

## CHAPTER IV--JOAN LACKLAND

By the second day of the northwester, Sheldon was in collapse from his fever. It had taken an unfair advantage of his weak state, and though it was only ordinary malarial fever, in forty-eight hours it had run him as low as ten days of fever would have done when he was in condition. But the dysentery had been swept away from Berande. A score of convalescents lingered in the hospital, but they were improving hourly. There had been but one more death--that of the man whose brother had wailed over him instead of brushing the flies away.

On the morning of the fourth day of his fever, Sheldon lay on the veranda, gazing dimly out over the raging ocean. The wind was falling, but a mighty sea was still thundering in on Berande beach, the flying spray reaching in as far as the flagstaff mounds, the foaming wash creaming against the gate-posts. He had taken thirty grains of quinine, and the drug was buzzing in his ears like a nest of hornets, making his hands and knees tremble, and causing a sickening palpitation of the stomach. Once, opening his eyes, he saw what he took to be an hallucination. Not far out, and coming in across the Jessie's anchorage, he saw a whale-boat's nose thrust skyward on a smoky crest and disappear naturally, as an actual whale-boat's nose should disappear, as it slid down the back of the sea. He knew that no whale-boat should be out there, and he was quite certain no men in the Solomons were mad enough to be abroad in such a storm.

But the hallucination persisted. A minute later, chancing to open his eyes, he saw the whale-boat, full length, and saw right into it as it rose on the face of a wave. He saw six sweeps at work, and in the stern, clearly outlined against the overhanging wall of white, a man who stood erect, gigantic, swaying with his weight on the steering-sweep. This he saw, and an eighth man who crouched in the bow and gazed shoreward. But what startled Sheldon was the sight of a woman in the stern-sheets, between the stroke-oar and the steersman. A woman she was, for a braid of her hair was flying, and she was just in the act of recapturing it and stowing it away beneath a hat that for all the world was like his own "Baden-Powell."

The boat disappeared behind the wave, and rose into view on the face of the following one. Again he looked into it. The men were dark-skinned, and larger than Solomon Islanders, but the woman, he could plainly see, was white. Who she was, and what she was doing there, were thoughts that drifted vaguely through his consciousness. He was too sick to be vitally interested, and, besides, he had a half feeling that it was all a dream; but he noted that the men were resting on their sweeps, while the woman and the steersman were intently watching the run of seas behind them.

"Good boatmen," was Sheldon's verdict, as he saw the boat leap forward on the face of a huge breaker, the sweeps plying swiftly to keep her on that front of the moving mountain of water that raced madly for the shore. It was well done. Part full of water, the boat was flung upon the beach,

the men springing out and dragging its nose to the gate-posts. Sheldon had called vainly to the house-boys, who, at the moment, were dosing the remaining patients in the hospital. He knew he was unable to rise up and go down the path to meet the newcomers, so he lay back in the steamer-chair, and watched for ages while they cared for the boat. The woman stood to one side, her hand resting on the gate. Occasionally surges of sea water washed over her feet, which he could see were encased in rubber sea-boots. She scrutinized the house sharply, and for some time she gazed at him steadily. At last, speaking to two of the men, who turned and followed her, she started up the path.

Sheldon attempted to rise, got half up out of his chair, and fell back helplessly. He was surprised at the size of the men, who loomed like giants behind her. Both were six-footers, and they were heavy in proportion. He had never seen islanders like them. They were not black like the Solomon Islanders, but light brown; and their features were larger, more regular, and even handsome.

The woman--or girl, rather, he decided--walked along the veranda toward him. The two men waited at the head of the steps, watching curiously. The girl was angry; he could see that. Her gray eyes were flashing, and her lips were quivering. That she had a temper, was his thought. But the eyes were striking. He decided that they were not gray after all, or, at least, not all gray. They were large and wide apart, and they looked at him from under level brows. Her face was cameo-like, so clear cut was it. There were other striking things about her--the cowboy

Stetson hat, the heavy braids of brown hair, and the long-barrelled 38 Colt's revolver that hung in its holster on her hip.

"Pretty hospitality, I must say," was her greeting, "letting strangers sink or swim in your front yard."

"I--I beg your pardon," he stammered, by a supreme effort dragging himself to his feet.

His legs wobbled under him, and with a suffocating sensation he began sinking to the floor. He was aware of a feeble gratification as he saw solicitude leap into her eyes; then blackness smote him, and at the moment of smiting him his thought was that at last, and for the first time in his life, he had fainted.

The ringing of the big bell aroused him. He opened his eyes and found that he was on the couch indoors. A glance at the clock told him that it was six, and from the direction the sun's rays streamed into the room he knew that it was morning. At first he puzzled over something untoward he was sure had happened. Then on the wall he saw a Stetson hat hanging, and beneath it a full cartridge-belt and a long-barrelled 38 Colt's revolver. The slender girth of the belt told its feminine story, and he remembered the whale-boat of the day before and the gray eyes that flashed beneath the level brows. She it must have been who had just rung the bell. The cares of the plantation rushed upon him, and he sat up in bed, clutching at the wall for support as the mosquito screen lurched

dizzily around him. He was still sitting there, holding on, with eyes closed, striving to master his giddiness, when he heard her voice.

"You'll lie right down again, sir," she said.

It was sharply imperative, a voice used to command. At the same time one hand pressed him back toward the pillow while the other caught him from behind and eased him down.

"You've been unconscious for twenty-four hours now," she went on, "and I have taken charge. When I say the word you'll get up, and not until then. Now, what medicine do you take?--quinine? Here are ten grains. That's right. You'll make a good patient."

"My dear madame," he began.

"You musn't speak," she interrupted, "that is, in protest. Otherwise, you can talk."

"But the plantation--"

"A dead man is of no use on a plantation. Don't you want to know about me? My vanity is hurt. Here am I, just through my first shipwreck; and here are you, not the least bit curious, talking about your miserable plantation. Can't you see that I am just bursting to tell somebody, anybody, about my shipwreck?"

He smiled; it was the first time in weeks. And he smiled, not so much at what she said, as at the way she said it--the whimsical expression of her face, the laughter in her eyes, and the several tiny lines of humour that drew in at the corners. He was curiously wondering as to what her age was, as he said aloud:

"Yes, tell me, please."

"That I will not--not now," she retorted, with a toss of the head. "I'll find somebody to tell my story to who does not have to be asked. Also, I want information. I managed to find out what time to ring the bell to turn the hands to, and that is about all. I don't understand the ridiculous speech of your people. What time do they knock off?"

"At eleven--go on again at one."

"That will do, thank you. And now, where do you keep the key to the provisions? I want to feed my men."

"Your men!" he gasped. "On tinned goods! No, no. Let them go out and eat with my boys."

Her eyes flashed as on the day before, and he saw again the imperative expression on her face.

"That I won't; my men are men. I've been out to your miserable barracks and watched them eat. Faugh! Potatoes! Nothing but potatoes! No salt! Nothing! Only potatoes! I may have been mistaken, but I thought I understood them to say that that was all they ever got to eat. Two meals a day and every day in the week?"

He nodded.

"Well, my men wouldn't stand that for a single day, much less a whole week. Where is the key?"

"Hanging on that clothes-hook under the clock."

He gave it easily enough, but as she was reaching down the key she heard him say:

"Fancy niggers and tinned provisions."

This time she really was angry. The blood was in her cheeks as she turned on him.

"My men are not niggers. The sooner you understand that the better for our acquaintance. As for the tinned goods, I'll pay for all they eat. Please don't worry about that. Worry is not good for you in your condition. And I won't stay any longer than I have to--just long enough to get you on your feet, and not go away with the feeling of having

deserted a white man."

"You're American, aren't you?" he asked quietly.

The question disconcerted her for the moment.

"Yes," she vouchsafed, with a defiant look. "Why?"

"Nothing. I merely thought so."

"Anything further?"

He shook his head.

"Why?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing. I thought you might have something pleasant to say."

"My name is Sheldon, David Sheldon," he said, with direct relevance, holding out a thin hand.

Her hand started out impulsively, then checked. "My name is Lackland, Joan Lackland." The hand went out. "And let us be friends."

"It could not be otherwise--" he began lamely.

"And I can feed my men all the tinned goods I want?" she rushed on.

"Till the cows come home," he answered, attempting her own lightness, then adding, "that is, to Berande. You see we don't have any cows at Berande."

She fixed him coldly with her eyes.

"Is that a joke?" she demanded.

"I really don't know--I--I thought it was, but then, you see, I'm sick."

"You're English, aren't you?" was her next query.

"Now that's too much, even for a sick man," he cried. "You know well enough that I am."

"Oh," she said absently, "then you are?"

He frowned, tightened his lips, then burst into laughter, in which she joined.

"It's my own fault," he confessed. "I shouldn't have baited you. I'll be careful in the future."

"In the meantime go on laughing, and I'll see about breakfast. Is there

anything you would fancy?"

He shook his head.

"It will do you good to eat something. Your fever has burned out, and you are merely weak. Wait a moment."

She hurried out of the room in the direction of the kitchen, tripped at the door in a pair of sandals several sizes too large for her feet, and disappeared in rosy confusion.

"By Jove, those are my sandals," he thought to himself. "The girl hasn't a thing to wear except what she landed on the beach in, and she certainly landed in sea-boots."