

CHAPTER XIX--THE LOST TOY

"Well," Joan said with a sigh, "I've shown you hustling American methods that succeed and get somewhere, and here you are beginning your muddling again."

Five days had passed, and she and Sheldon were standing on the veranda watching the Martha, close-hauled on the wind, laying a tack off shore. During those five days Joan had never once broached the desire of her heart, though Sheldon, in this particular instance reading her like a book, had watched her lead up to the question a score of times in the hope that he would himself suggest her taking charge of the Martha. She had wanted him to say the word, and she had steeled herself not to say it herself. The matter of finding a skipper had been a hard one. She was jealous of the Martha, and no suggested man had satisfied her.

"Oleson?" she had demanded. "He does very well on the Flibberty, with me and my men to overhaul her whenever she's ready to fall to pieces through his slackness. But skipper of the Martha? Impossible!"

"Munster? Yes, he's the only man I know in the Solomons I'd care to see in charge. And yet, there's his record. He lost the Umbawa--one hundred and forty drowned. He was first officer on the bridge. Deliberate disobedience to instructions. No wonder they broke him.

"Christian Young has never had any experience with large boats. Besides, we can't afford to pay him what he's clearing on the *Minerva*.

Sparrowhawk is a good man--to take orders. He has no initiative. He's an able sailor, but he can't command. I tell you I was nervous all the time he had charge of the *Flibberty* at Poonga-Poonga when I had to stay by the *Martha*."

And so it had gone. No name proposed was satisfactory, and, moreover, Sheldon had been surprised by the accuracy of her judgments. A dozen times she almost drove him to the statement that from the showing she made of Solomon Islands sailors, she was the only person fitted to command the *Martha*. But each time he restrained himself, while her pride prevented her from making the suggestion.

"Good whale-boat sailors do not necessarily make good schooner-handlers," she replied to one of his arguments. "Besides, the captain of a boat like the *Martha* must have a large mind, see things in a large way; he must have capacity and enterprise."

"But with your Tahitians on board--" Sheldon had begun another argument.

"There won't be any Tahitians on board," she had returned promptly. "My men stay with me. I never know when I may need them. When I sail, they sail; when I remain ashore, they remain ashore. I'll find plenty for them to do right here on the plantation. You've seen them clearing bush, each of them worth half a dozen of your cannibals."

So it was that Joan stood beside Sheldon and sighed as she watched the Martha beating out to sea, old Kinross, brought over from Savo, in command.

"Kinross is an old fossil," she said, with a touch of bitterness in her voice. "Oh, he'll never wreck her through rashness, rest assured of that; but he's timid to childishness, and timid skippers lose just as many vessels as rash ones. Some day, Kinross will lose the Martha because there'll be only one chance and he'll be afraid to take it. I know his sort. Afraid to take advantage of a proper breeze of wind that will fetch him in in twenty hours, he'll get caught out in the calm that follows and spend a whole week in getting in. The Martha will make money with him, there's no doubt of it; but she won't make near the money that she would under a competent master."

She paused, and with heightened colour and sparkling eyes gazed seaward at the schooner.

"My! but she is a witch! Look at her eating up the water, and there's no wind to speak of. She's not got ordinary white metal either. It's man-of-war copper, every inch of it. I had them polish it with cocoanut husks when she was careened at Poonga-Poonga. She was a seal-hunter before this gold expedition got her. And seal-hunters had to sail. They've run away from second class Russian cruisers more than once up there off Siberia.

"Honestly, if I'd dreamed of the chance waiting for me at Guvutu when I bought her for less than three hundred dollars, I'd never have gone partners with you. And in that case I'd be sailing her right now."

The justice of her contention came abruptly home to Sheldon. What she had done she would have done just the same if she had not been his partner. And in the saving of the Martha he had played no part. Single-handed, unadvised, in the teeth of the laughter of Guvutu and of the competition of men like Morgan and Raff, she had gone into the adventure and brought it through to success.

"You make me feel like a big man who has robbed a small child of a lolly," he said with sudden contrition.

"And the small child is crying for it." She looked at him, and he noted that her lip was slightly trembling and that her eyes were moist. It was the boy all over, he thought; the boy crying for the wee bit boat with which to play. And yet it was a woman, too. What a maze of contradiction she was! And he wondered, had she been all woman and no boy, if he would have loved her in just the same way. Then it rushed in upon his consciousness that he really loved her for what she was, for all the boy in her and all the rest of her--for the total of her that would have been a different total in direct proportion to any differing of the parts of her.

"But the small child won't cry any more for it," she was saying. "This is the last sob. Some day, if Kinross doesn't lose her, you'll turn her over to your partner, I know. And I won't nag you any more. Only I do hope you know how I feel. It isn't as if I'd merely bought the Martha, or merely built her. I saved her. I took her off the reef. I saved her from the grave of the sea when fifty-five pounds was considered a big risk. She is mine, peculiarly mine. Without me she wouldn't exist. That big nor'wester would have finished her the first three hours it blew. And then I've sailed her, too; and she is a witch, a perfect witch. Why, do you know, she'll steer by the wind with half a spoke, give and take. And going about! Well, you don't have to baby her, starting head-sheets, flattening mainsail, and gentling her with the wheel. Put your wheel down, and around she comes, like a colt with the bit in its teeth. And you can back her like a steamer. I did it at Langa-Langa, between that shoal patch and the shore-reef. It was wonderful.

"But you don't love boats like I do, and I know you think I'm making a fool of myself. But some day I'm going to sail the Martha again. I know it. I know it."

In reply, and quite without premeditation, his hand went out to hers, covering it as it lay on the railing. But he knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that it was the boy that returned the pressure he gave, the boy sorrowing over the lost toy. The thought chilled him. Never had he been actually nearer to her, and never had she been more convincingly remote. She was certainly not acutely aware that his hand was touching hers. In

her grief at the departure of the Martha it was, to her, anybody's hand--at the best, a friend's hand.

He withdrew his hand and walked perturbedly away.

"Why hasn't he got that big fisherman's staysail on her?" she demanded irritably. "It would make the old girl just walk along in this breeze. I know the sort old Kinross is. He's the skipper that lies three days under double-reefed topsails waiting for a gale that doesn't come. Safe? Oh, yes, he's safe--dangerously safe."

Sheldon retraced his steps.

"Never mind," he said. "You can go sailing on the Martha any time you please--recruiting on Malaita if you want to."

It was a great concession he was making, and he felt that he did it against his better judgment. Her reception of it was a surprise to him.

"With old Kinross in command?" she queried. "No, thank you. He'd drive me to suicide. I couldn't stand his handling of her. It would give me nervous prostration. I'll never step on the Martha again, unless it is to take charge of her. I'm a sailor, like my father, and he could never bear to see a vessel mishandled. Did you see the way Kinross got under way? It was disgraceful. And the noise he made about it! Old Noah did better with the Ark."

"But we manage to get somewhere just the same," he smiled.

"So did Noah."

"That was the main thing."

"For an antediluvian."

She took another lingering look at the Martha, then turned to Sheldon.

"You are a slovenly lot down here when it comes to boats--most of you are, any way. Christian Young is all right though, Munster has a slap-dash style about him, and they do say old Nielsen was a crackerjack. But with the rest I've seen, there's no dash, no go, no cleverness, no real sailor's pride. It's all humdrum, and podgy, and slow-going, any going so long as you get there heaven knows when. But some day I'll show you how the Martha should be handled. I'll break out anchor and get under way in a speed and style that will make your head hum; and I'll bring her alongside the wharf at Guvutu without dropping anchor and running a line."

She came to a breathless pause, and then broke into laughter, directed, he could see, against herself.

"Old Kinross is setting that fisherman's staysail," he remarked quietly.

"No!" she cried incredulously, swiftly looking, then running for the telescope.

She regarded the manoeuvre steadily through the glass, and Sheldon, watching her face, could see that the skipper was not making a success of it.

She finally lowered the glass with a groan.

"He's made a mess of it," she said, "and now he's trying it over again. And a man like that is put in charge of a fairy like the Martha! Well, it's a good argument against marriage, that's all. No, I won't look any more. Come on in and play a steady, conservative game of billiards with me. And after that I'm going to saddle up and go after pigeons. Will you come along?"

An hour later, just as they were riding out of the compound, Joan turned in the saddle for a last look at the Martha, a distant speck well over toward the Florida coast.

"Won't Tudor be surprised when he finds we own the Martha?" she laughed. "Think of it! If he doesn't strike pay-dirt he'll have to buy a steamer-passage to get away from the Solomons."

Still laughing gaily, she rode through the gate. But suddenly her

laughter broke flatly and she reined in the mare. Sheldon glanced at her sharply, and noted her face mottling, even as he looked, and turning orange and green.

"It's the fever," she said. "I'll have to turn back."

By the time they were in the compound she was shivering and shaking, and he had to help her from her horse.

"Funny, isn't it?" she said with chattering teeth. "Like seasickness--not serious, but horribly miserable while it lasts. I'm going to bed. Send Noa Noah and Viaburi to me. Tell Ornfiri to make hot water. I'll be out of my head in fifteen minutes. But I'll be all right by evening. Short and sharp is the way it takes me. Too bad to lose the shooting. Thank you, I'm all right."

Sheldon obeyed her instructions, rushed hot-water bottles along to her, and then sat on the veranda vainly trying to interest himself in a two-months-old file of Sydney newspapers. He kept glancing up and across the compound to the grass house. Yes, he decided, the contention of every white man in the islands was right; the Solomons was no place for a woman.

He clapped his hands, and Lalaperu came running.

"Here, you!" he ordered; "go along barracks, bring 'm black fella Mary,

plenty too much, altogether."

A few minutes later the dozen black women of Berande were ranged before him. He looked them over critically, finally selecting one that was young, comely as such creatures went, and whose body bore no signs of skin-disease.

"What name, you?" he demanded. "Sangui?"

"Me Mahua," was the answer.

"All right, you fella Mahua. You finish cook along boys. You stop along white Mary. All the time you stop along. You savvee?"

"Me savvee," she grunted, and obeyed his gesture to go to the grass house immediately.

"What name?" he asked Viaburi, who had just come out of the grass house.

"Big fella sick," was the answer. "White fella Mary talk 'm too much allee time. Allee time talk 'm big fella schooner."

Sheldon nodded. He understood. It was the loss of the Martha that had brought on the fever. The fever would have come sooner or later, he knew; but her disappointment had precipitated it. He lighted a cigarette, and in the curling smoke of it caught visions of his English

mother, and wondered if she would understand how her son could love a woman who cried because she could not be skipper of a schooner in the cannibal isles.