

CHAPTER XIV--THE MARTHA

They were deep in a game of billiards the next morning, after the eleven o'clock breakfast, when Viaburi entered and announced,--

"Big fella schooner close up."

Even as he spoke, they heard the rumble of chain through hawse-pipe, and from the veranda saw a big black-painted schooner, swinging to her just-caught anchor.

"It's a Yankee," Joan cried. "See that bow! Look at that elliptical stern! Ah, I thought so--" as the Stars and Stripes fluttered to the mast-head.

Noa Noah, at Sheldon's direction, ran the Union Jack up the flagstaff.

"Now what is an American vessel doing down here?" Joan asked. "It's not a yacht, though I'll wager she can sail. Look! Her name! What is it?"

"Martha, San Francisco," Sheldon read, looking through the telescope. "It's the first Yankee I ever heard of in the Solomons. They are coming ashore, whoever they are. And, by Jove, look at those men at the oars. It's an all-white crew. Now what reason brings them here?"

"They're not proper sailors," Joan commented. "I'd be ashamed of a crew of black-boys that pulled in such fashion. Look at that fellow in the bow--the one just jumping out; he'd be more at home on a cow-pony."

The boat's-crew scattered up and down the beach, ranging about with eager curiosity, while the two men who had sat in the stern-sheets opened the gate and came up the path to the bungalow. One of them, a tall and slender man, was clad in white ducks that fitted him like a semi-military uniform. The other man, in nondescript garments that were both of the sea and shore, and that must have been uncomfortably hot, slouched and shambled like an overgrown ape. To complete the illusion, his face seemed to sprout in all directions with a dense, bushy mass of red whiskers, while his eyes were small and sharp and restless.

Sheldon, who had gone to the head of the steps, introduced them to Joan. The bewhiskered individual, who looked like a Scotsman, had the Teutonic name of Von Blix, and spoke with a strong American accent. The tall man in the well-fitting ducks, who gave the English name of Tudor--John Tudor--talked purely-enunciated English such as any cultured American would talk, save for the fact that it was most delicately and subtly touched by a faint German accent. Joan decided that she had been helped to identify the accent by the short German-looking moustache that did not conceal the mouth and its full red lips, which would have formed a Cupid's bow but for some harshness or severity of spirit that had moulded them masculinely.

Von Blix was rough and boorish, but Tudor was gracefully easy in everything he did, or looked, or said. His blue eyes sparkled and flashed, his clean-cut mobile features were an index to his slightest shades of feeling and expression. He bubbled with enthusiasms, and his faintest smile or lightest laugh seemed spontaneous and genuine. But it was only occasionally at first that he spoke, for Von Blix told their story and stated their errand.

They were on a gold-hunting expedition. He was the leader, and Tudor was his lieutenant. All hands--and there were twenty-eight--were shareholders, in varying proportions, in the adventure. Several were sailors, but the large majority were miners, culled from all the camps from Mexico to the Arctic Ocean. It was the old and ever-untiring pursuit of gold, and they had come to the Solomons to get it. Part of them, under the leadership of Tudor, were to go up the Balesuna and penetrate the mountainous heart of Guadalcanar, while the Martha, under Von Blix, sailed away for Malaita to put through similar exploration.

"And so," said Von Blix, "for Mr. Tudor's expedition we must have some black-boys. Can we get them from you?"

"Of course we will pay," Tudor broke in. "You have only to charge what you consider them worth. You pay them six pounds a year, don't you?"

"In the first place we can't spare them," Sheldon answered. "We are short of them on the plantation as it is."

"We?" Tudor asked quickly. "Then you are a firm or a partnership? I understood at Guvutu that you were alone, that you had lost your partner."

Sheldon inclined his head toward Joan, and as he spoke she felt that he had become a trifle stiff.

"Miss Lackland has become interested in the plantation since then. But to return to the boys. We can't spare them, and besides, they would be of little use. You couldn't get them to accompany you beyond Binu, which is a short day's work with the boats from here. They are Malaita-men, and they are afraid of being eaten. They would desert you at the first opportunity. You could get the Binu men to accompany you another day's journey, through the grass-lands, but at the first roll of the foothills look for them to turn back. They likewise are disinclined to being eaten."

"Is it as bad as that?" asked Von Blix.

"The interior of Guadalcanar has never been explored," Sheldon explained. "The bushmen are as wild men as are to be found anywhere in the world to-day. I have never seen one. I have never seen a man who has seen one. They never come down to the coast, though their scouting parties occasionally eat a coast native who has wandered too far inland. Nobody knows anything about them. They don't even use tobacco--have never

learned its use. The Austrian expedition--scientists, you know--got part way in before it was cut to pieces. The monument is up the beach there several miles. Only one man got back to the coast to tell the tale. And now you have all I or any other man knows of the inside of Guadalcanar."

"But gold--have you heard of gold?" Tudor asked impatiently. "Do you know anything about gold?"

Sheldon smiled, while the two visitors hung eagerly upon his words.

"You can go two miles up the Balesuna and wash colours from the gravel. I've done it often. There is gold undoubtedly back in the mountains."

Tudor and Von Blix looked triumphantly at each other.

"Old Wheatsheaf's yarn was true, then," Tudor said, and Von Blix nodded.

"And if Malaita turns out as well--"

Tudor broke off and looked at Joan.

"It was the tale of this old beachcomber that brought us here," he explained. "Von Blix befriended him and was told the secret." He turned and addressed Sheldon. "I think we shall prove that white men have been through the heart of Guadalcanar long before the time of the Austrian expedition."

Sheldon shrugged his shoulders.

"We have never heard of it down here," he said simply. Then he addressed Von Blix. "As to the boys, you couldn't use them farther than Binu, and I'll lend you as many as you want as far as that. How many of your party are going, and how soon will you start?"

"Ten," said Tudor; "nine men and myself."

"And you should be able to start day after to-morrow," Von Blix said to him. "The boats should practically be knocked together this afternoon. To-morrow should see the outfit portioned and packed. As for the Martha, Mr. Sheldon, we'll rush the stuff ashore this afternoon and sail by sundown."

As the two men returned down the path to their boat, Sheldon regarded Joan quizzically.

"There's romance for you," he said, "and adventure--gold-hunting among the cannibals."

"A title for a book," she cried. "Or, better yet, 'Gold-Hunting Among the Head-Hunters.' My! wouldn't it sell!"

"And now aren't you sorry you became a cocoanut planter?" he teased.

"Think of investing in such an adventure."

"If I did," she retorted, "Von Blix wouldn't be finicky about my joining in the cruise to Malaita."

"I don't doubt but what he would jump at it."

"What do you think of them?" she asked.

"Oh, old Von Blix is all right, a solid sort of chap in his fashion; but Tudor is fly-away--too much on the surface, you know. If it came to being wrecked on a desert island, I'd prefer Von Blix."

"I don't quite understand," Joan objected. "What have you against Tudor?"

"You remember Browning's 'Last Duchess'?"

She nodded.

"Well, Tudor reminds me of her--"

"But she was delightful."

"So she was. But she was a woman. One expects something different from a man--more control, you know, more restraint, more deliberation. A man must be more solid, more solid and steady-going and less effervescent. A

man of Tudor's type gets on my nerves. One demands more repose from a man."

Joan felt that she did not quite agree with his judgment; and, somehow, Sheldon caught her feeling and was disturbed. He remembered noting how her eyes had brightened as she talked with the newcomer--confound it all, was he getting jealous? he asked himself. Why shouldn't her eyes brighten? What concern was it of his?

A second boat had been lowered, and the outfit of the shore party was landed rapidly. A dozen of the crew put the knocked-down boats together on the beach. There were five of these craft--lean and narrow, with flaring sides, and remarkably long. Each was equipped with three paddles and several iron-shod poles.

"You chaps certainly seem to know river-work," Sheldon told one of the carpenters.

The man spat a mouthful of tobacco-juice into the white sand, and answered,--

"We use 'em in Alaska. They're modelled after the Yukon poling-boats, and you can bet your life they're crackerjacks. This creek'll be a snap alongside some of them Northern streams. Five hundred pounds in one of them boats, an' two men can snake it along in a way that'd surprise you."

At sunset the Martha broke out her anchor and got under way, dipping her flag and saluting with a bomb gun. The Union Jack ran up and down the staff, and Sheldon replied with his brass signal-cannon. The miners pitched their tents in the compound, and cooked on the beach, while Tudor dined with Joan and Sheldon.

Their guest seemed to have been everywhere and seen everything and met everybody, and, encouraged by Joan, his talk was largely upon his own adventures. He was an adventurer of adventurers, and by his own account had been born into adventure. Descended from old New England stock, his father a consul-general, he had been born in Germany, in which country he had received his early education and his accent. Then, still a boy, he had rejoined his father in Turkey, and accompanied him later to Persia, his father having been appointed Minister to that country.

Tudor had always been a wanderer, and with facile wit and quick vivid description he leaped from episode and place to episode and place, relating his experiences seemingly not because they were his, but for the sake of their bizarreness and uniqueness, for the unusual incident or the laughable situation. He had gone through South American revolutions, been a Rough Rider in Cuba, a scout in South Africa, a war correspondent in the Russo-Japanese war. He had mushed dogs in the Klondike, washed gold from the sands of Nome, and edited a newspaper in San Francisco. The President of the United States was his friend. He was equally at home in the clubs of London and the Continent, the Grand Hotel at Yokohama, and the selector's shanties in the Never-Never country. He had shot big game

in Siam, pearled in the Paumotus, visited Tolstoy, seen the Passion Play, and crossed the Andes on mule-back; while he was a living directory of the fever holes of West Africa.

Sheldon leaned back in his chair on the veranda, sipping his coffee and listening. In spite of himself he felt touched by the charm of the man who had led so varied a life. And yet Sheldon was not comfortable. It seemed to him that the man addressed himself particularly to Joan. His words and smiles were directed impartially toward both of them, yet Sheldon was certain, had the two men of them been alone, that the conversation would have been along different lines. Tudor had seen the effect on Joan and deliberately continued the flow of reminiscence, netting her in the glamour of romance. Sheldon watched her rapt attention, listened to her spontaneous laughter, quick questions, and passing judgments, and felt grow within him the dawning consciousness that he loved her.

So he was very quiet and almost sad, though at times he was aware of a distinct irritation against his guest, and he even speculated as to what percentage of Tudor's tale was true and how any of it could be proved or disproved. In this connection, as if the scene had been prepared by a clever playwright, Utami came upon the veranda to report to Joan the capture of a crocodile in the trap they had made for her.

Tudor's face, illuminated by the match with which he was lighting his cigarette, caught Utami's eye, and Utami forgot to report to his

mistress.

"Hello, Tudor," he said, with a familiarity that startled Sheldon.

The Polynesian's hand went out, and Tudor, shaking it, was staring into his face.

"Who is it?" he asked. "I can't see you."

"Utami."

"And who the dickens is Utami? Where did I ever meet you, my man?"

"You no forget the Huahine?" Utami chided. "Last time Huahine sail?"

Tudor gripped the Tahitian's hand a second time and shook it with genuine heartiness.

"There was only one kanaka who came out of the Huahine that last voyage, and that kanaka was Joe. The deuce take it, man, I'm glad to see you, though I never heard your new name before."

"Yes, everybody speak me Joe along the Huahine. Utami my name all the time, just the same."

"But what are you doing here?" Tudor asked, releasing the sailor's hand

and leaning eagerly forward.

"Me sail along Missie Lackalanna her schooner Miele. We go Tahiti, Raiatea, Tahaa, Bora-Bora, Manua, Tutuila, Apia, Savaii, and Fiji Islands--plenty Fiji Islands. Me stop along Missie Lackalanna in Solomons. Very soon she catch other schooner."

"He and I were the two survivors of the wreck of the Huahine," Tudor explained to the others. "Fifty-seven all told on board when we sailed from Huapa, and Joe and I were the only two that ever set foot on land again. Hurricane, you know, in the Paumotus. That was when I was after pearls."

"And you never told me, Utami, that you'd been wrecked in a hurricane," Joan said reproachfully.

The big Tahitian shifted his weight and flashed his teeth in a conciliating smile.

"Me no t'ink nothing 't all," he said.

He half-turned, as if to depart, by his manner indicating that he considered it time to go while yet he desired to remain.

"All right, Utami," Tudor said. "I'll see you in the morning and have a yarn."

"He saved my life, the beggar," Tudor explained, as the Tahitian strode away and with heavy softness of foot went down the steps. "Swim! I never met a better swimmer."

And thereat, solicited by Joan, Tudor narrated the wreck of the Huahine; while Sheldon smoked and pondered, and decided that whatever the man's shortcomings were, he was at least not a liar.