

CHAPTER XVI--THE GIRL WHO HAD NOT GROWN UP

News, as usual, Christian Young brought--news of the drinking at Guvutu, where the men boasted that they drank between drinks; news of the new rifles adrift on Ysabel, of the latest murders on Malaita, of Tom Butler's sickness on Santa Ana; and last and most important, news that the Matambo had gone on a reef in the Shortlands and would be laid off one run for repairs.

"That means five weeks more before you can sail for Sydney," Sheldon said to Joan.

"And that we are losing precious time," she added ruefully.

"If you want to go to Sydney, the Upolu sails from Tulagi to-morrow afternoon," Young said.

"But I thought she was running recruits for the Germans in Samoa," she objected. "At any rate, I could catch her to Samoa, and change at Apia to one of the Weir Line freighters. It's a long way around, but still it would save time."

"This time the Upolu is going straight to Sydney," Young explained.

"She's going to dry-dock, you see; and you can catch her as late as five to-morrow afternoon--at least, so her first officer told me."

"But I've got to go to Guvutu first." Joan looked at the men with a whimsical expression. "I've some shopping to do. I can't wear these Berande curtains into Sydney. I must buy cloth at Guvutu and make myself a dress during the voyage down. I'll start immediately--in an hour. Lalaperu, you bring 'm one fella Adamu Adam along me. Tell 'm that fella Ornfiri make 'm kai-kai take along whale-boat." She rose to her feet, looking at Sheldon. "And you, please, have the boys carry down the whale-boat--my boat, you know. I'll be off in an hour."

Both Sheldon and Tudor looked at their watches.

"It's an all-night row," Sheldon said. "You might wait till morning--"

"And miss my shopping? No, thank you. Besides, the Upolu is not a regular passenger steamer, and she is just as liable to sail ahead of time as on time. And from what I hear about those Guvutu sybarites, the best time to shop will be in the morning. And now you'll have to excuse me, for I've got to pack."

"I'll go over with you," Sheldon announced.

"Let me run you over in the Minerva," said Young.

She shook her head laughingly.

"I'm going in the whale-boat. One would think, from all your solicitude, that I'd never been away from home before. You, Mr. Sheldon, as my partner, I cannot permit to desert Berande and your work out of a mistaken notion of courtesy. If you won't permit me to be skipper, I won't permit your galivanting over the sea as protector of young women who don't need protection. And as for you, Captain Young, you know very well that you just left Guvutu this morning, that you are bound for Marau, and that you said yourself that in two hours you are getting under way again."

"But may I not see you safely across?" Tudor asked, a pleading note in his voice that rasped on Sheldon's nerves.

"No, no, and again no," she cried. "You've all got your work to do, and so have I. I came to the Solomons to work, not to be escorted about like a doll. For that matter, here's my escort, and there are seven more like him."

Adamu Adam stood beside her, towering above her, as he towered above the three white men. The clinging cotton undershirt he wore could not hide the bulge of his tremendous muscles.

"Look at his fist," said Tudor. "I'd hate to receive a punch from it."

"I don't blame you." Joan laughed reminiscently. "I saw him hit the captain of a Swedish bark on the beach at Levuka, in the Fijis. It was

the captain's fault. I saw it all myself, and it was splendid. Adamu only hit him once, and he broke the man's arm. You remember, Adamu?"

The big Tahitian smiled and nodded, his black eyes, soft and deer-like, seeming to give the lie to so belligerent a nature.

"We start in an hour in the whale-boat for Guvutu, big brother," Joan said to him. "Tell your brothers, all of them, so that they can get ready. We catch the Upolu for Sydney. You will all come along, and sail back to the Solomons in the new schooner. Take your extra shirts and dungarees along. Plenty cold weather down there. Now run along, and tell them to hurry. Leave the guns behind. Turn them over to Mr. Sheldon. We won't need them."

"If you are really bent upon going--" Sheldon began.

"That's settled long ago," she answered shortly. "I'm going to pack now. But I'll tell you what you can do for me--issue some tobacco and other stuff they want to my men."

An hour later the three men had shaken hands with Joan down on the beach. She gave the signal, and the boat shoved off, six men at the oars, the seventh man for'ard, and Adamu Adam at the steering-sweep. Joan was standing up in the stern-sheets, reiterating her good-byes--a slim figure of a woman in the tight-fitting jacket she had worn ashore from the wreck, the long-barrelled Colt's revolver hanging from the loose belt

around her waist, her clear-cut face like a boy's under the Stetson hat that failed to conceal the heavy masses of hair beneath.

"You'd better get into shelter," she called to them. "There's a big squall coming. And I hope you've got plenty of chain out, Captain Young. Good-bye! Good-bye, everybody!"

Her last words came out of the darkness, which wrapped itself solidly about the boat. Yet they continued to stare into the blackness in the direction in which the boat had disappeared, listening to the steady click of the oars in the rowlocks until it faded away and ceased.

"She is only a girl," Christian Young said with slow solemnity. The discovery seemed to have been made on the spur of the moment. "She is only a girl," he repeated with greater solemnity.

"A dashed pretty one, and a good traveller," Tudor laughed. "She certainly has spunk, eh, Sheldon?"

"Yes, she is brave," was the reluctant answer for Sheldon did not feel disposed to talk about her.

"That's the American of it," Tudor went on. "Push, and go, and energy, and independence. What do you think, skipper?"

"I think she is young, very young, only a girl," replied the captain of

the Minerva, continuing to stare into the blackness that hid the sea.

The blackness seemed suddenly to increase in density, and they stumbled up the beach, feeling their way to the gate.

"Watch out for nuts," Sheldon warned, as the first blast of the squall shrieked through the palms. They joined hands and staggered up the path, with the ripe cocoanuts thudding in a monstrous rain all around them. They gained the veranda, where they sat in silence over their whisky, each man staring straight out to sea, where the wildly swinging riding-light of the Minerva could be seen in the lulls of the driving rain.

Somewhere out there, Sheldon reflected, was Joan Lackland, the girl who had not grown up, the woman good to look upon, with only a boy's mind and a boy's desires, leaving Berande amid storm and conflict in much the same manner that she had first arrived, in the stern-sheets of her whale-boat, Adamu Adam steering, her savage crew bending to the oars. And she was taking her Stetson hat with her, along with the cartridge-belt and the long-barrelled revolver. He suddenly discovered an immense affection for those fripperies of hers at which he had secretly laughed when first he saw them. He became aware of the sentimental direction in which his fancy was leading him, and felt inclined to laugh. But he did not laugh. The next moment he was busy visioning the hat, and belt, and revolver. Undoubtedly this was love, he thought, and he felt a tiny glow of pride in him in that the Solomons had not succeeded in killing all his sentiment.

An hour later, Christian Young stood up, knocked out his pipe, and prepared to go aboard and get under way.

"She's all right," he said, apropos of nothing spoken, and yet distinctly relevant to what was in each of their minds. "She's got a good boat's-crew, and she's a sailor herself. Good-night, Mr. Sheldon. Anything I can do for you down Marau-way?" He turned and pointed to a widening space of starry sky. "It's going to be a fine night after all. With this favouring bit of breeze she has sail on already, and she'll make Guvutu by daylight. Good-night."

"I guess I'll turn in, old man," Tudor said, rising and placing his glass on the table. "I'll start the first thing in the morning. It's been disgraceful the way I've been hanging on here. Good-night."

Sheldon, sitting on alone, wondered if the other man would have decided to pull out in the morning had Joan not sailed away. Well, there was one bit of consolation in it: Joan had certainly lingered at Berande for no man, not even Tudor. "I start in an hour"--her words rang in his brain, and under his eyelids he could see her as she stood up and uttered them. He smiled. The instant she heard the news she had made up her mind to go. It was not very flattering to man, but what could any man count in her eyes when a schooner waiting to be bought in Sydney was in the wind? What a creature! What a creature!

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Berande was a lonely place to Sheldon in the days that followed. In the morning after Joan's departure, he had seen Tudor's expedition off on its way up the Balesuna; in the late afternoon, through his telescope, he had seen the smoke of the Upolu that was bearing Joan away to Sydney; and in the evening he sat down to dinner in solitary state, devoting more of his time to looking at her empty chair than to his food. He never came out on the veranda without glancing first of all at her grass house in the corner of the compound; and one evening, idly knocking the balls about on the billiard table, he came to himself to find himself standing staring at the nail upon which from the first she had hung her Stetson hat and her revolver-belt.

Why should he care for her? he demanded of himself angrily. She was certainly the last woman in the world he would have thought of choosing for himself. Never had he encountered one who had so thoroughly irritated him, rasped his feelings, smashed his conventions, and violated nearly every attribute of what had been his ideal of woman. Had he been too long away from the world? Had he forgotten what the race of women was like? Was it merely a case of propinquity? And she wasn't really a woman. She was a masquerader. Under all her seeming of woman, she was a boy, playing a boy's pranks, diving for fish amongst sharks, sporting a revolver, longing for adventure, and, what was more, going out in search of it in her whale-boat, along with her savage islanders and her bag of sovereigns. But he loved her--that was the point of it all, and he did

not try to evade it. He was not sorry that it was so. He loved her--that was the overwhelming, astounding fact.

Once again he discovered a big enthusiasm for Berande. All the bubble-illusions concerning the life of the tropical planter had been pricked by the stern facts of the Solomons. Following the death of Hughie, he had resolved to muddle along somehow with the plantation; but this resolve had not been based upon desire. Instead, it was based upon the inherent stubbornness of his nature and his dislike to give over an attempted task.

But now it was different. Berande meant everything. It must succeed--not merely because Joan was a partner in it, but because he wanted to make that partnership permanently binding. Three more years and the plantation would be a splendid-paying investment. They could then take yearly trips to Australia, and oftener; and an occasional run home to England--or Hawaii, would come as a matter of course.

He spent his evenings poring over accounts, or making endless calculations based on cheaper freights for copra and on the possible maximum and minimum market prices for that staple of commerce. His days were spent out on the plantation. He undertook more clearing of bush; and clearing and planting went on, under his personal supervision, at a faster pace than ever before. He experimented with premiums for extra work performed by the black boys, and yearned continually for more of them to put to work. Not until Joan could return on the schooner would

this be possible, for the professional recruiters were all under long contracts to the Fulcrum Brothers, Morgan and Raff, and the Fires, Philp Company; while the Flibberty-Gibbet was wholly occupied in running about among his widely scattered trading stations, which extended from the coast of New Georgia in one direction to Ulava and Sikiana in the other. Blacks he must have, and, if Joan were fortunate in getting a schooner, three months at least must elapse before the first recruits could be landed on Berande.

A week after the Upolu's departure, the Malakula dropped anchor and her skipper came ashore for a game of billiards and to gossip until the land breeze sprang up. Besides, as he told his super-cargo, he simply had to come ashore, not merely to deliver the large package of seeds with full instructions for planting from Joan, but to shock Sheldon with the little surprise born of information he was bringing with him.

Captain Auckland played the billiards first, and it was not until he was comfortably seated in a steamer-chair, his second whisky securely in his hand, that he let off his bomb.

"A great piece, that Miss Lackland of yours," he chuckled. "Claims to be a part-owner of Berande. Says she's your partner. Is that straight?"

Sheldon nodded coldly.

"You don't say? That is a surprise! Well, she hasn't convinced Guvutu

or Tulagi of it. They're pretty used to irregular things over there, but--ha! ha!--" he stopped to have his laugh out and to mop his bald head with a trade handkerchief. "But that partnership yarn of hers was too big to swallow, though it gave them the excuse for a few more drinks."

"There is nothing irregular about it. It is an ordinary business transaction." Sheldon strove to act as though such transactions were quite the commonplace thing on plantations in the Solomons. "She invested something like fifteen hundred pounds in Berande--"

"So she said."

"And she has gone to Sydney on business for the plantation."

"Oh, no, she hasn't."

"I beg pardon?" Sheldon queried.

"I said she hasn't, that's all."

"But didn't the Upolu sail? I could have sworn I saw her smoke last Tuesday afternoon, late, as she passed Savo."

"The Upolu sailed all right." Captain Auckland sipped his whisky with provoking slowness. "Only Miss Lackland wasn't a passenger."

"Then where is she?"

"At Guvutu, last I saw of her. She was going to Sydney to buy a schooner, wasn't she?"

"Yes, yes."

"That's what she said. Well, she's bought one, though I wouldn't give her ten shillings for it if a nor'wester blows up, and it's about time we had one. This has been too long a spell of good weather to last."

"If you came here to excite my curiosity, old man," Sheldon said, "you've certainly succeeded. Now go ahead and tell me in a straightforward way what has happened. What schooner? Where is it? How did she happen to buy it?"

"First, the schooner Martha," the skipper answered, checking his replies off on his fingers. "Second, the Martha is on the outside reef at Poonga-Poonga, looted clean of everything portable, and ready to go to pieces with the first bit of lively sea. And third, Miss Lackland bought her at auction. She was knocked down to her for fifty-five quid by the third-assistant-resident-commissioner. I ought to know. I bid fifty myself, for Morgan and Raff. My word, weren't they hot! I told them to go to the devil, and that it was their fault for limiting me to fifty quid when they thought the chance to salve the Martha was worth more. You see, they weren't expecting competition. Fulcrum Brothers had no

representative present, neither had Fires, Philp Company, and the only man to be afraid of was Nielsen's agent, Squires, and him they got drunk and sound asleep over in Guvutu.

"'Twenty,' says I, for my bid. 'Twenty-five,' says the little girl. 'Thirty,' says I. 'Forty,' says she. 'Fifty,' says I. 'Fifty-five,' says she. And there I was stuck. 'Hold on,' says I; 'wait till I see my owners.' 'No, you don't,' says she. 'It's customary,' says I. 'Not anywhere in the world,' says she. 'Then it's courtesy in the Solomons,' says I.

"And d'ye know, on my faith I think Burnett'd have done it, only she pipes up, sweet and pert as you please: 'Mr. Auctioneer, will you kindly proceed with the sale in the customary manner? I've other business to attend to, and I can't afford to wait all night on men who don't know their own minds.' And then she smiles at Burnett, as well--you know, one of those fetching smiles, and damme if Burnett doesn't begin singing out: 'Goin', goin', goin'--last bid--goin', goin' for fifty-five sovereigns--goin', goin', gone--to you, Miss--er--what name, please?'

"'Joan Lackland,' says she, with a smile to me; and that's how she bought the Martha."

Sheldon experienced a sudden thrill. The Martha!--a finer schooner than the Malakula, and, for that matter, the finest in the Solomons. She was just the thing for recruits, and she was right on the spot. Then

he realized that for such a craft to sell at auction for fifty-five pounds meant that there was small chance for saving her.

"But how did it happen?" he asked. "Weren't they rather quick in selling the Martha?"

"Had to. You know the reef at Poonga-Poonga. She's not worth tuppence on it if any kind of a sea kicks up, and it's ripe for a nor'wester any moment now. The crowd abandoned her completely. Didn't even dream of auctioning her. Morgan and Raff persuaded them to put her up. They're a co-operative crowd, you know, an organized business corporation, fore and aft, all hands and the cook. They held a meeting and voted to sell."

"But why didn't they stand by and try to save her?"

"Stand by! You know Malaita. And you know Poonga-Poonga. That's where they cut off the Scottish Chiefs and killed all hands. There was nothing to do but take to the boats. The Martha missed stays going in, and inside five minutes she was on the reef and in possession. The niggers swarmed over her, and they just threw the crew into the boats. I talked with some of the men. They swear there were two hundred war canoes around her inside half an hour, and five thousand bushmen on the beach. Said you couldn't see Malaita for the smoke of the signal fires. Anyway, they cleared out for Tulagi."

"But why didn't they fight?" Sheldon asked.

"It was funny they didn't, but they got separated. You see, two-thirds of them were in the boats, without weapons, running anchors and never dreaming the natives would attack. They found out their mistake too late. The natives had charge. That's the trouble of new chums on the coast. It would never have happened with you or me or any old-timer."

"But what is Miss Lackland intending to do?" Captain Auckland grinned.

"She's going to try to get the Martha off, I should say. Or else why did she pay fifty-five quid for her? And if she fails, she'll try to get her money back by saving the gear--spars, you know, and patent steering-gear, and winches, and such things. At least that's what I'd do if I was in her place. When I sailed, the little girl had chartered the Emily--'I'm going recruiting,' says Munster--he's the skipper and owner now. 'And how much will you net on the cruise?' asks she. 'Oh, fifty quid,' says he. 'Good,' says she; 'you bring your Emily along with me and you'll get seventy-five.' You know that big ship's anchor and chain piled up behind the coal-sheds? She was just buying that when I left. She's certainly a hustler, that little girl of yours."

"She is my partner," Sheldon corrected.

"Well, she's a good one, that's all, and a cool one. My word! a white woman on Malaita, and at Poonga-Poonga of all places! Oh, I forgot to tell you--she palavered Burnett into lending her eight rifles for her

men, and three cases of dynamite. You'd laugh to see the way she makes that Guvutu gang stand around. And to see them being polite and trying to give advice! Lord, Lord, man, that little girl's a wonder, a marvel, a--a--a catastrophe. That's what she is, a catastrophe. She's gone through Guvutu and Tulagi like a hurricane; every last swine of them in love with her--except Raff. He's sore over the auction, and he sprang his recruiting contract with Munster on her. And what does she do but thank him, and read it over, and point out that while Munster was pledged to deliver all recruits to Morgan and Raff, there was no clause in the document forbidding him from chartering the Emily.

"There's your contract,' says she, passing it back. 'And a very good contract it is. The next time you draw one up, insert a clause that will fit emergencies like the present one.' And, Lord, Lord, she had him, too.

"But there's the breeze, and I'm off. Good-bye, old man. Hope the little girl succeeds. The Martha's a whacking fine boat, and she'd take the place of the Jessie."