

CHAPTER XVIII--MAKING THE BOOKS COME TRUE

Several quiet weeks slipped by. Berande, after such an unusual run of visiting vessels, drifted back into her old solitude. Sheldon went on with the daily round, clearing bush, planting cocoanuts, smoking copra, building bridges, and riding about his work on the horses Joan had bought. News of her he had none. Recruiting vessels on Malaita left the Poonga-Poonga coast severely alone; and the Clansman, a Samoan recruiter, dropping anchor one sunset for billiards and gossip, reported rumours amongst the Sio natives that there had been fighting at Poonga-Poonga. As this news would have had to travel right across the big island, little dependence was to be placed on it.

The steamer from Sydney, the Kammambo, broke the quietude of Berande for an hour, while landing mail, supplies, and the trees and seeds Joan had ordered. The Minerva, bound for Cape Marsh, brought the two cows from Nogi. And the Apostle, hurrying back to Tulagi to connect with the Sydney steamer, sent a boat ashore with the orange and lime trees from Ulava. And these several weeks marked a period of perfect weather. There were days on end when sleek calms ruled the breathless sea, and days when vagrant wisps of air fanned for several hours from one direction or another. The land-breezes at night alone proved regular, and it was at night that the occasional cutters and ketches slipped by, too eager to take advantage of the light winds to drop anchor for an hour.

Then came the long-expected nor'wester. For eight days it raged, lulling at times to short durations of calm, then shifting a point or two and raging with renewed violence. Sheldon kept a precautionary eye on the buildings, while the Balesuna, in flood, so savagely attacked the high bank Joan had warned him about, that he told off all the gangs to battle with the river.

It was in the good weather that followed, that he left the blacks at work, one morning, and with a shot-gun across his pommel rode off after pigeons. Two hours later, one of the house-boys, breathless and scratched ran him down with the news that the Martha, the Flibberty-Gibbet, and the Emily were heading in for the anchorage.

Coming into the compound from the rear, Sheldon could see nothing until he rode around the corner of the bungalow. Then he saw everything at once--first, a glimpse at the sea, where the Martha floated huge alongside the cutter and the ketch which had rescued her; and, next, the ground in front of the veranda steps, where a great crowd of fresh-caught cannibals stood at attention. From the fact that each was attired in a new, snow-white lava-lava, Sheldon knew that they were recruits. Part way up the steps, one of them was just backing down into the crowd, while another, called out by name, was coming up. It was Joan's voice that had called him, and Sheldon reined in his horse and watched. She sat at the head of the steps, behind a table, between Munster and his white mate, the three of them checking long lists, Joan asking the questions and

writing the answers in the big, red-covered, Berande labour-journal.

"What name?" she demanded of the black man on the steps.

"Tagari," came the answer, accompanied by a grin and a rolling of curious eyes; for it was the first white-man's house the black had ever seen.

"What place b'long you?"

"Bangoora."

No one had noticed Sheldon, and he continued to sit his horse and watch. There was a discrepancy between the answer and the record in the recruiting books, and a consequent discussion, until Munster solved the difficulty.

"Bangoora?" he said. "That's the little beach at the head of the bay out of Latta. He's down as a Latta-man--see, there it is, 'Tagari, Latta.'"

"What place you go you finish along white marster?" Joan asked.

"Bangoora," the man replied; and Joan wrote it down.

"Ogu!" Joan called.

The black stepped down, and another mounted to take his place. But

Tagari, just before he reached the bottom step, caught sight of Sheldon. It was the first horse the fellow had ever seen, and he let out a frightened screech and dashed madly up the steps. At the same moment the great mass of blacks surged away panic-stricken from Sheldon's vicinity. The grinning house-boys shouted encouragement and explanation, and the stampede was checked, the new-caught head-hunters huddling closely together and staring dubiously at the fearful monster.

"Hello!" Joan called out. "What do you mean by frightening all my boys? Come on up."

"What do you think of them?" she asked, when they had shaken hands. "And what do you think of her?"--with a wave of the hand toward the Martha. "I thought you'd deserted the plantation, and that I might as well go ahead and get the men into barracks. Aren't they beauties? Do you see that one with the split nose? He's the only man who doesn't hail from the Poonga-Poonga coast; and they said the Poonga-Poonga natives wouldn't recruit. Just look at them and congratulate me. There are no kiddies and half-grown youths among them. They're men, every last one of them. I have such a long story I don't know where to begin, and I won't begin anyway till we're through with this and until you have told me that you are not angry with me."

"Ogu--what place b'long you?" she went on with her catechism.

But Ogu was a bushman, lacking knowledge of the almost universal beche-de-

mer English, and half a dozen of his fellows wrangled to explain.

"There are only two or three more," Joan said to Sheldon, "and then we're done. But you haven't told me that you are not angry."

Sheldon looked into her clear eyes as she favoured him with a direct, untroubled gaze that threatened, he knew from experience, to turn teasingly defiant on an instant's notice. And as he looked at her it came to him that he had never half-anticipated the gladness her return would bring to him.

"I was angry," he said deliberately. "I am still angry, very angry--" he noted the glint of defiance in her eyes and thrilled--"but I forgave, and I now forgive all over again. Though I still insist--"

"That I should have a guardian," she interrupted. "But that day will never come. Thank goodness I'm of legal age and able to transact business in my own right. And speaking of business, how do you like my forceful American methods?"

"Mr. Raff, from what I hear, doesn't take kindly to them," he temporized, "and you've certainly set the dry bones rattling for many a day. But what I want to know is if other American women are as successful in business ventures?"

"Luck, 'most all luck," she disclaimed modestly, though her eyes lighted

with sudden pleasure; and he knew her boy's vanity had been touched by his trifle of tempered praise.

"Luck be blowed!" broke out the long mate, Sparrowhawk, his face shining with admiration. "It was hard work, that's what it was. We earned our pay. She worked us till we dropped. And we were down with fever half the time. So was she, for that matter, only she wouldn't stay down, and she wouldn't let us stay down. My word, she's a slave-driver--'Just one more heave, Mr. Sparrowhawk, and then you can go to bed for a week',--she to me, and me staggerin' 'round like a dead man, with bilious-green lights flashing inside my head, an' my head just bustin'. I was all in, but I gave that heave right O--and then it was, 'Another heave now, Mr. Sparrowhawk, just another heave.' An' the Lord lumme, the way she made love to old Kina-Kina!"

He shook his head reproachfully, while the laughter died down in his throat to long-drawn chuckles.

"He was older than Telepasse and dirtier," she assured Sheldon, "and I am sure much wickeder. But this isn't work. Let us get through with these lists."

She turned to the waiting black on the steps,--

"Ogu, you finish along big marster belong white man, you go Not-Not.--Here you, Tangari, you speak 'm along that fella Ogu. He finish he walk about

Not-Not. Have you got that, Mr. Munster?"

"But you've broken the recruiting laws," Sheldon said, when the new recruits had marched away to the barracks. "The licenses for the Flibberty and the Emily don't allow for one hundred and fifty. What did Burnett say?"

"He passed them, all of them," she answered. "Captain Munster will tell you what he said--something about being blowed, or words to that effect. Now I must run and wash up. Did the Sydney orders arrive?"

"Yours are in your quarters," Sheldon said. "Hurry, for breakfast is waiting. Let me have your hat and belt. Do, please, allow me. There's only one hook for them, and I know where it is."

She gave him a quick scrutiny that was almost woman-like, then sighed with relief as she unbuckled the heavy belt and passed it to him.

"I doubt if I ever want to see another revolver," she complained. "That one has worn a hole in me, I'm sure. I never dreamed I could get so weary of one."

Sheldon watched her to the foot of the steps, where she turned and called back,--

"My! I can't tell you how good it is to be home again."

And as his gaze continued to follow her across the compound to the tiny grass house, the realization came to him crushingly that Berande and that little grass house was the only place in the world she could call "home."

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"And Burnett said, 'Well, I'll be damned--I beg your pardon, Miss Lackland, but you have wantonly broken the recruiting laws and you know it,'" Captain Munster narrated, as they sat over their whisky, waiting for Joan to come back. "And says she to him, 'Mr. Burnett, can you show me any law against taking the passengers off a vessel that's on a reef?' 'That is not the point,' says he. 'It's the very, precise, particular point,' says she and you bear it in mind and go ahead and pass my recruits. You can report me to the Lord High Commissioner if you want, but I have three vessels here waiting on your convenience, and if you delay them much longer there'll be another report go in to the Lord High Commissioner.'

"'I'll hold you responsible, Captain Munster,' says he to me, mad enough to eat scrap-iron. 'No, you won't,' says she; 'I'm the charterer of the Emily, and Captain Munster has acted under my orders.'

"What could Burnett do? He passed the whole hundred and fifty, though the Emily was only licensed for forty, and the Flibberty-Gibbet for thirty-five."

"But I don't understand," Sheldon said.

"This is the way she worked it. When the Martha was floated, we had to beach her right away at the head of the bay, and whilst repairs were going on, a new rudder being made, sails bent, gear recovered from the niggers, and so forth, Miss Lackland borrows Sparrowhawk to run the Flibberty along with Curtis, lends me Brahms to take Sparrowhawk's place, and starts both craft off recruiting. My word, the niggers came easy. It was virgin ground. Since the Scottish Chiefs, no recruiter had ever even tried to work the coast; and we'd already put the fear of God into the niggers' hearts till the whole coast was quiet as lambs. When we filled up, we came back to see how the Martha was progressing."

"And thinking we was going home with our recruits," Sparrowhawk slipped in. "Lord lumme, that Miss Lackland ain't never satisfied. 'I'll take 'em on the Martha,' says she, 'and you can go back and fill up again.'"

"But I told her it couldn't be done," Munster went on. "I told her the Martha hadn't a license for recruiting. 'Oh,' she said, 'it can't be done, eh?' and she stood and thought a few minutes."

"And I'd seen her think before," cried Sparrowhawk, "and I knew at wunst that the thing was as good as done."

Munster lighted his cigarette and resumed.

"You see that spit,' she says to me, 'with the little ripple breaking around it? There's a current sets right across it and on it. And you see them bafflin' little cat's-paws? It's good weather and a falling tide. You just start to beat out, the two of you, and all you have to do is miss stays in the same baffling puff and the current will set you nicely aground."

"That little wash of sea won't more than start a sheet or two of copper,' says she, when Munster kicked," Sparrowhawk explained. "Oh, she's no green un, that girl."

"Then I'll rescue your recruits and sail away--simple, ain't it?' says she," Munster continued. "You hang up one tide,' says she; 'the next is the big high water. Then you kedge off and go after more recruits. There's no law against recruiting when you're empty.' 'But there is against starving 'em,' I said; 'you know yourself there ain't any kai-kai to speak of aboard of us, and there ain't a crumb on the Martha."

"We'd all been pretty well on native kai-kai, as it was," said Sparrowhawk.

"Don't let the kai-kai worry you, Captain Munster,' says she; 'if I can find grub for eighty-four mouths on the Martha, the two of you can do as much by your two vessels. Now go ahead and get aground before a steady breeze comes up and spoils the manoeuvre. I'll send my boats the

moment you strike. And now, good-day, gentlemen."

"And we went and did it," Sparrowhawk said solemnly, and then emitted a series of chuckling noises. "We laid over, starboard tack, and I pinched the Emily against the spit. 'Go about,' Captain Munster yells at me; 'go about, or you'll have me aground!' He yelled other things, much worse. But I didn't mind. I missed stays, pretty as you please, and the Flibberty drifted down on him and fouled him, and we went ashore together in as nice a mess as you ever want to see. Miss Lackland transferred the recruits, and the trick was done."

"But where was she during the nor'wester?" Sheldon asked.

"At Langa-Langa. Ran up there as it was coming on, and laid there the whole week and traded for grub with the niggers. When we got to Tulagi, there she was waiting for us and scrapping with Burnett. I tell you, Mr. Sheldon, she's a wonder, that girl, a perfect wonder."

Munster refilled his glass, and while Sheldon glanced across at Joan's house, anxious for her coming, Sparrowhawk took up the tale.

"Gritty! She's the grittiest thing, man or woman, that ever blew into the Solomons. You should have seen Poonga-Poonga the morning we arrived--Sniders popping on the beach and in the mangroves, war-drums booming in the bush, and signal-smokes raising everywhere. 'It's all up,' says Captain Munster."

"Yes, that's what I said," declared that mariner.

"Of course it was all up. You could see it with half an eye and hear it with one ear."

"'Up your granny,' she says to him," Sparrowhawk went on. "'Why, we haven't arrived yet, much less got started. Wait till the anchor's down before you get afraid.'"

"That's what she said to me," Munster proclaimed. "And of course it made me mad so that I didn't care what happened. We tried to send a boat ashore for a pow-wow, but it was fired upon. And every once and a while some nigger'd take a long shot at us out of the mangroves."

"They was only a quarter of a mile off," Sparrowhawk explained, "and it was damned nasty. 'Don't shoot unless they try to board,' was Miss Lackland's orders; but the dirty niggers wouldn't board. They just lay off in the bush and plugged away. That night we held a council of war in the Flibberty's cabin. 'What we want,' says Miss Lackland, 'is a hostage.'"

"'That's what they do in books,' I said, thinking to laugh her away from her folly," Munster interrupted. "'True,' says she, 'and have you never seen the books come true?' I shook my head. 'Then you're not too old to learn,' says she. 'I'll tell you one thing right now,' says I, 'and that

is I'll be blowed if you catch me ashore in the night-time stealing niggers in a place like this."

"You didn't say blowed," Sparrowhawk corrected. "You said you'd be damned."

"That's what I did, and I meant it, too."

"'Nobody asked you to go ashore,' says she, quick as lightning," Sparrowhawk grinned. "And she said more. She said, 'And if I catch you going ashore without orders there'll be trouble--understand, Captain Munster?'"

"Who in hell's telling this, you or me?" the skipper demanded wrathfully.

"Well, she did, didn't she?" insisted the mate.

"Yes, she did, if you want to make so sure of it. And while you're about it, you might as well repeat what she said to you when you said you wouldn't recruit on the Poonga-Poonga coast for twice your screw."

Sparrowhawk's sun-reddened face flamed redder, though he tried to pass the situation off by divers laughings and chucklings and face-twistings.

"Go on, go on," Sheldon urged; and Munster resumed the narrative.

"'What we need,' says she, 'is the strong hand. It's the only way to handle them; and we've got to take hold firm right at the beginning. I'm going ashore to-night to fetch Kina-Kina himself on board, and I'm not asking who's game to go for I've got every man's work arranged with me for him. I'm taking my sailors with me, and one white man.' 'Of course, I'm that white man,' I said; for by that time I was mad enough to go to hell and back again. 'Of course you're not,' says she. 'You'll have charge of the covering boat. Curtis stands by the landing boat. Fowler goes with me. Brahms takes charge of the Flibberty, and Sparrowhawk of the Emily. And we start at one o'clock.'

"My word, it was a tough job lying there in the covering boat. I never thought doing nothing could be such hard work. We stopped about fifty fathoms off, and watched the other boat go in. It was so dark under the mangroves we couldn't see a thing of it. D'ye know that little, monkey-looking nigger, Sheldon, on the Flibberty--the cook, I mean? Well, he was cabin-boy twenty years ago on the Scottish Chiefs, and after she was cut off he was a slave there at Poonga-Poonga. And Miss Lackland had discovered the fact. So he was the guide. She gave him half a case of tobacco for that night's work--"

"And scared him fit to die before she could get him to come along," Sparrowhawk observed.

"Well, I never saw anything so black as the mangroves. I stared at them till my eyes were ready to burst. And then I'd look at the stars, and

listen to the surf sighing along the reef. And there was a dog that barked. Remember that dog, Sparrowhawk? The brute nearly gave me heart-failure when he first began. After a while he stopped--wasn't barking at the landing party at all; and then the silence was harder than ever, and the mangroves grew blacker, and it was all I could do to keep from calling out to Curtis in there in the landing boat, just to make sure that I wasn't the only white man left alive.

"Of course there was a row. It had to come, and I knew it; but it startled me just the same. I never heard such screeching and yelling in my life. The niggers must have just dived for the bush without looking to see what was up, while her Tahitians let loose, shooting in the air and yelling to hurry 'em on. And then, just as sudden, came the silence again--all except for some small kiddie that had got dropped in the stampede and that kept crying in the bush for its mother.

"And then I heard them coming through the mangroves, and an oar strike on a gunwale, and Miss Lackland laugh, and I knew everything was all right. We pulled on board without a shot being fired. And, by God! she had made the books come true, for there was old Kina-Kina himself being hoisted over the rail, shivering and chattering like an ape. The rest was easy. Kina-Kina's word was law, and he was scared to death. And we kept him on board issuing proclamations all the time we were in Poonga-Poonga.

"It was a good move, too, in other ways. She made Kina-Kina order his people to return all the gear they'd stripped from the Martha. And

back it came, day after day, steering compasses, blocks and tackles, sails, coils of rope, medicine chests, ensigns, signal flags--everything, in fact, except the trade goods and supplies which had already been kai-kai'd. Of course, she gave them a few sticks of tobacco to keep them in good humour."

"Sure she did," Sparrowhawk broke forth. "She gave the beggars five fathoms of calico for the big mainsail, two sticks of tobacco for the chronometer, and a sheath-knife worth elevenpence ha'penny for a hundred fathoms of brand new five-inch manila. She got old Kina-Kina with that strong hand on the go off, and she kept him going all the time. She--here she comes now."

It was with a shock of surprise that Sheldon greeted her appearance. All the time, while the tale of happening at Poonga-Poonga had been going on, he had pictured her as the woman he had always known, clad roughly, skirt made out of window-curtain stuff, an undersized man's shirt for a blouse, straw sandals for foot covering, with the Stetson hat and the eternal revolver completing her costume. The ready-made clothes from Sydney had transformed her. A simple skirt and shirt-waist of some sort of wash-goods set off her trim figure with a hint of elegant womanhood that was new to him. Brown slippers peeped out as she crossed the compound, and he once caught a glimpse to the ankle of brown open-work stockings. Somehow, she had been made many times the woman by these mere extraneous trappings; and in his mind these wild Arabian Nights adventures of hers seemed thrice as wonderful.

As they went in to breakfast he became aware that Munster and Sparrowhawk had received a similar shock. All their air of camaraderie was dissipated, and they had become abruptly and immensely respectful.

"I've opened up a new field," she said, as she began pouring the coffee. "Old Kina-Kina will never forget me, I'm sure, and I can recruit there whenever I want. I saw Morgan at Guvutu. He's willing to contract for a thousand boys at forty shillings per head. Did I tell you that I'd taken out a recruiting license for the Martha? I did, and the Martha can sign eighty boys every trip."

Sheldon smiled a trifle bitterly to himself. The wonderful woman who had tripped across the compound in her Sydney clothes was gone, and he was listening to the boy come back again.