

## Chapter Four--THE JOKERS OF NEW GIBBON

I

"I'm almost afraid to take you in to New Gibbon," David Grief said. "It wasn't until you and the British gave me a free hand and let the place alone that any results were accomplished."

Wallenstein, the German Resident Commissioner from Bougainville, poured himself a long Scotch and soda and smiled.

"We take off our hats to you, Mr. Grief," he said in perfectly good English. "What you have done on the devil island is a miracle. And we shall continue not to interfere. It is a devil island, and old Koho is the big chief devil of them all. We never could bring him to terms. He is a liar, and he is no fool. He is a black Napoleon, a head-hunting, man-eating Talleyrand. I remember six years ago, when I landed there in the British cruiser. The niggers cleared out for the bush, of course, but we found several who couldn't get away. One was his latest wife. She had been hung up by one arm in the sun for two days and nights. We cut her down, but she died just the same. And staked out in the fresh running water, up to their necks, were three more women. All their bones were broken and their joints crushed. The process is supposed to make

them tender for the eating. They were still alive. Their vitality was remarkable. One woman, the oldest, lingered nearly ten days. Well, that was a sample of Koho's diet. No wonder he's a wild beast. How you ever pacified him is our everlasting puzzlement."

"I wouldn't call him exactly pacified," Grief answered. "Though he comes in once in a while and eats out of the hand."

"That's more than we accomplished with our cruisers. Neither the German nor the English ever laid eyes on him. You were the first."

"No; McTavish was the first," Grief disclaimed.

"Ah, yes, I remember him--the little, dried-up Scotchman." Wallenstein sipped his whiskey. "He's called the Trouble-mender, isn't he?"

Grief nodded.

"And they say the screw you pay him is bigger than mine or the British Resident's?"

"I'm afraid it is," Grief admitted. "You see, and no offence, he's really worth it. He spends his time wherever the trouble is. He is a wizard. He's the one who got me my lodgment on New Gibbon. He's down on Malaita now, starting a plantation for me."

"The first?"

"There's not even a trading station on all Malaita. The recruiters still use covering boats and carry the old barbed wire above their rails. There's the plantation now. We'll be in in half an hour." He handed the binoculars to his guest. "Those are the boat-sheds to the left of the bungalow. Beyond are the barracks. And to the right are the copra-sheds. We dry quite a bit already. Old Koho's getting civilized enough to make his people bring in the nuts. There's the mouth of the stream where you found the three women softening."

The Wonder, wing-and-wing, was headed directly in for the anchorage. She rose and fell lazily over a glassy swell flawed here and there by catspaws from astern. It was the tail-end of the monsoon season, and the air was heavy and sticky with tropic moisture, the sky a florid, leaden muss of formless clouds. The rugged land was swathed with cloud-banks and squall wreaths, through which headlands and interior peaks thrust darkly. On one promontory a slant of sunshine blazed torridly, on another, scarcely a mile away, a squall was bursting in furious downpour of driving rain.

This was the dank, fat, savage island of New Gibbon, lying fifty miles to leeward of Choiseul. Geographically, it belonged to the Solomon Group. Politically, the dividing line of German and British influence cut it in half, hence the joint control by the two Resident Commissioners. In the case of New Gibbon, this control existed only on

paper in the colonial offices of the two countries. There was no real control at all, and never had been. The bêche de mer fishermen of the old days had passed it by. The sandalwood traders, after stern experiences, had given it up. The blackbirders had never succeeded in recruiting one labourer on the island, and, after the schooner Dorset had been cut off with all hands, they left the place severely alone. Later, a German company had attempted a cocoanut plantation, which was abandoned after several managers and a number of contract labourers had lost their heads. German cruisers and British cruisers had failed to get the savage blacks to listen to reason. Four times the missionary societies had essayed the peaceful conquest of the island, and four times, between sickness and massacre, they had been driven away, More cruisers, more pacifications, had followed, and followed fruitlessly. The cannibals had always retreated into the bush and laughed at the screaming shells. When the warships left it was an easy matter to rebuild the burned grass houses and set up the ovens in the old-fashioned way.

New Gibbon was a large island, fully one hundred and fifty miles long and half as broad.

Its windward coast was iron-bound, without anchorages or inlets, and it was inhabited by scores of warring tribes--at least it had been, until Koho had arisen, like a Kamehameha, and, by force of arms and considerable statecraft, firmly welded the greater portion of the tribes into a confederation. His policy of permitting no intercourse with white

men had been eminently right, so far as survival of his own people was concerned; and after the visit of the last cruiser he had had his own way until David Grief and McTavish the Trouble-mender landed on the deserted beach where once had stood the German bungalow and barracks and the various English mission-houses.

Followed wars, false peaces, and more wars. The weazened little Scotchman could make trouble as well as mend it, and, not content with holding the beach, he imported bushmen from Malaita and invaded the wild-pig runs of the interior jungle. He burned villages until Koho wearied of rebuilding them, and when he captured Koho's eldest son he compelled a conference with the old chief. It was then that McTavish laid down the rate of head-exchange. For each head of his own people he promised to take ten of Koho's. After Koho had learned that the Scotchman was a man of his word, the first true peace was made. In the meantime McTavish had built the bungalow and barracks, cleared the jungle-land along the beach, and laid out the plantation. After that he had gone on his way to mend trouble on the atoll of Tasman, where a plague of black measles had broken out and been ascribed to Grief's plantation by the devil-devil doctors. Once, a year later, he had been called back again to straighten up New Gibbon; and Koho, after paying a forced fine of two hundred thousand cocoanuts, decided it was cheaper to keep the peace and sell the nuts. Also, the fires of his youth had burned down. He was getting old and limped of one leg where a Lee-Enfield bullet had perforated the calf.

## II

"I knew a chap in Hawaii," Grief said, "superintendent of a sugar plantation, who used a hammer and a ten-penny nail."

They were sitting on the broad bungalow veranda, and watching Worth, the manager of New Gibbon, doctoring the sick squad. They were New Georgia boys, a dozen of them, and the one with the aching tooth had been put back to the last. Worth had just failed in his first attempt. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with one hand and waved the forceps with the other.

"And broke more than one jaw," he asserted grimly.

Grief shook his head. Wallenstein smiled and elevated his brows.

"He said not, at any rate," Grief qualified. "He assured me, furthermore, that he always succeeded on the first trial."

"I saw it done when I was second mate on a lime-juicer," Captain Ward spoke up. "The old man used a caulking mallet and a steel marlin-spike. He took the tooth out with the first stroke, too, clean as a whistle."

"Me for the forceps," Worth muttered grimly, inserting his own pair in the mouth of the black. As he pulled, the man groaned and rose in the air. "Lend a hand, somebody, and hold him down," the manager appealed.

Grief and Wallenstein, on either side, gripped the black and held him. And he, in turn, struggled against them and clenched his teeth on the forceps. The group swayed back and forth. Such exertion, in the stagnant heat, brought the sweat out on all of them. The black sweated, too, but his was the sweat of excruciating pain. The chair on which he sat was overturned. Captain Ward paused in the act of pouring himself a drink, and called encouragement. Worth pleaded with his assistants to hang on, and hung on himself, twisting the tooth till it crackled and then attempting a straightaway pull.

Nor did any of them notice the little black man who limped up the steps and stood looking on. Koho was a conservative. His fathers before him had worn no clothes, and neither did he, not even a gee-string. The many empty perforations in nose and lips and ears told of decorative passions long since dead. The holes on both ear-lobes had been torn out, but their size was attested by the strips of withered flesh that hung down and swept his shoulders. He cared now only for utility, and in one of the half dozen minor holes in his right ear he carried a short clay pipe. Around his waist was buckled a cheap trade-belt, and between the imitation leather and the naked skin was thrust the naked blade of a long knife. Suspended from the belt was his bamboo betel-nut and lime box. In his hand was a short-barrelled, large-bore Snider rifle. He was indescribably filthy, and here and there marred by scars, the worst being the one left by the Lee-Enfield bullet, which had withered the calf to half the size of its mate. His shrunken mouth showed that few

teeth were left to serve him. Face and body were shrunken and withered, but his black, bead-like eyes, small and close together, were very bright, withal they were restless and querulous, and more like a monkey's than a man's.

He looked on, grinning like a shrewd little ape. His joy in the torment of the patient was natural, for the world he lived in was a world of pain. He had endured his share of it, and inflicted far more than his share on others. When the tooth parted from its locked hold in the jaw and the forceps raked across the other teeth and out of the mouth with a nerve-rasping sound, old Koho's eyes fairly sparkled, and he looked with glee at the poor black, collapsed on the veranda floor and groaning terribly as he held his head in both his hands.

"I think he's going to faint," Grief said, bending over the victim.

"Captain Ward, give him a drink, please. You'd better take one yourself, Worth; you're shaking like a leaf."

"And I think I'll take one," said Wallenstein, wiping the sweat from his face. His eye caught the shadow of Koho on the floor and followed it up to the old chief himself. "Hello! who's this?"

"Hello, Koho!" Grief said genially, though he knew better than to offer to shake hands.

It was one of Koho's tambos, given him by the devil-devil doctors when



he was born, that never was his flesh to come in contact with the flesh of a white man. Worth and Captain Ward, of the Wonder, greeted Koho, but Worth frowned at sight of the Snider, for it was one of his tambos that no visiting bushman should carry a weapon on the plantation. Rifles had a nasty way of going off at the hip under such circumstances. The manager clapped his hands, and a black house-boy, recruited from San Cristobal, came running. At a sign from Worth, he took the rifle from the visitor's hand and carried it inside the bungalow.

"Koho," Grief said, introducing the German Resident, "this big fella marster belong Bougainville--my word, big fella marster too much."

Koho, remembering the visits of the various German cruisers, smiled with a light of unpleasant reminiscence in his eyes.

"Don't shake hands with him, Wallenstein," Grief warned. "Tambo, you know." Then to Koho, "My word, you get 'm too much fat stop along you. Bime by you marry along new fella Mary, eh?"

"Too old fella me," Koho answered, with a weary shake of the head. "Me no like 'm Mary. Me no like 'm kai-kai (food). Close up me die along altogether." He stole a significant glance at Worth, whose head was tilted back to a long glass. "Me like 'm rum."

Grief shook his head.

"Tambo along black fella."

"He black fella no tambo," Koho retorted, nodding toward the groaning labourer.

"He fella sick," Grief explained.

"Me fella sick."

"You fella big liar," Grief laughed. "Rum tambo, all the time tambo. Now, Koho, we have big fella talk along this big fella mar-ster."

And he and Wallenstein and the old chief sat down on the veranda to confer about affairs of state. Koho was complimented on the peace he had kept, and he, with many protestations of his aged decrepitude, swore peace again and everlasting. Then was discussed the matter of starting a German plantation twenty miles down the coast. The land, of course, was to be bought from Koho, and the price was arranged in terms of tobacco, knives, beads, pipes, hatchets, porpoise teeth and shell-money--in terms of everything except rum. While the talk went on, Koho, glancing through the window, could see Worth mixing medicines and placing bottles back in the medicine cupboard. Also, he saw the manager complete his labours by taking a drink of Scotch. Koho noted the bottle carefully. And, though he hung about for an hour after the conference was over, there was never a moment when some one or another was not in the room. When Grief and Worth sat down to a business talk, Koho gave it up.

"Me go along schooner," he announced, then turned and limped out.

"How are the mighty fallen," Grief laughed. "To think that used to be Koho, the fiercest red-handed murderer in the Solomons, who defied all his life two of the greatest world powers. And now he's going aboard to try and cadge Denby for a drink."

### III

For the last time in his life the supercargo of the *Wonder* perpetrated a practical joke on a native. He was in the main cabin, checking off the list of goods being landed in the whaleboats, when Koho limped down the companionway and took a seat opposite him at the table.

"Close up me die along altogether," was the burden of the old chief's plaint. All the delights of the flesh had forsaken him. "Me no like 'm Mary. Me no like 'm kai-kai. Me too much sick fella. Me close up finish." A long, sad pause, in which his face expressed unutterable concern for his stomach, which he patted gingerly and with an assumption of pain. "Belly belong me too much sick." Another pause, which was an invitation to Denby to make suggestions. Then followed a long, weary, final sigh, and a "Me like 'm rum."

Denby laughed heartlessly. He had been cadged for drinks before by the old cannibal, and the sternest tambo Grief and McTavish had laid down was the one forbidding alcohol to the natives of New Gibbon.

The trouble was that Koho had acquired the taste. In his younger days he had learned the delights of drunkenness when he cut off the schooner *Dorset*, but unfortunately he had learned it along with all his tribesmen, and the supply had not held out long. Later, when he led his naked warriors down to the destruction of the German plantation, he was wiser, and he appropriated all the liquors for his sole use. The result

had been a gorgeous mixed drunk, on a dozen different sorts of drink, ranging from beer doctored with quinine to absinthe and apricot brandy. The drunk had lasted for months, and it had left him with a thirst that would remain with him until he died. Predisposed toward alcohol, after the way of savages, all the chemistry of his flesh clamoured for it. This craving was to him expressed in terms of tingling and sensation, of maggots crawling warmly and deliciously in his brain, of good feeling, and well being, and high exultation. And in his barren old age, when women and feasting were a weariness, and when old hates had smouldered down, he desired more and more the revivifying fire that came liquid out of bottles--out of all sorts of bottles--for he remembered them well. He would sit in the sun for hours, occasionally drooling, in mournful contemplation of the great orgy which had been his when the German plantation was cleaned out.

Denby was sympathetic. He sought out the old chief's symptoms and offered him dyspeptic tablets from the medicine chest, pills, and a varied assortment of harmless tabloids and capsules. But Koho steadfastly declined. Once, when he cut the Dorset off, he had bitten through a capsule of quinine; in addition, two of his warriors had partaken of a white powder and laid down and died very violently in a very short time. No; he did not believe in drugs. But the liquids from bottles, the cool-flaming youth-givers and warm-glowing dream-makers. No wonder the white men valued them so highly and refused to dispense them.

"Rum he good fella," he repeated over and over, plaintively and with the

weary patience of age.

And then Denby made his mistake and played his joke. Stepping around behind Koho, he unlocked the medicine closet and took out a four-ounce bottle labelled essence of mustard. As he made believe to draw the cork and drink of the contents, in the mirror on the for'ard bulkhead he glimpsed Koho, twisted half around, intently watching him. Denby smacked his lips and cleared his throat appreciatively as he replaced the bottle. Neglecting to relock the medicine closet, he returned to his chair, and, after a decent interval, went on deck. He stood beside the companionway and listened. After several moments the silence below was broken by a fearful, wheezing, propulsive, strangling cough. He smiled to himself and returned leisurely down the companionway. The bottle was back on the shelf where it belonged, and the old man sat in the same position. Denby marvelled at his iron control. Mouth and lips and tongue, and all sensitive membranes, were a blaze of fire. He gasped and nearly coughed several times, while involuntary tears brimmed in his eyes and ran down his cheeks. An ordinary man would have coughed and strangled for half an hour. But old Koho's face was grimly composed. It dawned on him that a trick had been played, and into his eyes came an expression of hatred and malignancy so primitive, so abysmal, that it sent the chills up and down Denby's spine. Koho arose proudly.

"Me go along," he said. "You sing out one fella boat stop along me."

#### IV

Having seen Grief and Worth start for a ride over the plantation, Wallenstein sat down in the big living-room and with gun-oil and old rags proceeded to take apart and clean his automatic pistol. On the table beside him stood the inevitable bottle of Scotch and numerous soda bottles. Another bottle, part full, chanced to stand there. It was also labelled Scotch, but its content was liniment which Worth had mixed for the horses and neglected to put away.

As Wallenstein worked, he glanced through the window and saw Koho coming up the compound path. He was limping very rapidly, but when he came along the veranda and entered the room his gait was slow and dignified. He sat down and watched the gun-cleaning, Though mouth and lips and tongue were afire, he gave no sign. At the end of five minutes he spoke.

"Rum he good fella. Me like 'm rum." Wallenstein smiled and shook his head, and then it was that his perverse imp suggested what was to be his last joke on a native. The similarity of the two bottles was the real suggestion. He laid his pistol parts on the table and mixed himself a long drink. Standing as he did between Koho and the table, he interchanged the two bottles, drained his glass, made as if to search for something, and left the room. From outside he heard the surprised splutter and cough; but when he returned the old chief sat as before. The liniment in the bottle, however, was lower, and it still oscillated.

Koho stood up, clapped his hands, and, when the house-boy answered, signed that he desired his rifle. The boy fetched the weapon, and according to custom preceded the visitor down the pathway. Not until outside the gate did the boy turn the rifle over to its owner. Wallenstein, chuckling to himself, watched the old chief limp along the beach in the direction of the river.

A few minutes later, as he put his pistol together, Wallenstein heard the distant report of a gun. For the instant he thought of Koho, then dismissed the conjecture from his mind. Worth and Grief had taken shotguns with them, and it was probably one of their shots at a pigeon. Wallenstein lounged back in his chair, chuckled, twisted his yellow mustache, and dozed. He was aroused by the excited voice of Worth, crying out:

"Ring the big fella bell! Ring plenty too much! Ring like hell!"

Wallenstein gained the veranda in time to see the manager jump his horse over the low fence of the compound and dash down the beach after Grief, who was riding madly ahead. A loud crackling and smoke rising through the cocoanut trees told the story. The boat-houses and the barracks were on fire. The big plantation bell was ringing wildly as the German Resident ran down the beach, and he could see whaleboats hastily putting off from the schooner.



Barracks and boat-houses, grass-thatched and like tinder, were wrapped in flames. Grief emerged from the kitchen, carrying a naked black child by the leg. Its head was missing.

"The cook's in there," he told Worth. "Her head's gone, too. She was too heavy, and I had to clear out."

"It was my fault," Wallenstein said. "Old Koho did it. But I let him take a drink of Worth's horse liniment."

"I guess he's headed for the bush," Worth said, springing astride his horse and starting. "Oliver is down there by the river. Hope he didn't get him."

The manager galloped away through the trees. A few minutes later, as the charred wreck of the barracks crashed in, they heard him calling and followed. On the edge of the river bank they came upon him. He still sat on his horse, very white-faced, and gazed at something on the ground. It was the body of Oliver, the young assistant manager, though it was hard to realize it, for the head was gone. The black labourers, breathless from their run in from the fields, were now crowding around, and under conches to-night, and the war-drums, "all merry hell will break loose. They won't rush us, but keep all the boys close up to the house, Mr. Worth. Come on!"

As they returned along the path they came upon a black who whimpered and

cried vociferously.

"Shut up mouth belong you!" Worth shouted. "What name you make 'm noise?"

"Him fella Koho finish along two fella bulla-macow," the black answered, drawing a forefinger significantly across his throat.

"He's knifed the cows," Grief said. "That means no more milk for some time for you, Worth. I'll see about sending a couple up from Ugi."

Wallenstein proved inconsolable, until Denby, coming ashore, confessed to the dose of essence of mustard. Thereat the German Resident became even cheerful, though he twisted his yellow mustache up more fiercely and continued to curse the Solomons with oaths culled from four languages.

Next morning, visible from the masthead of the Wonder, the bush was alive with signal-smokes. From promontory to promontory, and back through the solid jungle, the smoke-pillars curled and puffed and talked. Remote villages on the higher peaks, beyond the farthest raids McTavish had ever driven, joined in the troubled conversation. From across the river persisted a bedlam of conches; while from everywhere, drifting for miles along the quiet air, came the deep, booming reverberations of the great war-drums--huge tree trunks, hollowed by fire and carved with tools of stone and shell. "You're all right as long

as you stay close," Grief told his manager. "I've got to get along to Guvutu. They won't come out in the open and attack you. Keep the work-gangs close. Stop the clearing till this blows over. They'll get any detached gangs you send out. And, whatever you do, don't be fooled into going into the bush after Koho. If you do, he'll get you. All you've got to do is wait for McTavish. I'll send him up with a bunch of his Malaita bush-men. He's the only man who can go inside. Also, until he comes, I'll leave Denby with you. You don't mind, do you, Mr. Denby? I'll send McTavish up with the Wanda, and you can go back on her and rejoin the Wonder. Captain Ward can manage without you for a trip."

"It was just what I was going to volunteer," Denby answered. "I never dreamed all this muss would be kicked up over a joke. You see, in a way I consider myself responsible for it."

"So am I responsible," Wallenstein broke in.

"But I started it," the supercargo urged.

"Maybe you did, but I carried it along."

"And Koho finished it," Grief said.

"At any rate, I, too, shall remain," said the German.

"I thought you were coming to Guvutu with me," Grief protested.

"I was. But this is my jurisdiction, partly, and I have made a fool of myself in it completely. I shall remain and help get things straight again."

At Guvutu, Grief sent full instructions to McTavish by a recruiting ketch which was just starting for Malaita. Captain Ward sailed in the Wonder for the Santa Cruz Islands; and Grief, borrowing a whaleboat and a crew of black prisoners from the British Resident, crossed the channel to Guadalcanar, to examine the grass lands back of Penduffryn.

Three weeks later, with a free sheet and a lusty breeze, he threaded the coral patches and surged up the smooth water to Guvutu anchorage. The harbour was deserted, save for a small ketch which lay close in to the shore reef. Grief recognized it as the Wanda. She had evidently just got in by the Tulagi Passage, for her black crew was still at work furling the sails. As he rounded alongside, McTavish himself extended a hand to help him over the rail.

"What's the matter?" Grief asked. "Haven't you started yet?"

McTavish nodded. "And got back. Everything's all right on board."

"How's New Gibbon?"

"All there, the last I saw of it, barrin' a few inconsequential frills

that a good eye could make out lacking from the landscape."

He was a cold flame of a man, small as Koho, and as dried up, with a mahogany complexion and small, expressionless blue eyes that were more like gimlet-points than the eyes of a Scotchman. Without fear, without enthusiasm, impervious to disease and climate and sentiment, he was lean and bitter and deadly as a snake. That his present sour look boded ill news, Grief was well aware.

"Spit it out!" he said. "What's happened?"

"'Tis a thing severely to be condemned, a damned shame, this joking with heathen niggers," was the reply. "Also, 'tis very expensive. Come below, Mr. Grief. You'll be better for the information with a long glass in your hand. After you."

"How did you settle things?" his employer demanded as soon as they were seated in the cabin.

The little Scotchman shook his head. "There was nothing to settle. It all depends how you look at it. The other way would be to say it was settled, entirely settled, mind you, before I got there."

"But the plantation, man? The plantation?"

"No plantation. All the years of our work have gone for naught. 'Tis

back where we started, where the missionaries started, where the Germans started--and where they finished. Not a stone stands on another at the landing pier. The houses are black ashes. Every tree is hacked down, and the wild pigs are rooting out the yams and sweet potatoes. Those boys from New Georgia, a fine bunch they were, five score of them, and they cost you a pretty penny. Not one is left to tell the tale."

He paused and began fumbling in a large locker under the companion-steps.

"But Worth? And Denby? And Wallenstein?"

"That's what I'm telling you. Take a look."

McTavish dragged out a sack made of rice matting and emptied its contents on the floor. David Grief pulled himself together with a jerk, for he found himself gazing fascinated at the heads of the three men he had left at New Gibbon. The yellow mustache of Wallenstein had lost its fierce curl and drooped and wilted on the upper lip.

"I don't know how it happened," the Scotchman's voice went on drearily.

"But I surmise they went into the bush after the old devil."

"And where is Koho?" Grief asked.

"Back in the bush and drunk as a lord. That's how I was able to recover

the heads. He was too drunk to stand. They lugged him on their backs out of the village when I rushed it. And if you'll relieve me of the heads, I'll be well obliged." He paused and sighed. "I suppose they'll have regular funerals over them and put them in the ground. But in my way of thinking they'd make excellent curios. Any respectable museum would pay a hundred quid apiece. Better have another drink. You're looking a bit pale---- There, put that down you, and if you'll take my advice, Mr. Grief, I would say, set your face sternly against any joking with the niggers. It always makes trouble, and it is a very expensive divertimento."