

## CHAPTER XVII--"YOUR" MISS LACKLAND

The next morning Sheldon came in from the plantation to breakfast, to find the mission ketch, *Apostle*, at anchor, her crew swimming two mares and a filly ashore. Sheldon recognized the animals as belonging to the Resident Commissioner, and he immediately wondered if Joan had bought them. She was certainly living up to her threat of rattling the dry bones of the Solomons, and he was prepared for anything.

"Miss Lackland sent them," said Welshmere, the missionary doctor, stepping ashore and shaking hands with him. "There's also a box of saddles on board. And this letter from her. And the skipper of the *Flibberty-Gibbet*."

The next moment, and before he could greet him, Oleson stepped from the boat and began.

"She's stolen the *Flibberty*, Mr. Sheldon. Run clean away with her. She's a wild one. She gave me the fever. Brought it on by shock. And got me drunk, as well--rotten drunk."

Dr. Welshmere laughed heartily.

"Nevertheless, she is not an unmitigated evil, your Miss Lackland. She's sworn three men off their drink, or, to the same purpose, shut off their

whisky. You know them--Brahms, Curtis, and Fowler. She shipped them on the Flibberty-Gibbet along with her."

"She's the skipper of the Flibberty now," Oleson broke in. "And she'll wreck her as sure as God didn't make the Solomons."

Dr. Welshmere tried to look shocked, but laughed again.

"She has quite a way with her," he said. "I tried to back out of bringing the horses over. Said I couldn't charge freight, that the Apostle was under a yacht license, that I was going around by Savo and the upper end of Guadalcanar. But it was no use. 'Bother the charge,' said she. 'You take the horses like a good man, and when I float the Martha I'll return the service some day.'"

"And 'bother your orders,' said she to me," Oleson cried. "'I'm your boss now,' said she, 'and you take your orders from me.' 'Look at that load of ivory nuts,' I said. 'Bother them,' said she; 'I'm playin' for something bigger than ivory nuts. We'll dump them overside as soon as we get under way.'"

Sheldon put his hands to his ears.

"I don't know what has happened, and you are trying to tell me the tale backwards. Come up to the house and get in the shade and begin at the beginning."

"What I want to know," Oleson began, when they were seated, "is is she your partner or ain't she? That's what I want to know."

"She is," Sheldon assured him.

"Well, who'd have believed it!" Oleson glanced appealingly at Dr. Welshmere, and back again at Sheldon. "I've seen a few unlikely things in these Solomons--rats two feet long, butterflies the Commissioner hunts with a shot-gun, ear-ornaments that would shame the devil, and head-hunting devils that make the devil look like an angel. I've seen them and got used to them, but this young woman of yours--"

"Miss Lackland is my partner and part-owner of Berande," Sheldon interrupted.

"So she said," the irate skipper dashed on. "But she had no papers to show for it. How was I to know? And then there was that load of ivory nuts-eight tons of them."

"For heaven's sake begin at the--" Sheldon tried to interrupt.

"And then she's hired them drunken loafers, three of the worst scoundrels that ever disgraced the Solomons--fifteen quid a month each--what d'ye think of that? And sailed away with them, too! Phew!--You might give me a drink. The missionary won't mind. I've been on his teetotal hooker

four days now, and I'm perishing."

Dr. Welshmere nodded in reply to Sheldon's look of inquiry, and Viaburi was dispatched for the whisky and siphons.

"It is evident, Captain Oleson," Sheldon remarked to that refreshed mariner, "that Miss Lackland has run away with your boat. Now please give a plain statement of what occurred."

"Right O; here goes. I'd just come in on the Flibberty. She was on board before I dropped the hook--in that whale-boat of hers with her gang of Tahiti heathens--that big Adamu Adam and the rest. 'Don't drop the anchor, Captain Oleson,' she sang out. 'I want you to get under way for Poonga-Poonga.' I looked to see if she'd been drinking. What was I to think? I was rounding up at the time, alongside the shoal--a ticklish place--head-sails running down and losing way, so I says, 'Excuse me, Miss Lackland,' and yells for'ard, 'Let go!'

"'You might have listened to me and saved yourself trouble,' says she, climbing over the rail and squinting along for'ard and seeing the first shackle flip out and stop. 'There's fifteen fathom,' says she; 'you may as well turn your men to and heave up.'

"And then we had it out. I didn't believe her. I didn't think you'd take her on as a partner, and I told her as much and wanted proof. She got high and mighty, and I told her I was old enough to be her

grandfather and that I wouldn't take gammon from a chit like her. And then I ordered her off the Flibberty. 'Captain Oleson,' she says, sweet as you please, 'I've a few minutes to spare on you, and I've got some good whisky over on the Emily. Come on along. Besides, I want your advice about this wrecking business. Everybody says you're a crackerjack sailor-man'--that's what she said, 'crackerjack.' And I went, in her whale-boat, Adamu Adam steering and looking as solemn as a funeral.

"On the way she told me about the Martha, and how she'd bought her, and was going to float her. She said she'd chartered the Emily, and was sailing as soon as I could get the Flibberty underway. It struck me that her gammon was reasonable enough, and I agreed to pull out for Berande right O, and get your orders to go along to Poonga-Poonga. But she said there wasn't a second to be lost by any such foolishness, and that I was to sail direct for Poonga-Poonga, and that if I couldn't take her word that she was your partner, she'd get along without me and the Flibberty. And right there's where she fooled me.

"Down in the Emily's cabin was them three soaks--you know them--Fowler and Curtis and that Brahms chap. 'Have a drink,' says she. I thought they looked surprised when she unlocked the whisky locker and sent a nigger for the glasses and water-monkey. But she must have tipped them off unbeknownst to me, and they knew just what to do. 'Excuse me,' she says, 'I'm going on deck a minute.' Now that minute was half an hour. I hadn't had a drink in ten days. I'm an old man and the fever has

weakened me. Then I took it on an empty stomach, too, and there was them three soaks setting me an example, they arguing for me to take the Flibberty to Poonga-Poonga, an' me pointing out my duty to the contrary. The trouble was, all the arguments were pointed with drinks, and me not being a drinking man, so to say, and weak from fever . . .

"Well, anyway, at the end of the half-hour down she came again and took a good squint at me. 'That'll do nicely,' I remember her saying; and with that she took the whisky bottles and hove them overside through the companionway. 'That's the last, she said to the three soaks, 'till the Martha floats and you're back in Guvutu. It'll be a long time between drinks.' And then she laughed.

"She looked at me and said--not to me, mind you, but to the soaks: 'It's time this worthy man went ashore'--me! worthy man! 'Fowler,' she said--you know, just like a straight order, and she didn't mister him--it was plain Fowler--'Fowler,' she said, 'just tell Adamu Adam to man the whale-boat, and while he's taking Captain Oleson ashore have your boat put me on the Flibberty. The three of you sail with me, so pack your dunnage. And the one of you that shows up best will take the mate's billet. Captain Oleson doesn't carry a mate, you know.'

"I don't remember much after that. All hands got me over the side, and it seems to me I went to sleep, sitting in the stern-sheets and watching that Adamu steer. Then I saw the Flibberty's mainsail hoisting, and heard the clank of her chain coming in, and I woke up. 'Here, put me on

the Flibberty,' I said to Adamu. 'I put you on the beach,' said he. 'Missie Lackalanna say beach plenty good for you.' Well, I let out a yell and reached for the steering-sweep. I was doing my best by my owners, you see. Only that Adamu gives me a shove down on the bottom-boards, puts one foot on me to hold me down, and goes on steering. And that's all. The shock of the whole thing brought on fever. And now I've come to find out whether I'm skipper of the Flibberty, or that chit of yours with her pirating, heathen boat's-crew."

"Never mind, skipper. You can take a vacation on pay." Sheldon spoke with more assurance than he felt. "If Miss Lackland, who is my partner, has seen fit to take charge of the Flibberty-Gibbet, why, it is all right. As you will agree, there was no time to be lost if the Martha was to be got off. It is a bad reef, and any considerable sea would knock her bottom out. You settle down here, skipper, and rest up and get the fever out of your bones. When the Flibberty-Gibbet comes back, you'll take charge again, of course."

After Dr. Welshmere and the Apostle departed and Captain Oleson had turned in for a sleep in a veranda hammock, Sheldon opened Joan's letter.

DEAR MR. SHELDON,--Please forgive me for stealing the Flibberty-Gibbet. I simply had to. The Martha means everything to us. Think of it, only fifty-five pounds for her, two hundred and seventy-five dollars. If I don't save her, I know I shall be able to pay all expenses out of her gear, which the natives will not have

carried off. And if I do save her, it is the haul of a life-time. And if I don't save her, I'll fill the Emily and the Flibberty-Gibbet with recruits. Recruits are needed right now on Berande more than anything else.

And please, please don't be angry with me. You said I shouldn't go recruiting on the Flibberty, and I won't. I'll go on the Emily.

I bought two cows this afternoon. That trader at Nogi died of fever, and I bought them from his partner, Sam Willis his name is, who agrees to deliver them--most likely by the Minerva next time she is down that way. Berande has been long enough on tinned milk.

And Dr. Welshmere has agreed to get me some orange and lime trees from the mission station at Ulava. He will deliver them the next trip of the Apostle. If the Sydney steamer arrives before I get back, plant the sweet corn she will bring between the young trees on the high bank of the Balesuna. The current is eating in against that bank, and you should do something to save it.

I have ordered some fig-trees and loquats, too, from Sydney. Dr. Welshmere will bring some mango-seeds. They are big trees and require plenty of room.

The Martha is registered 110 tons. She is the biggest schooner in the Solomons, and the best. I saw a little of her lines and guess the



rest. She will sail like a witch. If she hasn't filled with water, her engine will be all right. The reason she went ashore was because it was not working. The engineer had disconnected the feed-pipes to clean out the rust. Poor business, unless at anchor or with plenty of sea room.

Plant all the trees in the compound, even if you have to clean out the palms later on.

And don't plant the sweet corn all at once. Let a few days elapse between plantings.

JOAN LACKLAND.

He fingered the letter, lingering over it and scrutinizing the writing in a way that was not his wont. How characteristic, was his thought, as he studied the boyish scrawl--clear to read, painfully, clear, but none the less boyish. The clearness of it reminded him of her face, of her cleanly stencilled brows, her straightly chiselled nose, the very clearness of the gaze of her eyes, the firmly yet delicately moulded lips, and the throat, neither fragile nor robust, but--but just right, he concluded, an adequate and beautiful pillar for so shapely a burden.

He looked long at the name. Joan Lackland--just an assemblage of letters, of commonplace letters, but an assemblage that generated a subtle and heady magic. It crept into his brain and twined and twisted

his mental processes until all that constituted him at that moment went out in love to that scrawled signature. A few commonplace letters--yet they caused him to know in himself a lack that sweetly hurt and that expressed itself in vague spiritual outpourings and delicious yearnings. Joan Lackland! Each time he looked at it there arose visions of her in a myriad moods and guises--coming in out of the flying smother of the gale that had wrecked her schooner; launching a whale-boat to go a-fishing; running dripping from the sea, with streaming hair and clinging garments, to the fresh-water shower; frightening four-score cannibals with an empty chlorodyne bottle; teaching Ornfiri how to make bread; hanging her Stetson hat and revolver-belt on the hook in the living-room; talking gravely about winning to hearth and saddle of her own, or juveniley rattling on about romance and adventure, bright-eyed, her face flushed and eager with enthusiasm. Joan Lackland! He mused over the cryptic wonder of it till the secrets of love were made clear and he felt a keen sympathy for lovers who carved their names on trees or wrote them on the beach-sands of the sea.

Then he came back to reality, and his face hardened. Even then she was on the wild coast of Malaita, and at Poonga-Poonga, of all villainous and dangerous portions the worst, peopled with a teeming population of head-hunters, robbers, and murderers. For the instant he entertained the rash thought of calling his boat's-crew and starting immediately in a whale-boat for Poonga-Poonga. But the next instant the idea was dismissed. What could he do if he did go? First, she would resent it. Next, she would laugh at him and call him a silly; and after all he would count for

only one rifle more, and she had many rifles with her. Three things only could he do if he went. He could command her to return; he could take the Flibberty-Gibbet away from her; he could dissolve their partnership;--any and all of which he knew would be foolish and futile, and he could hear her explain in terse set terms that she was legally of age and that nobody could say come or go to her. No, his pride would never permit him to start for Poonga-Poonga, though his heart whispered that nothing could be more welcome than a message from her asking him to come and lend a hand. Her very words--"lend a hand"; and in his fancy, he could see and hear her saying them.

There was much in her wilful conduct that caused him to wince in the heart of him. He was appalled by the thought of her shoulder to shoulder with the drunken rabble of traders and beachcombers at Guvutu. It was bad enough for a clean, fastidious man; but for a young woman, a girl at that, it was awful. The theft of the Flibberty-Gibbet was merely amusing, though the means by which the theft had been effected gave him hurt. Yet he found consolation in the fact that the task of making Oleson drunk had been turned over to the three scoundrels. And next, and swiftly, came the vision of her, alone with those same three scoundrels, on the Emily, sailing out to sea from Guvutu in the twilight with darkness coming on. Then came visions of Adamu Adam and Noa Noah and all her brawny Tahitian following, and his anxiety faded away, being replaced by irritation that she should have been capable of such wildness of conduct.

And the irritation was still on him as he got up and went inside to stare at the hook on the wall and to wish that her Stetson hat and revolver-belt were hanging from it.