

## CHAPTER X--A MESSAGE FROM BOUCHER

The next day Sheldon was left all alone. Joan had gone exploring Parisulay, and was not to be expected back until the late afternoon. Sheldon was vaguely oppressed by his loneliness, and several heavy squalls during the afternoon brought him frequently on to the veranda, telescope in hand, to scan the sea anxiously for the whale-boat. Betweenwhiles he scowled over the plantation account-books, made rough estimates, added and balanced, and scowled the harder. The loss of the Jessie had hit Berande severely. Not alone was his capital depleted by the amount of her value, but her earnings were no longer to be reckoned on, and it was her earnings that largely paid the running expenses of the plantation.

"Poor old Hughie," he muttered aloud, once. "I'm glad you didn't live to see it, old man. What a cropper, what a cropper!"

Between squalls the Flibberty-Gibbet ran in to anchorage, and her skipper, Pete Oleson (brother to the Oleson of the Jessie), ancient, grizzled, wild-eyed, emaciated by fever, dragged his weary frame up the veranda steps and collapsed in a steamer-chair. Whisky and soda kept him going while he made report and turned in his accounts.

"You're rotten with fever," Sheldon said. "Why don't you run down to Sydney for a blow of decent climate?"

The old skipper shook his head.

"I can't. I've ben in the islands too long. I'd die. The fever comes out worse down there."

"Kill or cure," Sheldon counselled.

"It's straight kill for me. I tried it three years ago. The cool weather put me on my back before I landed. They carried me ashore and into hospital. I was unconscious one stretch for two weeks. After that the doctors sent me back to the islands--said it was the only thing that would save me. Well, I'm still alive; but I'm too soaked with fever. A month in Australia would finish me."

"But what are you going to do?" Sheldon queried. "You can't stay here until you die."

"That's all that's left to me. I'd like to go back to the old country, but I couldn't stand it. I'll last longer here, and here I'll stay until I peg out; but I wish to God I'd never seen the Solomons, that's all."

He declined to sleep ashore, took his orders, and went back on board the cutter. A lurid sunset was blotted out by the heaviest squall of the day, and Sheldon watched the whale-boat arrive in the thick of it. As the spritsail was taken in and the boat headed on to the beach, he was aware of a distinct hurt at sight of Joan at the steering-oar, standing

erect and swaying her strength to it as she resisted the pressures that tended to throw the craft broadside in the surf. Her Tahitians leaped out and rushed the boat high up the beach, and she led her bizarre following through the gate of the compound.

The first drops of rain were driving like hail-stones, the tall cocoanut palms were bending and writhing in the grip of the wind, while the thick cloud-mass of the squall turned the brief tropic twilight abruptly to night.

Quite unconsciously the brooding anxiety of the afternoon slipped from Sheldon, and he felt strangely cheered at the sight of her running up the steps laughing, face flushed, hair flying, her breast heaving from the violence of her late exertions.

"Lovely, perfectly lovely--Pari-Sulay," she panted. "I shall buy it. I'll write to the Commissioner to-night. And the site for the bungalow--I've selected it already--is wonderful. You must come over some day and advise me. You won't mind my staying here until I can get settled? Wasn't that squall beautiful? And I suppose I'm late for dinner. I'll run and get clean, and be with you in a minute."

And in the brief interval of her absence he found himself walking about the big living-room and impatiently and with anticipation awaiting her coming.

"Do you know, I'm never going to squabble with you again," he announced when they were seated.

"Squabble!" was the retort. "It's such a sordid word. It sounds cheap and nasty. I think it's much nicer to quarrel."

"Call it what you please, but we won't do it any more, will we?" He cleared his throat nervously, for her eyes advertised the immediate beginning of hostilities. "I beg your pardon," he hurried on. "I should have spoken for myself. What I mean is that I refuse to quarrel. You have the most horrible way, without uttering a word, of making me play the fool. Why, I began with the kindest intentions, and here I am now--"

"Making nasty remarks," she completed for him.

"It's the way you have of catching me up," he complained.

"Why, I never said a word. I was merely sitting here, being sweetly lured on by promises of peace on earth and all the rest of it, when suddenly you began to call me names."

"Hardly that, I am sure."

"Well, you said I was horrible, or that I had a horrible way about me, which is the same thing. I wish my bungalow were up. I'd move to-morrow."

But her twitching lips belied her words, and the next moment the man was more uncomfortable than ever, being made so by her laughter.

"I was only teasing you. Honest Injun. And if you don't laugh I'll suspect you of being in a temper with me. That's right, laugh. But don't--" she added in alarm, "don't if it hurts you. You look as though you had a toothache. There, there--don't say it. You know you promised not to quarrel, while I have the privilege of going on being as hateful as I please. And to begin with, there's the Flibberty-Gibbet. I didn't know she was so large a cutter; but she's in disgraceful condition. Her rigging is something queer, and the next sharp squall will bring her head-gear all about the shop. I watched Noa Noah's face as we sailed past. He didn't say anything. He just sneered. And I don't blame him."

"Her skipper's rotten bad with fever," Sheldon explained. "And he had to drop his mate off to take hold of things at Ugi--that's where I lost Oscar, my trader. And you know what sort of sailors the niggers are."

She nodded her head judicially, and while she seemed to debate a weighty judgment he asked for a second helping of tinned beef--not because he was hungry, but because he wanted to watch her slim, firm fingers, naked of jewels and banded metals, while his eyes pleased in the swell of the forearm, appearing from under the sleeve and losing identity in the smooth, round wrist undisfigured by the netted veins that come to youth

when youth is gone. The fingers were brown with tan and looked exceedingly boyish. Then, and without effort, the concept came to him. Yes, that was it. He had stumbled upon the clue to her tantalizing personality. Her fingers, sunburned and boyish, told the story. No wonder she had exasperated him so frequently. He had tried to treat with her as a woman, when she was not a woman. She was a mere girl--and a boyish girl at that--with sunburned fingers that delighted in doing what boys' fingers did; with a body and muscles that liked swimming and violent endeavour of all sorts; with a mind that was daring, but that dared no farther than boys' adventures, and that delighted in rifles and revolvers, Stetson hats, and a sexless camaraderie with men.

Somehow, as he pondered and watched her, it seemed as if he sat in church at home listening to the choir-boys chanting. She reminded him of those boys, or their voices, rather. The same sexless quality was there. In the body of her she was woman; in the mind of her she had not grown up. She had not been exposed to ripening influences of that sort. She had had no mother. Von, her father, native servants, and rough island life had constituted her training. Horses and rifles had been her toys, camp and trail her nursery. From what she had told him, her seminary days had been an exile, devoted to study and to ceaseless longing for the wild riding and swimming of Hawaii. A boy's training, and a boy's point of view! That explained her chafe at petticoats, her revolt at what was only decently conventional. Some day she would grow up, but as yet she was only in the process.

Well, there was only one thing for him to do. He must meet her on her own basis of boyhood, and not make the mistake of treating her as a woman. He wondered if he could love the woman she would be when her nature awoke; and he wondered if he could love her just as she was and himself wake her up. After all, whatever it was, she had come to fill quite a large place in his life, as he had discovered that afternoon while scanning the sea between the squalls. Then he remembered the accounts of Berande, and the cropper that was coming, and scowled.

He became aware that she was speaking.

"I beg pardon," he said. "What's that you were saying?"

"You weren't listening to a word--I knew it," she chided. "I was saying that the condition of the Flibberty-Gibbet was disgraceful, and that tomorrow, when you've told the skipper and not hurt his feelings, I am going to take my men out and give her an overhauling. We'll scrub her bottom, too. Why, there's whiskers on her copper four inches long. I saw it when she rolled. Don't forget, I'm going cruising on the Flibberty some day, even if I have to run away with her."

While at their coffee on the veranda, Satan raised a commotion in the compound near the beach gate, and Sheldon finally rescued a mauled and frightened black and dragged him on the porch for interrogation.

"What fella marster you belong?" he demanded. "What name you come along

this fella place sun he go down?"

"Me b'long Boucher. Too many boy belong along Port Adams stop along my fella marster. Too much walk about."

The black drew a scrap of notepaper from under his belt and passed it over. Sheldon scanned it hurriedly.

"It's from Boucher," he explained, "the fellow who took Packard's place. Packard was the one I told you about who was killed by his boat's-crew. He says the Port Adams crowd is out--fifty of them, in big canoes--and camping on his beach. They've killed half a dozen of his pigs already, and seem to be looking for trouble. And he's afraid they may connect with the fifteen runaways from Lunga."

"In which case?" she queried.

"In which case Billy Pape will be compelled to send Boucher's successor. It's Pape's station, you know. I wish I knew what to do. I don't like to leave you here alone."

"Take me along then."

He smiled and shook his head.

"Then you'd better take my men along," she advised. "They're good shots,



and they're not afraid of anything--except Utami, and he's afraid of ghosts."

The big bell was rung, and fifty black boys carried the whale-boat down to the water. The regular boat's-crew manned her, and Matauare and three other Tahitians, belted with cartridges and armed with rifles, sat in the stern-sheets where Sheldon stood at the steering-oar.

"My, I wish I could go with you," Joan said wistfully, as the boat shoved off.

Sheldon shook his head.

"I'm as good as a man," she urged.

"You really are needed here," he replied.

"There's that Lunga crowd; they might reach the coast right here, and with both of us absent rush the plantation. Good-bye. We'll get back in the morning some time. It's only twelve miles."

When Joan started to return to the house, she was compelled to pass among the boat-carriers, who lingered on the beach to chatter in queer, ape-like fashion about the events of the night. They made way for her, but there came to her, as she was in the midst of them, a feeling of her own helplessness. There were so many of them. What was to prevent them from

dragging her down if they so willed? Then she remembered that one cry of hers would fetch Noa Noah and her remaining sailors, each one of whom was worth a dozen blacks in a struggle. As she opened the gate, one of the boys stepped up to her. In the darkness she could not make him out.

"What name?" she asked sharply. "What name belong you?"

"Me Aroa," he said.

She remembered him as one of the two sick boys she had nursed at the hospital. The other one had died.

"Me take 'm plenty fella medicine too much," Aroa was saying.

"Well, and you all right now," she answered.

"Me want 'm tobacco, plenty fella tobacco; me want 'm calico; me want 'm porpoise teeth; me want 'm one fella belt."

She looked at him humorously, expecting to see a smile, or at least a grin, on his face. Instead, his face was expressionless. Save for a narrow breech-clout, a pair of ear-plugs, and about his kinky hair a chaplet of white cowrie-shells, he was naked. His body was fresh-oiled and shiny, and his eyes glistened in the starlight like some wild animal's. The rest of the boys had crowded up at his back in a solid wall. Some one of them giggled, but the remainder regarded her in morose

and intense silence.

"Well?" she said. "What for you want plenty fella things?"

"Me take 'm medicine," quoth Aroa. "You pay me."

And this was a sample of their gratitude, she thought. It looked as if Sheldon had been right after all. Aroa waited stolidly. A leaping fish splashed far out on the water. A tiny wavelet murmured sleepily on the beach. The shadow of a flying-fox drifted by in velvet silence overhead. A light air fanned coolly on her cheek; it was the land-breeze beginning to blow.

"You go along quarters," she said, starting to turn on her heel to enter the gate.

"You pay me," said the boy.

"Aroa, you all the same one big fool. I no pay you. Now you go."

But the black was unmoved. She felt that he was regarding her almost insolently as he repeated:

"I take 'm medicine. You pay me. You pay me now."

Then it was that she lost her temper and cuffed his ears so soundly as to

drive him back among his fellows. But they did not break up. Another boy stepped forward.

"You pay me," he said.

His eyes had the querulous, troubled look such as she had noticed in monkeys; but while he was patently uncomfortable under her scrutiny, his thick lips were drawn firmly in an effort at sullen determination.

"What for?" she asked.

"Me Gogoomy," he said. "Bawo brother belong me."

Bawo, she remembered, was the sick boy who had died.

"Go on," she commanded.

"Bawo take 'm medicine. Bawo finish. Bawo my brother. You pay me. Father belong me one big fella chief along Port Adams. You pay me."

Joan laughed.

"Gogoomy, you just the same as Aroa, one big fool. My word, who pay me for medicine?"

She dismissed the matter by passing through the gate and closing it. But

Gogoomy pressed up against it and said impudently:

"Father belong me one big fella chief. You no bang 'm head belong me. My word, you fright too much."

"Me fright?" she demanded, while anger tingled all through her.

"Too much fright bang 'm head belong me," Gogoomy said proudly.

And then she reached for him across the gate and got him. It was a sweeping, broad-handed slap, so heavy that he staggered sideways and nearly fell. He sprang for the gate as if to force it open, while the crowd surged forward against the fence. Joan thought rapidly. Her revolver was hanging on the wall of her grass house. Yet one cry would bring her sailors, and she knew she was safe. So she did not cry for help. Instead, she whistled for Satan, at the same time calling him by name. She knew he was shut up in the living room, but the blacks did not wait to see. They fled with wild yells through the darkness, followed reluctantly by Gogoomy; while she entered the bungalow, laughing at first, but finally vexed to the verge of tears by what had taken place. She had sat up a whole night with the boy who had died, and yet his brother demanded to be paid for his life.

"Ugh! the ungrateful beast!" she muttered, while she debated whether or not she would confess the incident to Sheldon.