

CHAPTER XI--THE PORT ADAMS CROWD

"And so it was all settled easily enough," Sheldon was saying. He was on the veranda, drinking coffee. The whale-boat was being carried into its shed. "Boucher was a bit timid at first to carry off the situation with a strong hand, but he did very well once we got started. We made a play at holding a court, and Telepasse, the old scoundrel, accepted the findings. He's a Port Adams chief, a filthy beggar. We fined him ten times the value of the pigs, and made him move on with his mob. Oh, they're a sweet lot, I must say, at least sixty of them, in five big canoes, and out for trouble. They've got a dozen Sniders that ought to be confiscated."

"Why didn't you?" Joan asked.

"And have a row on my hands with the Commissioner? He's terribly touchy about his black wards, as he calls them. Well, we started them along their way, though they went in on the beach to kai-kai several miles back. They ought to pass here some time to-day."

Two hours later the canoes arrived. No one saw them come. The house-boys were busy in the kitchen at their own breakfast. The plantation hands were similarly occupied in their quarters. Satan lay sound asleep on his back under the billiard table, in his sleep brushing at the flies that pestered him. Joan was rummaging in the storeroom, and Sheldon was

taking his siesta in a hammock on the veranda. He awoke gently. In some occult, subtle way a warning that all was not well had penetrated his sleep and aroused him. Without moving, he glanced down and saw the ground beneath covered with armed savages. They were the same ones he had parted with that morning, though he noted an accession in numbers. There were men he had not seen before.

He slipped from the hammock and with deliberate slowness sauntered to the railing, where he yawned sleepily and looked down on them. It came to him curiously that it was his destiny ever to stand on this high place, looking down on unending hordes of black trouble that required control, bullying, and cajolery. But while he glanced carelessly over them, he was keenly taking stock. The new men were all armed with modern rifles. Ah, he had thought so. There were fifteen of them, undoubtedly the Lunga runaways. In addition, a dozen old Sniders were in the hands of the original crowd. The rest were armed with spears, clubs, bows and arrows, and long-handled tomahawks. Beyond, drawn up on the beach, he could see the big war-canoes, with high and fantastically carved bows and sterns, ornamented with scrolls and bands of white cowrie shells. These were the men who had killed his trader, Oscar, at Ugi.

"What name you walk about this place?" he demanded.

At the same time he stole a glance seaward to where the Flibberty-Gibbet reflected herself in the glassy calm of the sea. Not a soul was visible under her awnings, and he saw the whale-boat was

missing from alongside. The Tahitians had evidently gone shooting fish up the Balesuna. He was all alone in his high place above this trouble, while his world slumbered peacefully under the breathless tropic noon.

Nobody replied, and he repeated his demand, more of mastery in his voice this time, and a hint of growing anger. The blacks moved uneasily, like a herd of cattle, at the sound of his voice. But not one spoke. All eyes, however, were staring at him in certitude of expectancy. Something was about to happen, and they were waiting for it, waiting with the unanimous, unstable mob-mind for the one of them who would make the first action that would precipitate all of them into a common action. Sheldon looked for this one, for such was the one to fear. Directly beneath him he caught sight of the muzzle of a rifle, barely projecting between two black bodies, that was slowly elevating toward him. It was held at the hip by a man in the second row.

"What name you?" Sheldon suddenly shouted, pointing directly at the man who held the gun, who startled and lowered the muzzle.

Sheldon still held the whip hand, and he intended to keep it.

"Clear out, all you fella boys," he ordered. "Clear out and walk along salt water. Savvee!"

"Me talk," spoke up a fat and filthy savage whose hairy chest was caked with the unwashed dirt of years.

"Oh, is that you, Telepasse?" the white man queried genially. "You tell 'm boys clear out, and you stop and talk along me."

"Him good fella boy," was the reply. "Him stop along."

"Well, what do you want?" Sheldon asked, striving to hide under assumed carelessness the weakness of concession.

"That fella boy belong along me." The old chief pointed out Gogoomy, whom Sheldon recognized.

"White Mary belong you too much no good," Telepasse went on. "Bang 'm head belong Gogoomy. Gogoomy all the same chief. Bimeby me finish, Gogoomy big fella chief. White Mary bang 'm head. No good. You pay me plenty tobacco, plenty powder, plenty calico."

"You old scoundrel," was Sheldon's comment. An hour before, he had been chuckling over Joan's recital of the episode, and here, an hour later, was Telepasse himself come to collect damages.

"Gogoomy," Sheldon ordered, "what name you walk about here? You get along quarters plenty quick."

"Me stop," was the defiant answer.

"White Mary b'long you bang 'm head," old Telepasse began again. "My word, plenty big fella trouble you no pay."

"You talk along boys," Sheldon said, with increasing irritation. "You tell 'm get to hell along beach. Then I talk with you."

Sheldon felt a slight vibration of the veranda, and knew that Joan had come out and was standing by his side. But he did not dare glance at her. There were too many rifles down below there, and rifles had a way of going off from the hip.

Again the veranda vibrated with her moving weight, and he knew that Joan had gone into the house. A minute later she was back beside him. He had never seen her smoke, and it struck him as peculiar that she should be smoking now. Then he guessed the reason. With a quick glance, he noted the hand at her side, and in it the familiar, paper-wrapped dynamite. He noted, also, the end of fuse, split properly, into which had been inserted the head of a wax match.

"Telepasse, you old reprobate, tell 'm boys clear out along beach. My word, I no gammon along you."

"Me no gammon," said the chief. "Me want 'm pay white Mary bang 'm head b'long Gogoomy."

"I'll come down there and bang 'm head b'long you," Sheldon replied,

leaning toward the railing as if about to leap over.

An angry murmur arose, and the blacks surged restlessly. The muzzles of many guns were rising from the hips. Joan was pressing the lighted end of the cigarette to the fuse. A Snider went off with the roar of a bomb-gun, and Sheldon heard a pane of window-glass crash behind him. At the same moment Joan flung the dynamite, the fuse hissing and spluttering, into the thick of the blacks. They scattered back in too great haste to do any more shooting. Satan, aroused by the one shot, was snarling and panting to be let out. Joan heard, and ran to let him out; and thereat the tragedy was averted, and the comedy began.

Rifles and spears were dropped or flung aside in a wild scramble for the protection of the cocoanut palms. Satan multiplied himself. Never had he been free to tear and rend such a quantity of black flesh before, and he bit and snapped and rushed the flying legs till the last pair were above his head. All were treed except Telepasse, who was too old and fat, and he lay prone and without movement where he had fallen; while Satan, with too great a heart to worry an enemy that did not move, dashed frantically from tree to tree, barking and springing at those who clung on lowest down.

"I fancy you need a lesson or two in inserting fuses," Sheldon remarked dryly.

Joan's eyes were scornful.

"There was no detonator on it," she said. "Besides, the detonator is not yet manufactured that will explode that charge. It's only a bottle of chlorodyne."

She put her fingers into her mouth, and Sheldon winced as he saw her blow, like a boy, a sharp, imperious whistle--the call she always used for her sailors, and that always made him wince.

"They're gone up the Balesuna, shooting fish," he explained. "But there comes Oleson with his boat's-crew. He's an old war-horse when he gets started. See him banging the boys. They don't pull fast enough for him."

"And now what's to be done?" she asked. "You've treed your game, but you can't keep it treed."

"No; but I can teach them a lesson."

Sheldon walked over to the big bell.

"It is all right," he replied to her gesture of protest. "My boys are practically all bushmen, while these chaps are salt-water men, and there's no love lost between them. You watch the fun."

He rang a general call, and by the time the two hundred labourers trooped

into the compound Satan was once more penned in the living-room, complaining to high heaven at his abominable treatment. The plantation hands were dancing war-dances around the base of every tree and filling the air with abuse and vituperation of their hereditary enemies. The skipper of the Flibberty-Gibbet arrived in the thick of it, in the first throes of oncoming fever, staggering as he walked, and shivering so severely that he could scarcely hold the rifle he carried. His face was ghastly blue, his teeth clicked and chattered, and the violent sunshine through which he walked could not warm him.

"I'll s-s-sit down, and k-k-keep a guard on 'em," he chattered. "D-d-dash it all, I always g-get f-fever when there's any excitement. W-w-wh-what are you going to do?"

"Gather up the guns first of all."

Under Sheldon's direction the house-boys and gang-bosses collected the scattered arms and piled them in a heap on the veranda. The modern rifles, stolen from Lunga, Sheldon set aside; the Sniders he smashed into fragments; the pile of spears, clubs, and tomahawks he presented to Joan.

"A really unique addition to your collection," he smiled; "picked up right on the battlefield."

Down on the beach he built a bonfire out of the contents of the canoes, his blacks smashing, breaking, and looting everything they laid hands on.

The canoes themselves, splintered and broken, filled with sand and coral-boulders, were towed out to ten fathoms of water and sunk.

"Ten fathoms will be deep enough for them to work in," Sheldon said, as they walked back to the compound.

Here a Saturnalia had broken loose. The war-songs and dances were more unrestrained, and, from abuse, the plantation blacks had turned to pelting their helpless foes with pieces of wood, handfuls of pebbles, and chunks of coral-rock. And the seventy-five lusty cannibals clung stoically to their tree-perches, enduring the rain of missiles and snarling down promises of vengeance.

"There'll be wars for forty years on Malaita on account of this," Sheldon laughed. "But I always fancy old Telepasse will never again attempt to rush a plantation."

"Eh, you old scoundrel," he added, turning to the old chief, who sat gibbering in impotent rage at the foot of the steps. "Now head belong you bang 'm too. Come on, Miss Lackland, bang 'm just once. It will be the crowning indignity."

"Ugh, he's too dirty. I'd rather give him a bath. Here, you, Adamu Adam, give this devil-devil a wash. Soap and water! Fill that wash-tub. Ornfiri, run and fetch 'm scrub-brush."

The Tahitians, back from their fishing and grinning at the bedlam of the compound, entered into the joke.

"Tambo! Tambo!" shrieked the cannibals from the trees, appalled at so awful a desecration, as they saw their chief tumbled into the tub and the sacred dirt rubbed and soused from his body.

Joan, who had gone into the bungalow, tossed down a strip of white calico, in which old Telepasse was promptly wrapped, and he stood forth, resplendent and purified, withal he still spat and strangled from the soap-suds with which Noa Noah had gargled his throat.

The house-boys were directed to fetch handcuffs, and, one by one, the Lunga runaways were haled down out of their trees and made fast. Sheldon ironed them in pairs, and ran a steel chain through the links of the irons. Gogoomy was given a lecture for his mutinous conduct and locked up for the afternoon. Then Sheldon rewarded the plantation hands with an afternoon's holiday, and, when they had withdrawn from the compound, permitted the Port Adams men to descend from the trees. And all afternoon he and Joan loafed in the cool of the veranda and watched them diving down and emptying their sunken canoes of the sand and rocks. It was twilight when they embarked and paddled away with a few broken paddles. A breeze had sprung up, and the Flibberty-Gibbet had already sailed for Lunga to return the runaways.