blacks on board drew toward one another in apprehension akin to that of startled sheep in a fold when a wild woods marauder howls outside. Nor was there any need for Van Horn's shout to the whaleboat: "Washee-washee! Damn your hides!" The boat's crew lifted themselves clear of the thwarts as they threw all their weight into each stroke. They knew what dire fate was certain if ever the sea-washed coral rock gripped the Arangi's keel. And they knew fear precisely of the same sort as that of the fear-struck girl below in the lazarette. In the past more than one Langa-Langa and Somo boy had gone to make a Su'u feast day, just as Su'u boys, on occasion, had similarly served feasts at Langa-Langa and at Somo.

"My word," Tambi, at the wheel, addressed Van Horn as the period of tension passed and the Arangi went clear. "Brother belong my father, long time before he come boat's crew along this place. Big fella schooner brother belong my father he come along. All finish this place Su'u. Brother belong my father Su'u boys kai-kai along him altogether."

Van Horn recollected the Fair Hathaway of fifteen years before,

looted and burned by the people of Su'u after all hands had been killed. Truly, the Solomons at this beginning of the twentieth century were savage, and truly, of the Solomons, this great island of Malaita was savagest of all.

He cast his eyes speculatively up the slopes of the island to the seaman's landmark, Mount Kolorat, green-forested to its cloud-capped summit four thousand feet in the air. Even as he looked, thin smoke-columns were rising along the slopes and lesser peaks, and more were beginning to rise.

"My word," Tambi grinned. "Plenty boy stop 'm bush lookout along you eye belong him."

Van Horn smiled understandingly. He knew, by the ancient telegraphy of smoke-signalling, the message was being conveyed from village to village and tribe to tribe that a labour-recruiter was on the leeward coast.

All morning, under a brisk beam wind which had sprung up with the rising of the sun, the Arangi flew north, her course continuously advertised by the increasing smoke-talk that gossiped along the green summits. At high noon, with Van Horn, ever-attended by Jerry, standing for'ard and conning, the Arangi headed into the wind to thread the passage between two palm-tufted islets. There was need for conning. Coral patches uprose everywhere from the turquoise depths, running the gamut of green from deepest jade to palest tourmaline, over which the sea filtered

changing shades, creamed lazily, or burst into white fountains of sun-flashed spray.

The smoke columns along the heights became garrulous, and long before the Arangi was through the passage the entire leeward coast, from the salt-water men of the shore to the remotest bush villagers, knew that the labour recruiter was going in to Langa-Langa. As the lagoon, formed by the chain of islets lying off shore, opened out, Jerry began to smell the reef-villages. Canoes, many canoes, urged by paddles or sailed before the wind by the weight of the freshening South East trade on spread fronds of coconut palms, moved across the smooth surface of the lagoon. Jerry barked intimidatingly at those that came closest, bristling his neck and making a ferocious simulation of an efficient protector of the white god who stood beside him. And after each such warning, he would softly dab his cool damp muzzle against the sun-heated skin of Skipper's leg.

Once inside the lagoon, the Arangi filled away with the wind a-beam. At the end of a swift half-mile she rounded to, with head-sails trimming down and with a great flapping of main and mizzen, and dropped anchor in fifty feet of water so clear that every huge fluted clamshell was visible on the coral floor. The whaleboat was not necessary to put the Langa-Langa return boys ashore. Hundreds of canoes lay twenty deep along both sides of the Arangi, and each boy, with his box and bell, was clamoured for by scores of relatives and friends.

In such height of excitement, Van Horn permitted no one on board. Melanesians, unlike cattle, are as prone to stampede to attack as to retreat. Two of the boat's crew stood beside the Lee-Enfields on the skylight. Borckman, with half the boat's crew, went about the ship's work. Van Horn, Jerry at his heels, careful that no one should get at his back, superintended the departure of the Langa-Langa returns and kept a vigilant eye on the remaining half of the boat's crew that guarded the barbed-wire rails. And each Somo boy sat on his trade-box to prevent it from being tossed into the waiting canoes by some Langa-Langa boy.

In half an hour the riot departed ashore. Only several canoes lingered, and from one of these Van Horn beckoned aboard Nau-hau, the biggest chief of the stronghold of Langa-Langa. Unlike most of the big chiefs, Nau-hau was young, and, unlike most of the Melanesians, he was handsome, even beautiful.

"Hello, King o' Babylon," was Van Horn's greeting, for so he had named him because of fancied Semitic resemblance blended with the crude power that marked his visage and informed his bearing.

Born and trained to nakedness, Nau-hau trod the deck boldly and unashamed. His sole gear of clothing was a length of trunk strap buckled about his waist. Between this and his bare skin was thrust the naked blade of a ten-inch ripping knife. His sole decoration was a white China soup-plate, perforated and strung on coconut sennit, suspended from about his neck so that it rested flat on his chest and half-concealed the

generous swell of muscles. It was the greatest of treasures. No man of Malaita he had ever heard of possessed an unbroken soup-plate.

Nor was he any more ridiculous because of the soup-plate than was he ludicrous because of his nakedness. He was royal. His father had been a king before him, and he had proved himself greater than his father. Life and death he bore in his hands and head. Often he had exercised it, chirping to his subjects in the tongue of Langa-Langa: "Slay here," and "Slay there"; "Thou shalt die," and "Thou shalt live." Because his father, a year abdicated, had chosen foolishly to interfere with his son's government, he had called two boys and had them twist a cord of coconut around his father's neck so that thereafter he never breathed again. Because his favourite wife, mother of his eldest born, had dared out of silliness of affection to violate one of his kingly tamboos, he had had her killed and had himself selfishly and religiously eaten the last of her even to the marrow of her cracked joints, sharing no morsel with his boonest of comrades.

Royal he was, by nature, by training, by deed. He carried himself with consciousness of royalty. He looked royal--as a magnificent stallion may look royal, as a lion on a painted tawny desert may look royal. He was as splendid a brute--an adumbration of the splendid human conquerors and rulers, higher on the ladder of evolution, who have appeared in other times and places. His pose of body, of chest, of shoulders, of head, was royal. Royal was the heavy-lidded, lazy, insolent way he looked out of his eyes.

Royal in courage was he, this moment on the Arangi, despite the fact that he knew he walked on dynamite. As he had long since bitterly learned, any white man was as much dynamite as was the mysterious death-dealing missile he sometimes employed. When a stripling, he had made one of the canoe force that attacked the sandalwood-cutter that had been even smaller than the Arangi. He had never forgotten that mystery. Two of the three white men he had seen slain and their heads removed on deck. The third, still fighting, had but the minute before fled below. Then the cutter, along with all her wealth of hoop-iron, tobacco, knives and calico, had gone up into the air and fallen back into the sea in scattered and fragmented nothingness. It had been dynamite--the MYSTERY. And he, who had been hurled uninjured through the air by a miracle of fortune, had divined that white men in themselves were truly dynamite, compounded of the same mystery as the substance with which they shot the swift-darting schools of mullet, or blow up, in extremity, themselves and the ships on which they voyaged the sea from far places. And yet on this unstable and death-terrific substance of which he was well aware Van Horn was composed, he trod heavily with his personality, daring, to the verge of detonation, to impact it with his insolence.

"My word," he began, "what name you make 'm boy belong me stop along you too much?" Which was a true and correct charge that the boys which Van Horn had just returned had been away three years and a half instead of three years.

"You talk that fella talk I get cross too much along you," Van Horn bristled back, and then added, diplomatically, dipping into a half-case of tobacco sawed across and proffering a handful of stick tobacco: "Much better you smoke 'm up and talk 'm good fella talk."

But Nau-hau grandly waved aside the gift for which he hungered.

"Plenty tobacco stop along me," he lied. "What name one fella boy go way no come back?" he demanded.

Van Horn pulled the long slender account book out of the twist of his loin-cloth, and, while he skimmed its pages, impressed Nau-hau with the dynamite of the white man's superior powers which enabled him to remember correctly inside the scrawled sheets of a book instead of inside his head.

"Sati," Van Horn read, his finger marking the place, his eyes alternating watchfully between the writing and the black chief before him, while the black chief himself speculated and studied the chance of getting behind him and, with the single knife-thrust he knew so well, of severing the other's spinal cord at the base of the neck.

"Sati," Van Horn read. "Last monsoon begin about this time, him fella Sati get 'm sick belly belong him too much; bime by him fella Sati finish altogether," he translated into beche-de-mer the written information: Died of dysentery July 4th, 1901.

"Plenty work him fella Sati, long time," Nau-hau drove to the point.

"What come along money belong him?"

Van Horn did mental arithmetic from the account.

"Altogether him make 'm six tens pounds and two fella pounds gold money," was his translation of sixty-two pounds of wages. "I pay advance father belong him one ten pounds and five fella pounds. Him finish altogether four tens pounds and seven fella pounds."

"What name stop four tens pounds and seven fella pounds?" Nau-hau demanded, his tongue, but not his brain, encompassing so prodigious a sum.

Van Horn held up his hand.

"Too much hurry you fella Nau-hau. Him fella Sati buy 'm slop chest along plantation two tens pounds and one fella pound. Belong Sati he finish altogether two tens pounds and six fella pounds."

"What name stop two tens pounds and six fella pounds?" Nau-hau continued inflexibly.

"Stop 'm along me," the captain answered curtly.

"Give 'm me two tens pounds and six fella pounds."

"Give 'm you hell," Van Horn refused, and in the blue of his eyes the black chief sensed the impression of the dynamite out of which white men seemed made, and felt his brain quicken to the vision of the bloody day he first encountered an explosion of dynamite and was hurled through the air.

"What name that old fella boy stop 'm along canoe?" Van Horn asked, pointing to an old man in a canoe alongside. "Him father belong Sati?"

"Him father belong Sati," Nau-hau affirmed.

Van Horn motioned the old man in and on board, beckoned Borckman to take charge of the deck and of Nau-hau, and went below to get the money from his strong-box. When he returned, cavalierly ignoring the chief, he addressed himself to the old man.

"What name belong you?"

"Me fella Nino," was the quavering response. "Him fella Sati belong along me."

Van Horn glanced for verification to Nau-hau, who nodded affirmation in the reverse Solomon way; whereupon Van Horn counted twenty-six gold sovereigns into the hand of Sati's father.

Immediately thereafter Nau-hau extended his hand and received the sum. Twenty gold pieces the chief retained for himself, returning to the old man the remaining six. It was no quarrel of Van Horn's. He had fulfilled his duty and paid properly. The tyranny of a chief over a subject was none of his business.

Both masters, white and black, were fairly contented with themselves. Van Horn had paid the money where it was due; Nau-hau, by virtue of kingship, had robbed Sati's father of Sati's labour before Van Horn's eyes. But Nau-hau was not above strutting. He declined a proffered present of tobacco, bought a case of stick tobacco from Van Horn, paying him five pounds for it, and insisted on having it sawed open so that he could fill his pipe.

"Plenty good boy stop along Langa-Langa?" Van Horn, unperturbed, politely queried, in order to make conversation and advertise nonchalance.

The King o' Babylon grinned, but did not deign to reply.

"Maybe I go ashore and walk about?" Van Horn challenged with tentative emphasis.

"Maybe too much trouble along you," Nau-hau challenged back. "Maybe plenty bad fella boy kai-kai along you."

Although Van Horn did not know it, at this challenge he experienced the hair-pricking sensations in his scalp that Jerry experienced when he bristled his back.

"Hey, Borckman," he called. "Man the whaleboat."

When the whaleboat was alongside, he descended into it first, superiorly, then invited Nau-hau to accompany him.

"My word, King o' Babylon," he muttered in the chief's ears as the boat's crew bent to the oars, "one fella boy make 'm trouble, I shoot 'm hell outa you first thing. Next thing I shoot 'm hell outa Langa-Langa. All the time you me fella walk about, you walk about along me. You no like walk about along me, you finish close up altogether."

And ashore, a white man alone, attended by an Irish terrier puppy with a heart flooded with love and by a black king resentfully respectful of the dynamite of the white man, Van Horn went, swashbuckling barelegged through a stronghold of three thousand souls, while his white mate, addicted to schnapps, held the deck of the tiny craft at anchor off shore, and while his black boat's crew, oars in hands, held the whaleboat stern-on to the beach to receive the expected flying leap of the man they served but did not love, and whose head they would eagerly take any time were it not for fear of him.

Van Horn had had no intention of going ashore, and that he went ashore at

the black chief's insolent challenge was merely a matter of business. For an hour he strolled about, his right hand never far from the butt of the automatic that lay along his groin, his eyes never too far from the unwilling Nau-hau beside him. For Nau-hau, in sullen volcanic rage, was ripe to erupt at the slightest opportunity. And, so strolling, Van Horn was given to see what few white men have seen, for Langa-Langa and her sister islets, beautiful beads strung along the lee coast of Malaita, were as unique as they were unexplored.

Originally these islets had been mere sand-banks and coral reefs awash in the sea or shallowly covered by the sea. Only a hunted, wretched creature, enduring incredible hardship, could have eked out a miserable existence upon them. But such hunted, wretched creatures, survivors of village massacres, escapes from the wrath of chiefs and from the long-pig fate of the cooking-pot, did come, and did endure. They, who knew only the bush, learned the salt water and developed the salt-water-man breed. They learned the ways of the fish and the shell-fish, and they invented hooks and lines, nets and fish-traps, and all the diverse cunning ways by which swimming meat can be garnered from the shifting, unstable sea.

Such refugees stole women from the mainland, and increased and multiplied. With herculean labour, under the burning sun, they conquered the sea. They walled the confines of their coral reefs and sand-banks with coral-rock stolen from the mainland on dark nights. Fine masonry, without mortar or cutting chisel, they builded to withstand the ocean surge. Likewise stolen from the mainland, as mice steal from human

habitations when humans sleep, they stole canoe-loads, and millions of canoe-loads, of fat, rich soil.

Generations and centuries passed, and, behold, in place of naked sandbanks half awash were walled citadels, perforated with launching-ways for the long canoes, protected against the mainland by the lagoons that were to them their narrow seas. Coconut palms, banana trees, and lofty breadfruit trees gave food and sun-shelter. Their gardens prospered. Their long, lean war-canoes ravaged the coasts and visited vengeance for their forefathers upon the descendants of them that had persecuted and desired to eat.

Like the refugees and renegades who slunk away in the salt marshes of the Adriatic and builded the palaces of powerful Venice on her deep-sunk piles, so these wretched hunted blacks builded power until they became masters of the mainland, controlling traffic and trade-routes, compelling the bushmen for ever after to remain in the bush and never to dare attempt the salt-water.

And here, amidst the fat success and insolence of the sea-people, Van Horn swaggered his way, taking his chance, incapable of believing that he might swiftly die, knowing that he was building good future business in the matter of recruiting labour for the plantations of other adventuring white men on far islands who dared only less greatly than he.

And when, at the end of an hour, Van Horn passed Jerry into the

sternsheets of the whaleboat and followed, he left on the beach a stunned and wondering royal black, who, more than ever before, was respectful of the dynamite-compounded white men who brought to him stick tobacco, calico, knives and hatchets, and inexorably extracted from such trade a profit.