

CHAPTER V--SHE WOULD A PLANTER BE

Sheldon mended rapidly. The fever had burned out, and there was nothing for him to do but gather strength. Joan had taken the cook in hand, and for the first time, as Sheldon remarked, the chop at Berande was white man's chop. With her own hands Joan prepared the sick man's food, and between that and the cheer she brought him, he was able, after two days, to totter feebly out upon the veranda. The situation struck him as strange, and stranger still was the fact that it did not seem strange to the girl at all. She had settled down and taken charge of the household as a matter of course, as if he were her father, or brother, or as if she were a man like himself.

"It is just too delightful for anything," she assured him. "It is like a page out of some romance. Here I come along out of the sea and find a sick man all alone with two hundred slaves--"

"Recruits," he corrected. "Contract labourers. They serve only three years, and they are free agents when they enter upon their contracts."

"Yes, yes," she hurried on. "--A sick man alone with two hundred recruits on a cannibal island--they are cannibals, aren't they? Or is it all talk?"

"Talk!" he said, with a smile. "It's a trifle more than that. Most of

my boys are from the bush, and every bushman is a cannibal."

"But not after they become recruits? Surely, the boys you have here wouldn't be guilty."

"They'd eat you if the chance afforded."

"Are you just saying so, on theory, or do you really know?" she asked.

"I know."

"Why? What makes you think so? Your own men here?"

"Yes, my own men here, the very house-boys, the cook that at the present moment is making such delicious rolls, thanks to you. Not more than three months ago eleven of them sneaked a whale-boat and ran for Malaita. Nine of them belonged to Malaita. Two were bushmen from San Cristoval. They were fools--the two from San Cristoval, I mean; so would any two Malaita men be who trusted themselves in a boat with nine from San Cristoval."

"Yes?" she asked eagerly. "Then what happened?"

"The nine Malaita men ate the two from San Cristoval, all except the heads, which are too valuable for mere eating. They stowed them away in the stern-locker till they landed. And those two heads are now in some

bush village back of Langa Langa."

She clapped her hands and her eyes sparkled. "They are really and truly cannibals! And just think, this is the twentieth century! And I thought romance and adventure were fossilized!"

He looked at her with mild amusement.

"What is the matter now?" she queried.

"Oh, nothing, only I don't fancy being eaten by a lot of filthy niggers is the least bit romantic."

"No, of course not," she admitted. "But to be among them, controlling them, directing them, two hundred of them, and to escape being eaten by them--that, at least, if it isn't romantic, is certainly the quintessence of adventure. And adventure and romance are allied, you know."

"By the same token, to go into a nigger's stomach should be the quintessence of adventure," he retorted.

"I don't think you have any romance in you," she exclaimed. "You're just dull and sombre and sordid like the business men at home. I don't know why you're here at all. You should be at home placidly vegetating as a banker's clerk or--or--"

"A shopkeeper's assistant, thank you."

"Yes, that--anything. What under the sun are you doing here on the edge of things?"

"Earning my bread and butter, trying to get on in the world."

"By the bitter road the younger son must tread, Ere he win to hearth and saddle of his own," she quoted. "Why, if that isn't romantic, then nothing is romantic. Think of all the younger sons out over the world, on a myriad of adventures winning to those same hearths and saddles. And here you are in the thick of it, doing it, and here am I in the thick of it, doing it."

"I--I beg pardon," he drawled.

"Well, I'm a younger daughter, then," she amended; "and I have no hearth nor saddle--I haven't anybody or anything--and I'm just as far on the edge of things as you are."

"In your case, then, I'll admit there is a bit of romance," he confessed.

He could not help but think of the preceding nights, and of her sleeping in the hammock on the veranda, under mosquito curtains, her bodyguard of Tahitian sailors stretched out at the far corner of the veranda within call. He had been too helpless to resist, but now he resolved she should

have his couch inside while he would take the hammock.

"You see, I had read and dreamed about romance all my life," she was saying, "but I never, in my wildest fancies, thought that I should live it. It was all so unexpected. Two years ago I thought there was nothing left to me but. . . ." She faltered, and made a moue of distaste.

"Well, the only thing that remained, it seemed to me, was marriage."

"And you preferred a cannibal isle and a cartridge-belt?" he suggested.

"I didn't think of the cannibal isle, but the cartridge-belt was blissful."

"You wouldn't dare use the revolver if you were compelled to. Or," noting the glint in her eyes, "if you did use it, to--well, to hit anything."

She started up suddenly to enter the house. He knew she was going for her revolver.

"Never mind," he said, "here's mine. What can you do with it?"

"Shoot the block off your flag-halyards."

He smiled his unbelief.

"I don't know the gun," she said dubiously.

"It's a light trigger and you don't have to hold down. Draw fine."

"Yes, yes," she spoke impatiently. "I know automatics--they jam when they get hot--only I don't know yours." She looked at it a moment. "It's cocked. Is there a cartridge in the chamber?"

She fired, and the block remained intact.

"It's a long shot," he said, with the intention of easing her chagrin.

But she bit her lip and fired again. The bullet emitted a sharp shriek as it ricocheted into space. The metal block rattled back and forth. Again and again she fired, till the clip was emptied of its eight cartridges. Six of them were hits. The block still swayed at the gaff-end, but it was battered out of all usefulness. Sheldon was astonished. It was better than he or even Hughie Drummond could have done. The women he had known, when they sporadically fired a rifle or revolver, usually shrieked, shut their eyes, and blazed away into space.

"That's really good shooting . . . for a woman," he said. "You only missed it twice, and it was a strange weapon."

"But I can't make out the two misses," she complained. "The gun worked beautifully, too. Give me another clip and I'll hit it eight times for

anything you wish."

"I don't doubt it. Now I'll have to get a new block. Viaburi! Here you fella, catch one fella block along storeroom."

"I'll wager you can't do it eight out of eight . . . anything you wish," she challenged.

"No fear of my taking it on," was his answer. "Who taught you to shoot?"

"Oh, my father, at first, and then Von, and his cowboys. He was a shot--Dad, I mean, though Von was splendid, too."

Sheldon wondered secretly who Von was, and he speculated as to whether it was Von who two years previously had led her to believe that nothing remained for her but matrimony.

"What part of the United States is your home?" he asked. "Chicago or Wyoming? or somewhere out there? You know you haven't told me a thing about yourself. All that I know is that you are Miss Joan Lackland from anywhere."

"You'd have to go farther west to find my stamping grounds."

"Ah, let me see--Nevada?"

She shook her head.

"California?"

"Still farther west."

"It can't be, or else I've forgotten my geography."

"It's your politics," she laughed. "Don't you remember 'Annexation'?"

"The Philippines!" he cried triumphantly.

"No, Hawaii. I was born there. It is a beautiful land. My, I'm almost homesick for it already. Not that I haven't been away. I was in New York when the crash came. But I do think it is the sweetest spot on earth--Hawaii, I mean."

"Then what under the sun are you doing down here in this God-forsaken place?" he asked. "Only fools come here," he added bitterly.

"Nielsen wasn't a fool, was he?" she queried. "As I understand, he made three millions here."

"Only too true, and that fact is responsible for my being here."

"And for me, too," she said. "Dad heard about him in the Marquesas, and

so we started. Only poor Dad didn't get here."

"He--your father--died?" he faltered.

She nodded, and her eyes grew soft and moist.

"I might as well begin at the beginning." She lifted her head with a proud air of dismissing sadness, after, the manner of a woman qualified to wear a Baden-Powell and a long-barrelled Colt's. "I was born at Hilo. That's on the island of Hawaii--the biggest and best in the whole group. I was brought up the way most girls in Hawaii are brought up. They live in the open, and they know how to ride and swim before they know what six-times-six is. As for me, I can't remember when I first got on a horse nor when I learned to swim. That came before my A B C's. Dad owned cattle ranches on Hawaii and Maui--big ones, for the islands. Hokuna had two hundred thousand acres alone. It extended in between Mauna Koa and Mauna Loa, and it was there I learned to shoot goats and wild cattle. On Molokai they have big spotted deer. Von was the manager of Hokuna. He had two daughters about my own age, and I always spent the hot season there, and, once, a whole year. The three of us were like Indians. Not that we ran wild, exactly, but that we were wild to run wild. There were always the governesses, you know, and lessons, and sewing, and housekeeping; but I'm afraid we were too often bribed to our tasks with promises of horses or of cattle drives.

"Von had been in the army, and Dad was an old sea-dog, and they were both

stern disciplinarians; only the two girls had no mother, and neither had I, and they were two men after all. They spoiled us terribly. You see, they didn't have any wives, and they made chums out of us--when our tasks were done. We had to learn to do everything about the house twice as well as the native servants did it--that was so that we should know how to manage some day. And we always made the cocktails, which was too holy a rite for any servant. Then, too, we were never allowed anything we could not take care of ourselves. Of course the cowboys always roped and saddled our horses, but we had to be able ourselves to go out in the paddock and rope our horses--"

"What do you mean by rope?" Sheldon asked.

"To lariat them, to lasso them. And Dad and Von timed us in the saddling and made a most rigid examination of the result. It was the same way with our revolvers and rifles. The house-boys always cleaned them and greased them; but we had to learn how in order to see that they did it properly. More than once, at first, one or the other of us had our rifles taken away for a week just because of a tiny speck of rust. We had to know how to build fires in the driving rain, too, out of wet wood, when we camped out, which was the hardest thing of all--except grammar, I do believe. We learned more from Dad and Von than from the governesses; Dad taught us French and Von German. We learned both languages passably well, and we learned them wholly in the saddle or in camp.

"In the cool season the girls used to come down and visit me in Hilo,

where Dad had two houses, one at the beach, or the three of us used to go down to our place in Puna, and that meant canoes and boats and fishing and swimming. Then, too, Dad belonged to the Royal Hawaiian Yacht Club, and took us racing and cruising. Dad could never get away from the sea, you know. When I was fourteen I was Dad's actual housekeeper, with entire power over the servants, and I am very proud of that period of my life. And when I was sixteen we three girls were all sent up to California to Mills Seminary, which was quite fashionable and stifling. How we used to long for home! We didn't chum with the other girls, who called us little cannibals, just because we came from the Sandwich Islands, and who made invidious remarks about our ancestors banqueting on Captain Cook--which was historically untrue, and, besides, our ancestors hadn't lived in Hawaii.

"I was three years at Mills Seminary, with trips home, of course, and two years in New York; and then Dad went smash in a sugar plantation on Maui. The report of the engineers had not been right. Then Dad had built a railroad that was called 'Lackland's Folly,'--it will pay ultimately, though. But it contributed to the smash. The Pelaulau Ditch was the finishing blow. And nothing would have happened anyway, if it hadn't been for that big money panic in Wall Street. Dear good Dad! He never let me know. But I read about the crash in a newspaper, and hurried home. It was before that, though, that people had been dinging into my ears that marriage was all any woman could get out of life, and good-bye to romance. Instead of which, with Dad's failure, I fell right into romance."

"How long ago was that?" Sheldon asked.

"Last year--the year of the panic."

"Let me see," Sheldon pondered with an air of gravity. "Sixteen plus five, plus one, equals twenty-two. You were born in 1887?"

"Yes; but it is not nice of you."

"I am really sorry," he said, "but the problem was so obvious."

"Can't you ever say nice things? Or is it the way you English have?"
There was a snap in her gray eyes, and her lips quivered suspiciously for a moment. "I should recommend, Mr. Sheldon, that you read Gertrude Atherton's 'American Wives and English Husbands.'"

"Thank you, I have. It's over there." He pointed at the generously filled bookshelves. "But I am afraid it is rather partisan."

"Anything un-English is bound to be," she retorted. "I never have liked the English anyway. The last one I knew was an overseer. Dad was compelled to discharge him."

"One swallow doesn't make a summer."

"But that Englishman made lots of trouble--there! And now please don't make me any more absurd than I already am."

"I'm trying not to."

"Oh, for that matter--" She tossed her head, opened her mouth to complete the retort, then changed her mind. "I shall go on with my history. Dad had practically nothing left, and he decided to return to the sea. He'd always loved it, and I half believe that he was glad things had happened as they did. He was like a boy again, busy with plans and preparations from morning till night. He used to sit up half the night talking things over with me. That was after I had shown him that I was really resolved to go along.

"He had made his start, you know, in the South Seas--pearls and pearl shell--and he was sure that more fortunes, in trove of one sort and another, were to be picked up. Cocoanut-planting was his particular idea, with trading, and maybe pearling, along with other things, until the plantation should come into bearing. He traded off his yacht for a schooner, the Miele, and away we went. I took care of him and studied navigation. He was his own skipper. We had a Danish mate, Mr. Ericson, and a mixed crew of Japanese and Hawaiians. We went up and down the Line Islands, first, until Dad was heartsick. Everything was changed. They had been annexed and divided by one power or another, while big companies had stepped in and gobbled land, trading rights, fishing rights, everything.

"Next we sailed for the Marquesas. They were beautiful, but the natives were nearly extinct. Dad was cut up when he learned that the French charged an export duty on copra--he called it medieval--but he liked the land. There was a valley of fifteen thousand acres on Nuka-hiva, half inclosing a perfect anchorage, which he fell in love with and bought for twelve hundred Chili dollars. But the French taxation was outrageous (that was why the land was so cheap), and, worst of all, we could obtain no labour. What kanakas there were wouldn't work, and the officials seemed to sit up nights thinking out new obstacles to put in our way.

"Six months was enough for Dad. The situation was hopeless. 'We'll go to the Solomons,' he said, 'and get a whiff of English rule. And if there are no openings there we'll go on to the Bismarck Archipelago. I'll wager the Admiraltys are not yet civilized.' All preparations were made, things packed on board, and a new crew of Marquesans and Tahitians shipped. We were just ready to start to Tahiti, where a lot of repairs and refitting for the Miele were necessary, when poor Dad came down sick and died."

"And you were left all alone?"

Joan nodded.

"Very much alone. I had no brothers nor sisters, and all Dad's people were drowned in a Kansas cloud-burst. That happened when he was a little

boy. Of course, I could go back to Von. There's always a home there waiting for me. But why should I go? Besides, there were Dad's plans, and I felt that it devolved upon me to carry them out. It seemed a fine thing to do. Also, I wanted to carry them out. And . . . here I am.

"Take my advice and never go to Tahiti. It is a lovely place, and so are the natives. But the white people! Now Barabbas lived in Tahiti. Thieves, robbers, and lairs--that is what they are. The honest men wouldn't require the fingers of one hand to count. The fact that I was a woman only simplified matters with them. They robbed me on every pretext, and they lied without pretext or need. Poor Mr. Ericson was corrupted. He joined the robbers, and O.K.'d all their demands even up to a thousand per cent. If they robbed me of ten francs, his share was three. One bill of fifteen hundred francs I paid, netted him five hundred francs. All this, of course, I learned afterward. But the Miele was old, the repairs had to be made, and I was charged, not three prices, but seven prices.

"I never shall know how much Ericson got out of it. He lived ashore in a nicely furnished house. The shipwrights were giving it to him rent-free. Fruit, vegetables, fish, meat, and ice came to this house every day, and he paid for none of it. It was part of his graft from the various merchants. And all the while, with tears in his eyes, he bemoaned the vile treatment I was receiving from the gang. No, I did not fall among thieves. I went to Tahiti.

"But when the robbers fell to cheating one another, I got my first clues to the state of affairs. One of the robbed robbers came to me after dark, with facts, figures, and assertions. I knew I was ruined if I went to law. The judges were corrupt like everything else. But I did do one thing. In the dead of night I went to Ericson's house. I had the same revolver I've got now, and I made him stay in bed while I overhauled things. Nineteen hundred and odd francs was what I carried away with me. He never complained to the police, and he never came back on board. As for the rest of the gang, they laughed and snapped their fingers at me. There were two Americans in the place, and they warned me to leave the law alone unless I wanted to leave the Miele behind as well.

"Then I sent to New Zealand and got a German mate. He had a master's certificate, and was on the ship's papers as captain, but I was a better navigator than he, and I was really captain myself. I lost her, too, but it's no reflection on my seamanship. We were drifting four days outside there in dead calms. Then the nor'wester caught us and drove us on the lee shore. We made sail and tried to clew off, when the rotten work of the Tahiti shipwrights became manifest. Our jib-boom and all our headstays carried away. Our only chance was to turn and run through the passage between Florida and Ysabel. And when we were safely through, in the twilight, where the chart shows fourteen fathoms as the shoalest water, we smashed on a coral patch. The poor old Miele struck only once, and then went clear; but it was too much for her, and we just had time to clear away in the boat when she went down. The German mate was drowned. We lay all night to a sea-drag, and next morning sighted your

place here."

"I suppose you will go back to Von, now?" Sheldon queried.

"Nothing of the sort. Dad planned to go to the Solomons. I shall look about for some land and start a small plantation. Do you know any good land around here? Cheap?"

"By George, you Yankees are remarkable, really remarkable," said Sheldon.

"I should never have dreamed of such a venture."

"Adventure," Joan corrected him.

"That's right--adventure it is. And if you'd gone ashore on Malaita instead of Guadalcanar you'd have been kai-kai'd long ago, along with your noble Tahitian sailors."

Joan shuddered.

"To tell the truth," she confessed, "we were very much afraid to land on Guadalcanar. I read in the 'Sailing Directions' that the natives were treacherous and hostile. Some day I should like to go to Malaita. Are there any plantations there?"

"Not one. Not a white trader even."

"Then I shall go over on a recruiting vessel some time."

"Impossible!" Sheldon cried. "It is no place for a woman."

"I shall go just the same," she repeated.

"But no self-respecting woman--"

"Be careful," she warned him. "I shall go some day, and then you may be sorry for the names you have called me."