

CHAPTER XX--A MAN-TALK

The most patient man in the world is prone to impatience in love--and Sheldon was in love. He called himself an ass a score of times a day, and strove to contain himself by directing his mind in other channels, but more than a score of times each day his thoughts roved back and dwelt on Joan. It was a pretty problem she presented, and he was continually debating with himself as to what was the best way to approach her.

He was not an adept at love-making. He had had but one experience in the gentle art (in which he had been more wooed than wooing), and the affair had profited him little. This was another affair, and he assured himself continually that it was a uniquely different and difficult affair. Not only was here a woman who was not bent on finding a husband, but it was a woman who wasn't a woman at all; who was genuinely appalled by the thought of a husband; who joyed in boys' games, and sentimentalized over such things as adventure; who was healthy and normal and wholesome, and who was so immature that a husband stood for nothing more than an encumbrance in her cherished scheme of existence.

But how to approach her? He divined the fanatical love of freedom in her, the deep-seated antipathy for restraint of any sort. No man could ever put his arm around her and win her. She would flutter away like a frightened bird. Approach by contact--that, he realized, was the one thing he must never do. His hand-clasp must be what it had always been,

the hand-clasp of hearty friendship and nothing more. Never by action must he advertise his feeling for her. Remained speech. But what speech? Appeal to her love? But she did not love him. Appeal to her brain? But it was apparently a boy's brain. All the deliciousness and fineness of a finely bred woman was hers; but, for all he could discern, her mental processes were sexless and boyish. And yet speech it must be, for a beginning had to be made somewhere, some time; her mind must be made accustomed to the idea, her thoughts turned upon the matter of marriage.

And so he rode overseeing about the plantation, with tightly drawn and puckered brows, puzzling over the problem, and steeling himself to the first attempt. A dozen ways he planned an intricate leading up to the first breaking of the ice, and each time some link in the chain snapped and the talk went off on unexpected and irrelevant lines. And then one morning, quite fortuitously, the opportunity came.

"My dearest wish is the success of Berande," Joan had just said, apropos of a discussion about the cheapening of freights on copra to market.

"Do you mind if I tell you the dearest wish of my heart?" he promptly returned. "I long for it. I dream about it. It is my dearest desire."

He paused and looked at her with intent significance; but it was plain to him that she thought there was nothing more at issue than mutual confidences about things in general.

"Yes, go ahead," she said, a trifle impatient at his delay.

"I love to think of the success of Berande," he said; "but that is secondary. It is subordinate to the dearest wish, which is that some day you will share Berande with me in a completer way than that of mere business partnership. It is for you, some day, when you are ready, to be my wife."

She started back from him as if she had been stung. Her face went white on the instant, not from maidenly embarrassment, but from the anger which he could see flaming in her eyes.

"This taking for granted!--this when I am ready!" she cried passionately. Then her voice swiftly became cold and steady, and she talked in the way he imagined she must have talked business with Morgan and Raff at Guvutu. "Listen to me, Mr. Sheldon. I like you very well, though you are slow and a muddler; but I want you to understand, once and for all, that I did not come to the Solomons to get married. That is an affliction I could have accumulated at home, without sailing ten thousand miles after it. I have my own way to make in the world, and I came to the Solomons to do it. Getting married is not making my way in the world. It may do for some women, but not for me, thank you. When I sit down to talk over the freight on copra, I don't care to have proposals of marriage sandwiched in. Besides--besides--"

Her voice broke for the moment, and when she went on there was a note of appeal in it that well-nigh convicted him to himself of being a brute.

"Don't you see?--it spoils everything; it makes the whole situation impossible . . . and . . . and I so loved our partnership, and was proud of it. Don't you see?--I can't go on being your partner if you make love to me. And I was so happy."

Tears of disappointment were in her eyes, and she caught a swift sob in her throat.

"I warned you," he said gravely. "Such unusual situations between men and women cannot endure. I told you so at the beginning."

"Oh, yes; it is quite clear to me what you did." She was angry again, and the feminine appeal had disappeared. "You were very discreet in your warning. You took good care to warn me against every other man in the Solomons except yourself."

It was a blow in the face to Sheldon. He smarted with the truth of it, and at the same time he smarted with what he was convinced was the injustice of it. A gleam of triumph that flickered in her eye because of the hit she had made decided him.

"It is not so one-sided as you seem to think it is," he began. "I was doing very nicely on Berande before you came. At least I was not

suffering indignities, such as being accused of cowardly conduct, as you have just accused me. Remember--please remember, I did not invite you to Berande. Nor did I invite you to stay on at Berande. It was by staying that you brought about this--to you--unpleasant situation. By staying you made yourself a temptation, and now you would blame me for it. I did not want you to stay. I wasn't in love with you then. I wanted you to go to Sydney; to go back to Hawaii. But you insisted on staying. You virtually--"

He paused for a softer word than the one that had risen to his lips, and she took it away from him.

"Forced myself on you--that's what you meant to say," she cried, the flags of battle painting her cheeks. "Go ahead. Don't mind my feelings."

"All right; I won't," he said decisively, realizing that the discussion was in danger of becoming a vituperative, schoolboy argument. "You have insisted on being considered as a man. Consistency would demand that you talk like a man, and like a man listen to man-talk. And listen you shall. It is not your fault that this unpleasantness has arisen. I do not blame you for anything; remember that. And for the same reason you should not blame me for anything."

He noticed her bosom heaving as she sat with clenched hands, and it was all he could do to conquer the desire to flash his arms out and around

her instead of going on with his coolly planned campaign. As it was, he nearly told her that she was a most adorable boy. But he checked all such wayward fancies, and held himself rigidly down to his disquisition.

"You can't help being yourself. You can't help being a very desirable creature so far as I am concerned. You have made me want you. You didn't intend to; you didn't try to. You were so made, that is all. And I was so made that I was ripe to want you. But I can't help being myself. I can't by an effort of will cease from wanting you, any more than you by an effort of will can make yourself undesirable to me."

"Oh, this desire! this want! want! want!" she broke in rebelliously. "I am not quite a fool. I understand some things. And the whole thing is so foolish and absurd--and uncomfortable. I wish I could get away from it. I really think it would be a good idea for me to marry Noa Noah, or Adamu Adam, or Lalaperu there, or any black boy. Then I could give him orders, and keep him penned away from me; and men like you would leave me alone, and not talk marriage and 'I want, I want.'"

Sheldon laughed in spite of himself, and far from any genuine impulse to laugh.

"You are positively soulless," he said savagely.

"Because I've a soul that doesn't yearn for a man for master?" she took up the gage. "Very well, then. I am soulless, and what are you going to

do about it?"

"I am going to ask you why you look like a woman? Why have you the form of a woman? the lips of a woman? the wonderful hair of a woman? And I am going to answer: because you are a woman--though the woman in you is asleep--and that some day the woman will wake up."

"Heaven forbid!" she cried, in such sudden and genuine dismay as to make him laugh, and to bring a smile to her own lips against herself.

"I've got some more to say to you," Sheldon pursued. "I did try to protect you from every other man in the Solomons, and from yourself as well. As for me, I didn't dream that danger lay in that quarter. So I failed to protect you from myself. I failed to protect you at all. You went your own wilful way, just as though I didn't exist--wrecking schooners, recruiting on Malaita, and sailing schooners; one lone, unprotected girl in the company of some of the worst scoundrels in the Solomons. Fowler! and Brahms! and Curtis! And such is the perverseness of human nature--I am frank, you see--I love you for that too. I love you for all of you, just as you are."

She made a moue of distaste and raised a hand protestingly.

"Don't," he said. "You have no right to recoil from the mention of my love for you. Remember this is a man-talk. From the point of view of the talk, you are a man. The woman in you is only incidental,

accidental, and irrelevant. You've got to listen to the bald statement of fact, strange though it is, that I love you."

"And now I won't bother you any more about love. We'll go on the same as before. You are better off and safer on Berande, in spite of the fact that I love you, than anywhere else in the Solomons. But I want you, as a final item of man-talk, to remember, from time to time, that I love you, and that it will be the dearest day of my life when you consent to marry me. I want you to think of it sometimes. You can't help but think of it sometimes. And now we won't talk about it any more. As between men, there's my hand."

He held out his hand. She hesitated, then gripped it heartily, and smiled through her tears.

"I wish--" she faltered, "I wish, instead of that black Mary, you'd given me somebody to swear for me."

And with this enigmatic utterance she turned away.