

## CHAPTER VII--A HARD-BITTEN GANG

Joan took hold of the household with no uncertain grip, revolutionizing things till Sheldon hardly recognized the place. For the first time the bungalow was clean and orderly. No longer the house-boys loafed and did as little as they could; while the cook complained that "head belong him walk about too much," from the strenuous course in cookery which she put him through. Nor did Sheldon escape being roundly lectured for his laziness in eating nothing but tinned provisions. She called him a muddler and a slouch, and other invidious names, for his slackness and his disregard of healthful food.

She sent her whale-boat down the coast twenty miles for limes and oranges, and wanted to know scathingly why said fruits had not long since been planted at Berande, while he was beneath contempt because there was no kitchen garden. Mummy apples, which he had regarded as weeds, under her guidance appeared as appetizing breakfast fruit, and, at dinner, were metamorphosed into puddings that elicited his unqualified admiration. Bananas, foraged from the bush, were served, cooked and raw, a dozen different ways, each one of which he declared was better than any other. She or her sailors dynamited fish daily, while the Balesuna natives were paid tobacco for bringing in oysters from the mangrove swamps. Her achievements with cocoanuts were a revelation. She taught the cook how to make yeast from the milk, that, in turn, raised light and airy bread. From the tip-top heart of the tree she concocted a delicious salad. From

the milk and the meat of the nut she made various sauces and dressings, sweet and sour, that were served, according to preparation, with dishes that ranged from fish to pudding. She taught Sheldon the superiority of cocoanut cream over condensed cream, for use in coffee. From the old and sprouting nuts she took the solid, spongy centres and turned them into salads. Her forte seemed to be salads, and she astonished him with the deliciousness of a salad made from young bamboo shoots. Wild tomatoes, which had gone to seed or been remorselessly hoed out from the beginning of Berande, were foraged for salads, soups, and sauces. The chickens, which had always gone into the bush and hidden their eggs, were given laying-bins, and Joan went out herself to shoot wild duck and wild pigeons for the table.

"Not that I like to do this sort of work," she explained, in reference to the cookery; "but because I can't get away from Dad's training."

Among other things, she burned the pestilential hospital, quarrelled with Sheldon over the dead, and, in anger, set her own men to work building a new, and what she called a decent, hospital. She robbed the windows of their lawn and muslin curtains, replacing them with gaudy calico from the trade-store, and made herself several gowns. When she wrote out a list of goods and clothing for herself, to be sent down to Sydney by the first steamer, Sheldon wondered how long she had made up her mind to stay.

She was certainly unlike any woman he had ever known or dreamed of. So far as he was concerned she was not a woman at all. She neither

languished nor blandished. No feminine lures were wasted on him. He might have been her brother, or she his brother, for all sex had to do with the strange situation. Any mere polite gallantry on his part was ignored or snubbed, and he had very early given up offering his hand to her in getting into a boat or climbing over a log, and he had to acknowledge to himself that she was eminently fitted to take care of herself. Despite his warnings about crocodiles and sharks, she persisted in swimming in deep water off the beach; nor could he persuade her, when she was in the boat, to let one of the sailors throw the dynamite when shooting fish. She argued that she was at least a little bit more intelligent than they, and that, therefore, there was less liability of an accident if she did the shooting. She was to him the most masculine and at the same time the most feminine woman he had ever met.

A source of continual trouble between them was the disagreement over methods of handling the black boys. She ruled by stern kindness, rarely rewarding, never punishing, and he had to confess that her own sailors worshipped her, while the house-boys were her slaves, and did three times as much work for her as he had ever got out of them. She quickly saw the unrest of the contract labourers, and was not blind to the danger, always imminent, that both she and Sheldon ran. Neither of them ever ventured out without a revolver, and the sailors who stood the night watches by Joan's grass house were armed with rifles. But Joan insisted that this reign of terror had been caused by the reign of fear practised by the white men. She had been brought up with the gentle Hawaiians, who never were ill-treated nor roughly handled, and she generalized that the

Solomon Islanders, under kind treatment, would grow gentle.

One evening a terrific uproar arose in the barracks, and Sheldon, aided by Joan's sailors, succeeded in rescuing two women whom the blacks were beating to death. To save them from the vengeance of the blacks, they were guarded in the cook-house for the night. They were the two women who did the cooking for the labourers, and their offence had consisted of one of them taking a bath in the big cauldron in which the potatoes were boiled. The blacks were not outraged from the standpoint of cleanliness; they often took baths in the cauldrons themselves. The trouble lay in that the bather had been a low, degraded, wretched female; for to the Solomon Islander all females are low, degraded, and wretched.

Next morning, Joan and Sheldon, at breakfast, were aroused by a swelling murmur of angry voices. The first rule of Berande had been broken. The compound had been entered without permission or command, and all the two hundred labourers, with the exception of the boss-boys, were guilty of the offence. They crowded up, threatening and shouting, close under the front veranda. Sheldon leaned over the veranda railing, looking down upon them, while Joan stood slightly back. When the uproar was stilled, two brothers stood forth. They were large men, splendidly muscled, and with faces unusually ferocious, even for Solomon Islanders. One was Carin-Jama, otherwise The Silent; and the other was Bellin-Jama, The Boaster. Both had served on the Queensland plantations in the old days, and they were known as evil characters wherever white men met and gammed.

"We fella boy we want 'm them dam two black fella Mary," said Bellin-Jama.

"What you do along black fella Mary?" Sheldon asked.

"Kill 'm," said Bellin-Jama.

"What name you fella boy talk along me?" Sheldon demanded, with a show of rising anger. "Big bell he ring. You no belong along here. You belong along field. Bime by, big fella bell he ring, you stop along kai-kai, you come talk along me about two fella Mary. Now all you boy get along out of here."

The gang waited to see what Bellin-Jama would do, and Bellin-Jama stood still.

"Me no go," he said.

"You watch out, Bellin-Jama," Sheldon said sharply, "or I send you along Tulagi one big fella lashing. My word, you catch 'm strong fella."

Bellin-Jama glared up belligerently.

"You want 'm fight," he said, putting up his fists in approved, returned-Queenslander style.

Now, in the Solomons, where whites are few and blacks are many, and where the whites do the ruling, such an offer to fight is the deadliest insult. Blacks are not supposed to dare so highly as to offer to fight a white man. At the best, all they can look for is to be beaten by the white man.

A murmur of admiration at Bellin-Jama's bravery went up from the listening blacks. But Bellin-Jama's voice was still ringing in the air, and the murmuring was just beginning, when Sheldon cleared the rail, leaping straight downward. From the top of the railing to the ground it was fifteen feet, and Bellin-Jama was directly beneath. Sheldon's flying body struck him and crushed him to earth. No blows were needed to be struck. The black had been knocked helpless. Joan, startled by the unexpected leap, saw Carin-Jama, The Silent, reach out and seize Sheldon by the throat as he was half-way to his feet, while the five-score blacks surged forward for the killing. Her revolver was out, and Carin-Jama let go his grip, reeling backward with a bullet in his shoulder. In that fleeting instant of action she had thought to shoot him in the arm, which, at that short distance, might reasonably have been achieved. But the wave of savages leaping forward had changed her shot to the shoulder. It was a moment when not the slightest chance could be taken.

The instant his throat was released, Sheldon struck out with his fist, and Carin-Jama joined his brother on the ground. The mutiny was quelled, and five minutes more saw the brothers being carried to the hospital, and the mutineers, marshalled by the gang-bosses, on the way to the fields.

When Sheldon came up on the veranda, he found Joan collapsed on the steamer-chair and in tears. The sight unnerved him as the row just over could not possibly have done. A woman in tears was to him an embarrassing situation; and when that woman was Joan Lackland, from whom he had grown to expect anything unexpected, he was really frightened. He glanced down at her helplessly, and moistened his lips.

"I want to thank you," he began. "There isn't a doubt but what you saved my life, and I must say--"

She abruptly removed her hands, showing a wrathful and tear-stained face.

"You brute! You coward!" she cried. "You have made me shoot a man, and I never shot a man in my life before."

"It's only a flesh-wound, and he isn't going to die," Sheldon managed to interpolate.

"What of that? I shot him just the same. There was no need for you to jump down there that way. It was brutal and cowardly."

"Oh, now I say--" he began soothingly.

"Go away. Don't you see I hate you! hate you! Oh, won't you go away!"

Sheldon was white with anger.

"Then why in the name of common sense did you shoot?" he demanded.

"Be-be-because you were a white man," she sobbed. "And Dad would never have left any white man in the lurch. But it was your fault. You had no right to get yourself in such a position. Besides, it wasn't necessary."

"I am afraid I don't understand," he said shortly, turning away. "We will talk it over later on."

"Look how I get on with the boys," she said, while he paused in the doorway, stiffly polite, to listen. "There's those two sick boys I am nursing. They will do anything for me when they get well, and I won't have to keep them in fear of their life all the time. It is not necessary, I tell you, all this harshness and brutality. What if they are cannibals? They are human beings, just like you and me, and they are amenable to reason. That is what distinguishes all of us from the lower animals."

He nodded and went out.

"I suppose I've been unforgivably foolish," was her greeting, when he returned several hours later from a round of the plantation. "I've been to the hospital, and the man is getting along all right. It is not a serious hurt."



Sheldon felt unaccountably pleased and happy at the changed aspect of her mood.

"You see, you don't understand the situation," he began. "In the first place, the blacks have to be ruled sternly. Kindness is all very well, but you can't rule them by kindness only. I accept all that you say about the Hawaiians and the Tahitians. You say that they can be handled that way, and I believe you. I have had no experience with them. But you have had no experience with the blacks, and I ask you to believe me. They are different from your natives. You are used to Polynesians. These boys are Melanesians. They're blacks. They're niggers--look at their kinky hair. And they're a whole lot lower than the African niggers. Really, you know, there is a vast difference."

"They possess no gratitude, no sympathy, no kindness. If you are kind to them, they think you are a fool. If you are gentle with them they think you are afraid. And when they think you are afraid, watch out, for they will get you. Just to show you, let me state the one invariable process in a black man's brain when, on his native heath, he encounters a stranger. His first thought is one of fear. Will the stranger kill him? His next thought, seeing that he is not killed, is: Can he kill the stranger? There was Packard, a Colonial trader, some twelve miles down the coast. He boasted that he ruled by kindness and never struck a blow. The result was that he did not rule at all. He used to come down in his whale-boat to visit Hughie and me. When his boat's crew decided to go

home, he had to cut his visit short to accompany them. I remember one Sunday afternoon when Packard had accepted our invitation to stop to dinner. The soup was just served, when Hughie saw a nigger peering in through the door. He went out to him, for it was a violation of Berande custom. Any nigger has to send in word by the house-boys, and to keep outside the compound. This man, who was one of Packard's boat's-crew, was on the veranda. And he knew better, too. 'What name?' said Hughie. 'You tell 'm white man close up we fella boat's-crew go along. He no come now, we fella boy no wait. We go.' And just then Hughie fetched him a clout that knocked him clean down the stairs and off the veranda."

"But it was needlessly cruel," Joan objected. "You wouldn't treat a white man that way."

"And that's just the point. He wasn't a white man. He was a low black nigger, and he was deliberately insulting, not alone his own white master, but every white master in the Solomons. He insulted me. He insulted Hughie. He insulted Berande."

"Of course, according to your lights, to your formula of the rule of the strong--"

"Yes," Sheldon interrupted, "but it was according to the formula of the rule of the weak that Packard ruled. And what was the result? I am still alive. Packard is dead. He was unswervingly kind and gentle to his boys, and his boys waited till one day he was down with fever. His

head is over on Malaita now. They carried away two whale-boats as well, filled with the loot of the store. Then there was Captain Mackenzie of the ketch Minota. He believed in kindness. He also contended that better confidence was established by carrying no weapons. On his second trip to Malaita, recruiting, he ran into Bina, which is near Langa Langa. The rifles with which the boat's-crew should have been armed, were locked up in his cabin. When the whale-boat went ashore after recruits, he paraded around the deck without even a revolver on him. He was tomahawked. His head remains in Malaita. It was suicide. So was Packard's finish suicide."

"I grant that precaution is necessary in dealing with them," Joan agreed; "but I believe that more satisfactory results can be obtained by treating them with discreet kindness and gentleness."

"And there I agree with you, but you must understand one thing. Berande, bar none, is by far the worst plantation in the Solomons so far as the labour is concerned. And how it came to be so proves your point. The previous owners of Berande were not discreetly kind. They were a pair of unadulterated brutes. One was a down-east Yankee, as I believe they are called, and the other was a guzzling German. They were slave-drivers. To begin with, they bought their labour from Johnny Be-blowed, the most notorious recruiter in the Solomons. He is working out a ten years' sentence in Fiji now, for the wanton killing of a black boy. During his last days here he had made himself so obnoxious that the natives on Malaita would have nothing to do with him. The only way he

could get recruits was by hurrying to the spot whenever a murder or series of murders occurred. The murderers were usually only too willing to sign on and get away to escape vengeance. Down here they call such escapes, 'pier-head jumps.' There is suddenly a roar from the beach, and a nigger runs down to the water pursued by clouds of spears and arrows. Of course, Johnny Be-blowed's whale-boat is lying ready to pick him up. In his last days Johnny got nothing but pier-head jumps.

"And the first owners of Berande bought his recruits--a hard-bitten gang of murderers. They were all five-year boys. You see, the recruiter has the advantage over a boy when he makes a pier-head jump. He could sign him on for ten years did the law permit. Well, that's the gang of murderers we've got on our hands now. Of course some are dead, some have been killed, and there are others serving sentences at Tulagi. Very little clearing did those first owners do, and less planting. It was war all the time. They had one manager killed. One of the partners had his shoulder slashed nearly off by a cane-knife. The other was speared on two different occasions. Both were bullies, wherefore there was a streak of cowardice in them, and in the end they had to give up. They were chased away--literally chased away--by their own niggers. And along came poor Hughie and me, two new chums, to take hold of that hard-bitten gang. We did not know the situation, and we had bought Berande, and there was nothing to do but hang on and muddle through somehow.

"At first we made the mistake of indiscreet kindness. We tried to rule by persuasion and fair treatment. The niggers concluded that we were

afraid. I blush to think of what fools we were in those first days. We were imposed on, and threatened and insulted; and we put up with it, hoping our square-dealing would soon mend things. Instead of which everything went from bad to worse. Then came the day when Hughie reprimanded one of the boys and was nearly killed by the gang. The only thing that saved him was the number on top of him, which enabled me to reach the spot in time.

"Then began the rule of the strong hand. It was either that or quit, and we had sunk about all our money into the venture, and we could not quit. And besides, our pride was involved. We had started out to do something, and we were so made that we just had to go on with it. It has been a hard fight, for we were, and are to this day, considered the worst plantation in the Solomons from the standpoint of labour. Do you know, we have been unable to get white men in. We've offered the managership to half a dozen. I won't say they were afraid, for they were not. But they did not consider it healthy--at least that is the way it was put by the last one who declined our offer. So Hughie and I did the managing ourselves."

"And when he died you were prepared to go on all alone!" Joan cried, with shining eyes.

"I thought I'd muddle through. And now, Miss Lackland, please be charitable when I seem harsh, and remember that the situation is unparalleled down here. We've got a bad crowd, and we're making them

work. You've been over the plantation and you ought to know. And I assure you that there are no better three-and-four-years-old trees on any other plantation in the Solomons. We have worked steadily to change matters for the better. We've been slowly getting in new labour. That is why we bought the Jessie. We wanted to select our own labour. In another year the time will be up for most of the original gang. You see, they were recruited during the first year of Berande, and their contracts expire on different months. Naturally, they have contaminated the new boys to a certain extent; but that can soon be remedied, and then Berande will be a respectable plantation."

Joan nodded but remained silent. She was too occupied in glimpsing the vision of the one lone white man as she had first seen him, helpless from fever, a collapsed wraith in a steamer-chair, who, up to the last heartbeat, by some strange alchemy of race, was pledged to mastery.

"It is a pity," she said. "But the white man has to rule, I suppose."

"I don't like it," Sheldon assured her. "To save my life I can't imagine how I ever came here. But here I am, and I can't run away."

"Blind destiny of race," she said, faintly smiling. "We whites have been land robbers and sea robbers from remotest time. It is in our blood, I guess, and we can't get away from it."

"I never thought about it so abstractly," he confessed. "I've been too

busy puzzling over why I came here."