

## CHAPTER IX--AS BETWEEN A MAN AND A WOMAN

It was Satan's inexhaustible energy and good spirits that most impressed them. His teeth seemed perpetually to ache with desire, and in lieu of black legs he husked the cocoanuts that fell from the trees in the compound, kept the enclosure clear of intruding hens, and made a hostile acquaintance with every boss-boy who came to report. He was unable to forget the torment of his puppyhood, wherein everlasting hatred of the black had been woven into the fibres of consciousness; and such a terror did he make himself that Sheldon was forced to shut him up in the living room when, for any reason, strange natives were permitted in the compound. This always hurt Satan's feelings and fanned his wrath, so that even the house-boys had to watch out for him when he was first released.

Christian Young sailed away in the *Minerva*, carrying an invitation (that would be delivered nobody knew when) to Tommy Jones to drop in at Berande the next time he was passing.

"What are your plans when you get to Sydney?" Sheldon asked, that night, at dinner.

"First I've heard that I'm going to Sydney," Joan retorted. "I suppose you've received information, by bush-telegraph, that that third assistant understrapper and ex-sailorman at Tulagi is going to deport me as an

undesirable immigrant."

"Oh, no, nothing of the sort, I assure you," Sheldon began with awkward haste, fearful of having offended, though he knew not how. "I was just wondering, that was all. You see, with the loss of the schooner and . . . and all the rest . . . you understand . . . I was thinking that if--a--if--hang it all, until you could communicate with your friends, my agents at Sydney could advance you a loan, temporary you see, why I'd be only too glad and all the rest, you know. The proper--"

But his jaw dropped and he regarded her irritably and with apprehension.

"What is the matter?" he demanded, with a show of heat. "What have I done now?"

Joan's eyes were bright with battle, the curve of her lips sharp with mockery.

"Certainly not the unexpected," she said quietly. "Merely ignored me in your ordinary, every-day, man-god, superior fashion. Naturally it counted for nothing, my telling you that I had no idea of going to Sydney. Go to Sydney I must, because you, in your superior wisdom, have so decreed."

She paused and looked at him curiously, as though he were some strange breed of animal.

"Of course I am grateful for your offer of assistance; but even that is no salve to wounded pride. For that matter, it is no more than one white man should expect from another. Shipwrecked mariners are always helped along their way. Only this particular mariner doesn't need any help. Furthermore, this mariner is not going to Sydney, thank you."

"But what do you intend to do?"

"Find some spot where I shall escape the indignity of being patronized and bossed by the superior sex."

"Come now, that is putting it a bit too strongly." Sheldon laughed, but the strain in his voice destroyed the effect of spontaneity. "You know yourself how impossible the situation is."

"I know nothing of the sort, sir. And if it is impossible, well, haven't I achieved it?"

"But it cannot continue. Really--"

"Oh, yes, it can. Having achieved it, I can go on achieving it. I intend to remain in the Solomons, but not on Berande. To-morrow I am going to take the whale-boat over to Pari-Sulay. I was talking with Captain Young about it. He says there are at least four hundred acres, and every foot of it good for planting. Being an island, he says I won't

have to bother about wild pigs destroying the young trees. All I'll have to do is to keep the weeds hoed until the trees come into bearing. First, I'll buy the island; next, get forty or fifty recruits and start clearing and planting; and at the same time I'll run up a bungalow; and then you'll be relieved of my embarrassing presence--now don't say that it isn't."

"It is embarrassing," he said bluntly. "But you refuse to see my point of view, so there is no use in discussing it. Now please forget all about it, and consider me at your service concerning this . . . this project of yours. I know more about cocoanut-planting than you do. You speak like a capitalist. I don't know how much money you have, but I don't fancy you are rolling in wealth, as you Americans say. But I do know what it costs to clear land. Suppose the government sells you Parisulay at a pound an acre; clearing will cost you at least four pounds more; that is, five pounds for four hundred acres, or, say, ten thousand dollars. Have you that much?"

She was keenly interested, and he could see that the previous clash between them was already forgotten. Her disappointment was plain as she confessed:

"No; I haven't quite eight thousand dollars."

"Then here's another way of looking at it. You'll need, as you said, at least fifty boys. Not counting premiums, their wages are thirty dollars

a year."

"I pay my Tahitians fifteen a month," she interpolated.

"They won't do on straight plantation work. But to return. The wages of fifty boys each year will come to three hundred pounds--that is, fifteen hundred dollars. Very well. It will be seven years before your trees begin to bear. Seven times fifteen hundred is ten thousand five hundred dollars--more than you possess, and all eaten up by the boys' wages, with nothing to pay for bungalow, building, tools, quinine, trips to Sydney, and so forth."

Sheldon shook his head gravely. "You'll have to abandon the idea."

"But I won't go to Sydney," she cried. "I simply won't. I'll buy in to the extent of my money as a small partner in some other plantation. Let me buy in in Berande!"

"Heaven forbid!" he cried in such genuine dismay that she broke into hearty laughter.

"There, I won't tease you. Really, you know, I'm not accustomed to forcing my presence where it is not desired. Yes, yes; I know you're just aching to point out that I've forced myself upon you ever since I landed, only you are too polite to say so. Yet as you said yourself, it was impossible for me to go away, so I had to stay. You wouldn't let me

go to Tulagi. You compelled me to force myself upon you. But I won't buy in as partner with any one. I'll buy Pari-Sulay, but I'll put only ten boys on it and clear slowly. Also, I'll invest in some old ketch and take out a trading license. For that matter, I'll go recruiting on Malaita."

She looked for protest, and found it in Sheldon's clenched hand and in every line of his clean-cut face.

"Go ahead and say it," she challenged. "Please don't mind me. I'm--I'm getting used to it, you know. Really I am."

"I wish I were a woman so as to tell you how preposterously insane and impossible it is," he blurted out.

She surveyed him with deliberation, and said:

"Better than that, you are a man. So there is nothing to prevent your telling me, for I demand to be considered as a man. I didn't come down here to trail my woman's skirts over the Solomons. Please forget that I am accidentally anything else than a man with a man's living to make."

Inwardly Sheldon fumed and fretted. Was she making game of him? Or did there lurk in her the insidious unhealthfulness of unwomanliness? Or was it merely a case of blank, staring, sentimental, idiotic innocence?

"I have told you," he began stiffly, "that recruiting on Malaita is impossible for a woman, and that is all I care to say--or dare."

"And I tell you, in turn, that it is nothing of the sort. I've sailed the Miele here, master, if you please, all the way from Tahiti--even if I did lose her, which was the fault of your Admiralty charts. I am a navigator, and that is more than your Solomons captains are. Captain Young told me all about it. And I am a seaman--a better seaman than you, when it comes right down to it, and you know it. I can shoot. I am not a fool. I can take care of myself. And I shall most certainly buy a ketch, run her myself, and go recruiting on Malaita."

Sheldon made a hopeless gesture.

"That's right," she rattled on. "Wash your hands of me. But as Von used to say, 'You just watch my smoke!'"

"There's no use in discussing it. Let us have some music."

He arose and went over to the big phonograph; but before the disc started, and while he was winding the machine, he heard her saying:

"I suppose you've been accustomed to Jane Eyres all your life. That's why you don't understand me. Come on, Satan; let's leave him to his old music."

He watched her morosely and without intention of speaking, till he saw her take a rifle from the stand, examine the magazine, and start for the door.

"Where are you going?" he asked peremptorily.

"As between man and woman," she answered, "it would be too terribly--er--indecent for you to tell me why I shouldn't go alligatoring. Good-night. Sleep well."

He shut off the phonograph with a snap, started toward the door after her, then abruptly flung himself into a chair.

"You're hoping a 'gator catches me, aren't you?" she called from the veranda, and as she went down the steps her rippling laughter drifted tantalizingly back through the wide doorway.