

CHAPTER VIII--LOCAL COLOUR

At sunset a small ketch fanned in to anchorage, and a little later the skipper came ashore. He was a soft-spoken, gentle-voiced young fellow of twenty, but he won Joan's admiration in advance when Sheldon told her that he ran the ketch all alone with a black crew from Malaita. And Romance lured and beckoned before Joan's eyes when she learned he was Christian Young, a Norfolk Islander, but a direct descendant of John Young, one of the original Bounty mutineers. The blended Tahitian and English blood showed in his soft eyes and tawny skin; but the English hardness seemed to have disappeared. Yet the hardness was there, and it was what enabled him to run his ketch single-handed and to wring a livelihood out of the fighting Solomons.

Joan's unexpected presence embarrassed him, until she herself put him at his ease by a frank, comradely manner that offended Sheldon's sense of the fitness of things feminine. News from the world Young had not, but he was filled with news of the Solomons. Fifteen boys had stolen rifles and run away into the bush from Lunga plantation, which was farther east on the Guadalcanar coast. And from the bush they had sent word that they were coming back to wipe out the three white men in charge, while two of the three white men, in turn, were hunting them through the bush. There was a strong possibility, Young volunteered, that if they were not caught they might circle around and tap the coast at Berande in order to steal or capture a whale-boat.

"I forgot to tell you that your trader at Ugi has been murdered," he said to Sheldon. "Five big canoes came down from Port Adams. They landed in the night-time, and caught Oscar asleep. What they didn't steal they burned. The Flibberty-Gibbet got the news at Mboli Pass, and ran down to Ugi. I was at Mboli when the news came."

"I think I'll have to abandon Ugi," Sheldon remarked.

"It's the second trader you've lost there in a year," Young concurred.

"To make it safe there ought to be two white men at least. Those Malaita canoes are always raiding down that way, and you know what that Port Adams lot is. I've got a dog for you. Tommy Jones sent it up from Neal Island. He said he'd promised it to you. It's a first-class nigger-chaser. Hadn't been on board two minutes when he had my whole boat's-crew in the rigging. Tommy calls him Satan."

"I've wondered several times why you had no dogs here," Joan said.

"The trouble is to keep them. They're always eaten by the crocodiles."

"Jack Hanley was killed at Marovo Lagoon two months ago," Young announced in his mild voice. "The news just came down on the Apostle."

"Where is Marovo Lagoon?" Joan asked.

"New Georgia, a couple of hundred miles to the westward," Sheldon answered. "Bougainville lies just beyond."

"His own house-boys did it," Young went on; "but they were put up to it by the Marovo natives. His Santa Cruz boat's-crew escaped in the whale-boat to Choiseul, and Mather, in the Lily, sailed over to Marovo. He burned a village, and got Hanley's head back. He found it in one of the houses, where the niggers had it drying. And that's all the news I've got, except that there's a lot of new Lee-Enfields loose on the eastern end of Ysabel. Nobody knows how the natives got them. The government ought to investigate. And--oh yes, a war vessel's in the group, the Cambrian. She burned three villages at Bina--on account of the Minota, you know--and shelled the bush. Then she went to Sio to straighten out things there."

The conversation became general, and just before Young left to go on board Joan asked,--

"How can you manage all alone, Mr. Young?"

His large, almost girlish eyes rested on her for a moment before he replied, and then it was in the softest and gentlest of voices.

"Oh, I get along pretty well with them. Of course, there is a bit of trouble once in a while, but that must be expected. You must never let them think you are afraid. I've been afraid plenty of times, but they

never knew it."

"You would think he wouldn't strike a mosquito that was biting him," Sheldon said when Young had gone on board. "All the Norfolk Islanders that have descended from the Bounty crowd are that way. But look at Young. Only three years ago, when he first got the Minerva, he was lying in Suu, on Malaita. There are a lot of returned Queenslanders there--a rough crowd. They planned to get his head. The son of their chief, old One-Eyed Billy, had recruited on Lunga and died of dysentery. That meant that a white man's head was owing to Suu--any white man, it didn't matter who so long as they got the head. And Young was only a lad, and they made sure to get his easily. They decoyed his whale-boat ashore with a promise of recruits, and killed all hands. At the same instant, the Suu gang that was on board the Minerva jumped Young. He was just preparing a dynamite stick for fish, and he lighted it and tossed it in amongst them. One can't get him to talk about it, but the fuse was short, the survivors leaped overboard, while he slipped his anchor and got away. They've got one hundred fathoms of shell money on his head now, which is worth one hundred pounds sterling. Yet he goes into Suu regularly. He was there a short time ago, returning thirty boys from Cape Marsh--that's the Fulcrum Brothers' plantation."

"At any rate, his news to-night has given me a better insight into the life down here," Joan said. "And it is colourful life, to say the least. The Solomons ought to be printed red on the charts--and yellow, too, for the diseases."

"The Solomons are not always like this," Sheldon answered. "Of course, Berande is the worst plantation, and everything it gets is the worst. I doubt if ever there was a worse run of sickness than we were just getting over when you arrived. Just as luck would have it, the Jessie caught the contagion as well. Berande has been very unfortunate. All the old-timers shake their heads at it. They say it has what you Americans call a hoodoo on it."

"Berande will succeed," Joan said stoutly. "I like to laugh at superstition. You'll pull through and come out the big end of the horn. The ill luck can't last for ever. I am afraid, though, the Solomons is not a white man's climate."

"It will be, though. Give us fifty years, and when all the bush is cleared off back to the mountains, fever will be stamped out; everything will be far healthier. There will be cities and towns here, for there's an immense amount of good land going to waste."

"But it will never become a white man's climate, in spite of all that," Joan reiterated. "The white man will always be unable to perform the manual labour."

"That is true."

"It will mean slavery," she dashed on.

"Yes, like all the tropics. The black, the brown, and the yellow will have to do the work, managed by the white men. The black labour is too wasteful, however, and in time Chinese or Indian coolies will be imported. The planters are already considering the matter. I, for one, am heartily sick of black labour."

"Then the blacks will die off?"

Sheldon shrugged his shoulders, and retorted,--

"Yes, like the North American Indian, who was a far nobler type than the Melanesian. The world is only so large, you know, and it is filling up--"

"And the unfit must perish?"

"Precisely so. The unfit must perish."

In the morning Joan was roused by a great row and hullabaloo. Her first act was to reach for her revolver, but when she heard Noa Noah, who was on guard, laughing outside, she knew there was no danger, and went out to see the fun. Captain Young had landed Satan at the moment when the bridge-building gang had started along the beach. Satan was big and black, short-haired and muscular, and weighed fully seventy pounds. He did not love the blacks. Tommy Jones had trained him well, tying him up daily for several hours and telling off one or two black boys at a time

to tease him. So Satan had it in for the whole black race, and the second after he landed on the beach the bridge-building gang was stampeding over the compound fence and swarming up the cocoanut palms.

"Good morning," Sheldon called from the veranda. "And what do you think of the nigger-chaser?"

"I'm thinking we have a task before us to train him in to the house-boys," she called back.

"And to your Tahitians, too. Look out, Noah! Run for it!"

Satan, having satisfied himself that the tree-perches were unassailable, was charging straight for the big Tahitian.

But Noah stood his ground, though somewhat irresolutely, and Satan, to every one's surprise, danced and frisked about him with laughing eyes and wagging tail.

"Now, that is what I might call a proper dog," was Joan's comment. "He is at least wiser than you, Mr. Sheldon. He didn't require any teaching to recognize the difference between a Tahitian and a black boy. What do you think, Noah? Why don't he bite you? He savvee you Tahitian eh?"

Noa Noah shook his head and grinned.

"He no savvee me Tahitian," he explained. "He savvee me wear pants all the same white man."

"You'll have to give him a course in 'Sartor Resartus,'" Sheldon laughed, as he came down and began to make friends with Satan.

It chanced just then that Adamu Adam and Matauare, two of Joan's sailors, entered the compound from the far side-gate. They had been down to the Balesuna making an alligator trap, and, instead of trousers, were clad in lava-lavas that flapped gracefully about their stalwart limbs. Satan saw them, and advertised his find by breaking away from Sheldon's hands and charging.

"No got pants," Noah announced with a grin that broadened as Adamu Adam took to flight.

He climbed up the platform that supported the galvanized iron tanks which held the water collected from the roof. Foiled here, Satan turned and charged back on Matauare.

"Run, Matauare! Run!" Joan called.

But he held his ground and waited the dog.

"He is the Fearless One--that is what his name means," Joan explained to Sheldon.

The Tahitian watched Satan coolly, and when that sanguine-mouthed creature lifted into the air in the final leap, the man's hand shot out. It was a fair grip on the lower jaw, and Satan described a half circle and was flung to the rear, turning over in the air and falling heavily on his back. Three times he leaped, and three times that grip on his jaw flung him to defeat. Then he contented himself with trotting at Matauare's heels, eyeing him and sniffing him suspiciously.

"It's all right, Satan; it's all right," Sheldon assured him. "That good fella belong along me."

But Satan dogged the Tahitian's movements for a full hour before he made up his mind that the man was an appurtenance of the place. Then he turned his attention to the three house-boys, cornering Ornfiri in the kitchen and rushing him against the hot stove, stripping the lava-lava from Lalaperu when that excited youth climbed a veranda-post, and following Viaburi on top the billiard-table, where the battle raged until Joan managed a rescue.