

Adventure

By

Jack London

ADVENTURE

"We are those fools who could not rest
In the dull earth we left behind,
But burned with passion for the West,
And drank strange frenzy from its wind.
The world where wise men live at ease
Fades from our unregretful eyes,
And blind across uncharted seas
We stagger on our enterprise."

"THE SHIP OF FOOLS."

CHAPTER I--SOMETHING TO BE DONE

He was a very sick white man. He rode pick-a-back on a woolly-headed, black-skinned savage, the lobes of whose ears had been pierced and stretched until one had torn out, while the other carried a circular block of carved wood three inches in diameter. The torn ear had been pierced again, but this time not so ambitiously, for the hole accommodated no more than a short clay pipe. The man-horse was greasy and dirty, and naked save for an exceedingly narrow and dirty loin-cloth; but the white man clung to him closely and desperately. At times, from weakness, his head drooped and rested on the woolly pate. At other times he lifted his head and stared with swimming eyes at the cocoanut palms that reeled and swung in the shimmering heat. He was clad in a thin undershirt and a strip of cotton cloth, that wrapped about his waist and descended to his knees. On his head was a battered Stetson, known to the trade as a Baden-Powell. About his middle was strapped a belt, which carried a large-calibred automatic pistol and several spare clips, loaded and ready for quick work.

The rear was brought up by a black boy of fourteen or fifteen, who carried medicine bottles, a pail of hot water, and various other hospital appurtenances. They passed out of the compound through a small wicker gate, and went on under the blazing sun, winding about among new-planted cocoanuts that threw no shade. There was not a breath of wind, and the superheated, stagnant air was heavy with pestilence. From the direction

they were going arose a wild clamour, as of lost souls wailing and of men in torment. A long, low shed showed ahead, grass-walled and grass-thatched, and it was from here that the noise proceeded. There were shrieks and screams, some unmistakably of grief, others unmistakably of unendurable pain. As the white man drew closer he could hear a low and continuous moaning and groaning. He shuddered at the thought of entering, and for a moment was quite certain that he was going to faint. For that most dreaded of Solomon Island scourges, dysentery, had struck Berande plantation, and he was all alone to cope with it. Also, he was afflicted himself.

By stooping close, still on man-back, he managed to pass through the low doorway. He took a small bottle from his follower, and sniffed strong ammonia to clear his senses for the ordeal. Then he shouted, "Shut up!" and the clamour stilled. A raised platform of forest slabs, six feet wide, with a slight pitch, extended the full length of the shed. Alongside of it was a yard-wide run-way. Stretched on the platform, side by side and crowded close, lay a score of blacks. That they were low in the order of human life was apparent at a glance. They were man-eaters. Their faces were asymmetrical, bestial; their bodies were ugly and ape-like. They wore nose-rings of clam-shell and turtle-shell, and from the ends of their noses which were also pierced, projected horns of beads strung on stiff wire. Their ears were pierced and distended to accommodate wooden plugs and sticks, pipes, and all manner of barbaric ornaments. Their faces and bodies were tattooed or scarred in hideous designs. In their sickness they wore no clothing, not even loin-cloths,

though they retained their shell armlets, their bead necklaces, and their leather belts, between which and the skin were thrust naked knives. The bodies of many were covered with horrible sores. Swarms of flies rose and settled, or flew back and forth in clouds.

The white man went down the line, dosing each man with medicine. To some he gave chlorodyne. He was forced to concentrate with all his will in order to remember which of them could stand ipecacuanha, and which of them were constitutionally unable to retain that powerful drug. One who lay dead he ordered to be carried out. He spoke in the sharp, peremptory manner of a man who would take no nonsense, and the well men who obeyed his orders scowled malignantly. One muttered deep in his chest as he took the corpse by the feet. The white man exploded in speech and action. It cost him a painful effort, but his arm shot out, landing a back-hand blow on the black's mouth.

"What name you, Angara?" he shouted. "What for talk 'long you, eh? I knock seven bells out of you, too much, quick!"

With the automatic swiftness of a wild animal the black gathered himself to spring. The anger of a wild animal was in his eyes; but he saw the white man's hand dropping to the pistol in his belt. The spring was never made. The tensed body relaxed, and the black, stooping over the corpse, helped carry it out. This time there was no muttering.

"Swine!" the white man gritted out through his teeth at the whole breed

of Solomon Islanders.

He was very sick, this white man, as sick as the black men who lay helpless about him, and whom he attended. He never knew, each time he entered the festering shambles, whether or not he would be able to complete the round. But he did know in large degree of certainty that, if he ever fainted there in the midst of the blacks, those who were able would be at his throat like ravening wolves.

Part way down the line a man was dying. He gave orders for his removal as soon as he had breathed his last. A black stuck his head inside the shed door, saying,--

"Four fella sick too much."

Fresh cases, still able to walk, they clustered about the spokesman. The white man singled out the weakest, and put him in the place just vacated by the corpse. Also, he indicated the next weakest, telling him to wait for a place until the next man died. Then, ordering one of the well men to take a squad from the field-force and build a lean-to addition to the hospital, he continued along the run-way, administering medicine and cracking jokes in beche-de-mer English to cheer the sufferers. Now and again, from the far end, a weird wail was raised. When he arrived there he found the noise was emitted by a boy who was not sick. The white man's wrath was immediate.

"What name you sing out alla time?" he demanded.

"Him fella my brother belong me," was the answer. "Him fella die too much."

"You sing out, him fella brother belong you die too much," the white man went on in threatening tones. "I cross too much along you. What name you sing out, eh? You fat-head make um brother belong you die dose up too much. You fella finish sing out, savvee? You fella no finish sing out I make finish damn quick."

He threatened the wailer with his fist, and the black cowered down, glaring at him with sullen eyes.

"Sing out no good little bit," the white man went on, more gently. "You no sing out. You chase um fella fly. Too much strong fella fly. You catch water, washee brother belong you; washee plenty too much, bime bye brother belong you all right. Jump!" he shouted fiercely at the end, his will penetrating the low intelligence of the black with dynamic force that made him jump to the task of brushing the loathsome swarms of flies away.

Again he rode out into the reeking heat. He clutched the black's neck tightly, and drew a long breath; but the dead air seemed to shrivel his lungs, and he dropped his head and dozed till the house was reached. Every effort of will was torture, yet he was called upon continually to

make efforts of will. He gave the black he had ridden a nip of trade-gin. Viaburi, the house-boy, brought him corrosive sublimate and water, and he took a thorough antiseptic wash. He dosed himself with chlorodyne, took his own pulse, smoked a thermometer, and lay back on the couch with a suppressed groan. It was mid-afternoon, and he had completed his third round that day. He called the house-boy.

"Take um big fella look along Jessie," he commanded.

The boy carried the long telescope out on the veranda, and searched the sea.

"One fella schooner long way little bit," he announced. "One fella Jessie."

The white man gave a little gasp of delight.

"You make um Jessie, five sticks tobacco along you," he said.

There was silence for a time, during which he waited with eager impatience.

"Maybe Jessie, maybe other fella schooner," came the faltering admission.

The man wormed to the edge of the couch, and slipped off to the floor on

his knees. By means of a chair he drew himself to his feet. Still clinging to the chair, supporting most of his weight on it, he shoved it to the door and out upon the veranda. The sweat from the exertion streamed down his face and showed through the undershirt across his shoulders. He managed to get into the chair, where he panted in a state of collapse. In a few minutes he roused himself. The boy held the end of the telescope against one of the veranda scantlings, while the man gazed through it at the sea. At last he picked up the white sails of the schooner and studied them.

"No Jessie," he said very quietly. "That's the Malakula."

He changed his seat for a steamer reclining-chair. Three hundred feet away the sea broke in a small surf upon the beach. To the left he could see the white line of breakers that marked the bar of the Balesuna River, and, beyond, the rugged outline of Savo Island. Directly before him, across the twelve-mile channel, lay Florida Island; and, farther to the right, dim in the distance, he could make out portions of Malaita--the savage island, the abode of murder, and robbery, and man-eating--the place from which his own two hundred plantation hands had been recruited. Between him and the beach was the cane-grass fence of the compound. The gate was ajar, and he sent the house-boy to close it. Within the fence grew a number of lofty cocoanut palms. On either side the path that led to the gate stood two tall flagstaffs. They were reared on artificial mounds of earth that were ten feet high. The base of each staff was surrounded by short posts, painted white and connected by heavy chains.

The staffs themselves were like ships' masts, with topmasts spliced on in true nautical fashion, with shrouds, ratlines, gaffs, and flag-halyards. From the gaff of one, two gay flags hung limply, one a checkerboard of blue and white squares, the other a white pennant centred with a red disc. It was the international code signal of distress.

On the far corner of the compound fence a hawk brooded. The man watched it, and knew that it was sick. He wondered idly if it felt as bad as he felt, and was feebly amused at the thought of kinship that somehow penetrated his fancy. He roused himself to order the great bell to be rung as a signal for the plantation hands to cease work and go to their barracks. Then he mounted his man-horse and made the last round of the day.

In the hospital were two new cases. To these he gave castor-oil. He congratulated himself. It had been an easy day. Only three had died. He inspected the copra-drying that had been going on, and went through the barracks to see if there were any sick lying hidden and defying his rule of segregation. Returned to the house, he received the reports of the boss-boys and gave instructions for next day's work. The boat's crew boss also he had in, to give assurance, as was the custom nightly, that the whale-boats were hauled up and padlocked. This was a most necessary precaution, for the blacks were in a funk, and a whale-boat left lying on the beach in the evening meant a loss of twenty blacks by morning. Since the blacks were worth thirty dollars apiece, or less, according to how much of their time had been worked out, Berande plantation could ill

afford the loss. Besides, whale-boats were not cheap in the Solomons; and, also, the deaths were daily reducing the working capital. Seven blacks had fled into the bush the week before, and four had dragged themselves back, helpless from fever, with the report that two more had been killed and kai-kai'd {1} by the hospitable bushmen. The seventh man was still at large, and was said to be working along the coast on the lookout to steal a canoe and get away to his own island.

Viaburi brought two lighted lanterns to the white man for inspection. He glanced at them and saw that they were burning brightly with clear, broad flames, and nodded his head. One was hoisted up to the gaff of the flagstaff, and the other was placed on the wide veranda. They were the leading lights to the Berande anchorage, and every night in the year they were so inspected and hung out.

He rolled back on his couch with a sigh of relief. The day's work was done. A rifle lay on the couch beside him. His revolver was within reach of his hand. An hour passed, during which he did not move. He lay in a state of half-slumber, half-coma. He became suddenly alert. A creak on the back veranda was the cause. The room was L-shaped; the corner in which stood his couch was dim, but the hanging lamp in the main part of the room, over the billiard table and just around the corner, so that it did not shine on him, was burning brightly. Likewise the verandas were well lighted. He waited without movement. The creaks were repeated, and he knew several men lurked outside.

"What name?" he cried sharply.

The house, raised a dozen feet above the ground, shook on its pile foundations to the rush of retreating footsteps.

"They're getting bold," he muttered. "Something will have to be done."

The full moon rose over Malaita and shone down on Berande. Nothing stirred in the windless air. From the hospital still proceeded the moaning of the sick. In the grass-thatched barracks nearly two hundred woolly-headed man-eaters slept off the weariness of the day's toil, though several lifted their heads to listen to the curses of one who cursed the white man who never slept. On the four verandas of the house the lanterns burned. Inside, between rifle and revolver, the man himself moaned and tossed in intervals of troubled sleep.