

CHAPTER XII--MR. MORGAN AND MR. RAFF

Sheldon was back in the plantation superintending the building of a bridge, when the schooner Malakula ran in close and dropped anchor. Joan watched the taking in of sail and the swinging out of the boat with a sailor's interest, and herself met the two men who came ashore. While one of the house-boys ran to fetch Sheldon, she had the visitors served with whisky and soda, and sat and talked with them.

They seemed awkward and constrained in her presence, and she caught first one and then the other looking at her with secret curiosity. She felt that they were weighing her, appraising her, and for the first time the anomalous position she occupied on Berande sank sharply home to her. On the other hand, they puzzled her. They were neither traders nor sailors of any type she had known. Nor did they talk like gentlemen, despite the fact that there was nothing offensive in their bearing and that the veneer of ordinary social nicety was theirs. Undoubtedly, they were men of affairs--business men of a sort; but what affairs should they have in the Solomons, and what business on Berande? The elder one, Morgan, was a huge man, bronzed and moustached, with a deep bass voice and an almost guttural speech, and the other, Raff, was slight and effeminate, with nervous hands and watery, washed-out gray eyes, who spoke with a faint indefinable accent that was hauntingly reminiscent of the Cockney, and that was yet not Cockney of any brand she had ever encountered. Whatever they were, they were self-made men, she concluded; and she felt the

impulse to shudder at thought of falling into their hands in a business way. There, they would be merciless.

She watched Sheldon closely when he arrived, and divined that he was not particularly delighted to see them. But see them he must, and so pressing was the need that, after a little perfunctory general conversation, he led the two men into the stuffy office. Later in the afternoon, she asked Lalaperu where they had gone.

"My word," quoth Lalaperu; "plenty walk about, plenty look 'm. Look 'm tree; look 'm ground belong tree; look 'm all fella bridge; look 'm copra-house; look 'm grass-land; look 'm river; look 'm whale-boat--my word, plenty big fella look 'm too much."

"What fella man them two fella?" she queried.

"Big fella marster along white man," was the extent of his description.

But Joan decided that they were men of importance in the Solomons, and that their examination of the plantation and of its accounts was of sinister significance.

At dinner no word was dropped that gave a hint of their errand. The conversation was on general topics; but Joan could not help noticing the troubled, absent expression that occasionally came into Sheldon's eyes. After coffee, she left them; and at midnight, from across the compound,

she could hear the low murmur of their voices and see glowing the fiery ends of their cigars. Up early herself, she found they had already departed on another tramp over the plantation.

"What you think?" she asked Viaburi.

"Sheldon marster he go along finish short time little bit," was the answer.

"What you think?" she asked Ornfiri.

"Sheldon marster big fella walk about along Sydney. Yes, me t'ink so. He finish along Berande."

All day the examination of the plantation and the discussion went on; and all day the skipper of the Malakula sent urgent messages ashore for the two men to hasten. It was not until sunset that they went down to the boat, and even then a final talk of nearly an hour took place on the beach. Sheldon was combating something--that she could plainly see; and that his two visitors were not giving in she could also plainly see.

"What name?" she asked lightly, when Sheldon sat down to dinner.

He looked at her and smiled, but it was a very wan and wistful smile.

"My word," she went on. "One big fella talk. Sun he go down--talk-talk;

sun he come up--talk-talk; all the time talk-talk. What name that fella talk-talk?

"Oh, nothing much." He shrugged his shoulders. "They were trying to buy Berande, that was all."

She looked at him challengingly.

"It must have been more than that. It was you who wanted to sell."

"Indeed, no, Miss Lackland; I assure you that I am far from desiring to sell."

"Don't let us fence about it," she urged. "Let it be straight talk between us. You're in trouble. I'm not a fool. Tell me. Besides, I may be able to help, to--to suggest something."

In the pause that followed, he seemed to debate, not so much whether he would tell her, as how to begin to tell her.

"I'm American, you see," she persisted, "and our American heritage is a large parcel of business sense. I don't like it myself, but I know I've got it--at least more than you have. Let us talk it over and find a way out. How much do you owe?"

"A thousand pounds, and a few trifles over--small bills, you know. Then,

too, thirty of the boys finish their time next week, and their balances will average ten pounds each. But what is the need of bothering your head with it? Really, you know--"

"What is Berande worth?--right now?"

"Whatever Morgan and Raff are willing to pay for it." A glance at her hurt expression decided him. "Hughie and I have sunk eight thousand pounds in it, and our time. It is a good property, and worth more than that. But it has three years to run before its returns begin to come in. That is why Hughie and I engaged in trading and recruiting. The Jessie and our stations came very near to paying the running expenses of Berande."

"And Morgan and Raff offered you what?"

"A thousand pounds clear, after paying all bills."

"The thieves!" she cried.

"No, they're good business men, that is all. As they told me, a thing is worth no more than one is willing to pay or to receive."

"And how much do you need to carry on Berande for three years?" Joan hurried on.

"Two hundred boys at six pounds a year means thirty-six hundred pounds--that's the main item."

"My, how cheap labour does mount up! Thirty-six hundred pounds, eighteen thousand dollars, just for a lot of cannibals! Yet the place is good security. You could go down to Sydney and raise the money."

He shook his head.

"You can't get them to look at plantations down there. They've been taken in too often. But I do hate to give the place up--more for Hughie's sake, I swear, than my own. He was bound up in it. You see, he was a persistent chap, and hated to acknowledge defeat. It--it makes me uncomfortable to think of it myself. We were running slowly behind, but with the Jessie we hoped to muddle through in some fashion."

"You were muddlers, the pair of you, without doubt. But you needn't sell to Morgan and Raff. I shall go down to Sydney on the next steamer, and I'll come back in a second-hand schooner. I should be able to buy one for five or six thousand dollars--"

He held up his hand in protest, but she waved it aside.

"I may manage to freight a cargo back as well. At any rate, the schooner will take over the Jessie's business. You can make your arrangements accordingly, and have plenty of work for her when I get back. I'm going

to become a partner in Berande to the extent of my bag of sovereigns--I've got over fifteen hundred of them, you know. We'll draw up an agreement right now--that is, with your permission, and I know you won't refuse it."

He looked at her with good-natured amusement.

"You know I sailed here all the way from Tahiti in order to become a planter," she insisted. "You know what my plans were. Now I've changed them, that's all. I'd rather be a part owner of Berande and get my returns in three years, than break ground on Pari-Sulay and wait seven years."

"And this--er--this schooner. . . ." Sheldon changed his mind and stopped.

"Yes, go on."

"You won't be angry?" he queried.

"No, no; this is business. Go on."

"You--er--you would run her yourself?--be the captain, in short?--and go recruiting on Malaita?"

"Certainly. We would save the cost of a skipper. Under an agreement you

would be credited with a manager's salary, and I with a captain's. It's quite simple. Besides, if you won't let me be your partner, I shall buy Pari-Sulay, get a much smaller vessel, and run her myself. So what is the difference?"

"The difference?--why, all the difference in the world. In the case of Pari-Sulay you would be on an independent venture. You could turn cannibal for all I could interfere in the matter. But on Berande, you would be my partner, and then I would be responsible. And of course I couldn't permit you, as my partner, to be skipper of a recruiter. I tell you, the thing is what I would not permit any sister or wife of mine--"

"But I'm not going to be your wife, thank goodness--only your partner."

"Besides, it's all ridiculous," he held on steadily. "Think of the situation. A man and a woman, both young, partners on an isolated plantation. Why, the only practical way out would be that I'd have to marry you--"

"Mine was a business proposition, not a marriage proposal," she interrupted, coldly angry. "I wonder if somewhere in this world there is one man who could accept me for a comrade."

"But you are a woman just the same," he began, "and there are certain conventions, certain decencies--"

She sprang up and stamped her foot.

"Do you know what I'd like to say?" she demanded.

"Yes," he smiled, "you'd like to say, 'Damn petticoats!'"

She nodded her head ruefully.

"That's what I wanted to say, but it sounds different on your lips. It sounds as though you meant it yourself, and that you meant it because of me."

"Well, I am going to bed. But do, please, think over my proposition, and let me know in the morning. There's no use in my discussing it now. You make me so angry. You are cowardly, you know, and very egotistic. You are afraid of what other fools will say. No matter how honest your motives, if others criticized your actions your feelings would be hurt. And you think more about your own wretched feelings than you do about mine. And then, being a coward--all men are at heart cowards--you disguise your cowardice by calling it chivalry. I thank heaven that I was not born a man. Good-night. Do think it over. And don't be foolish. What Berande needs is good American hustle. You don't know what that is. You are a muddler. Besides, you are enervated. I'm fresh to the climate. Let me be your partner, and you'll see me rattle the dry bones of the Solomons. Confess, I've rattled yours already."

"I should say so," he answered. "Really, you know, you have. I never received such a dressing-down in my life. If any one had ever told me that I'd be a party even to the present situation. . . . Yes, I confess, you have rattled my dry bones pretty considerably."

"But that is nothing to the rattling they are going to get," she assured him, as he rose and took her hand. "Good-night. And do, do give me a rational decision in the morning."