

CHAPTER XXI--CONTRABAND

Sheldon did not mention the subject again, nor did his conduct change from what it had always been. There was nothing of the pining lover, nor of the lover at all, in his demeanour. Nor was there any awkwardness between them. They were as frank and friendly in their relations as ever. He had wondered if his belligerent love declaration might have aroused some womanly self-consciousness in Joan, but he looked in vain for any sign of it. She appeared as unchanged as he; and while he knew that he hid his real feelings, he was firm in his belief that she hid nothing. And yet the germ he had implanted must be at work; he was confident of that, though he was without confidence as to the result. There was no forecasting this strange girl's processes. She might awaken, it was true; and on the other hand, and with equal chance, he might be the wrong man for her, and his declaration of love might only more firmly set her in her views on single blessedness.

While he devoted more and more of his time to the plantation itself, she took over the house and its multitudinous affairs; and she took hold firmly, in sailor fashion, revolutionizing the system and discipline. The labour situation on Berande was improving. The Martha had carried away fifty of the blacks whose time was up, and they had been among the worst on the plantation--five-year men recruited by Billy Be-blowed, men who had gone through the old days of terrorism when the original owners of Berande had been driven away. The new recruits, being broken in under

the new regime, gave better promise. Joan had joined with Sheldon from the start in the programme that they must be gripped with the strong hand, and at the same time be treated with absolute justice, if they were to escape being contaminated by the older boys that still remained.

"I think it would be a good idea to put all the gangs at work close to the house this afternoon," she announced one day at breakfast. "I've cleaned up the house, and you ought to clean up the barracks. There is too much stealing going on."

"A good idea," Sheldon agreed. "Their boxes should be searched. I've just missed a couple of shirts, and my best toothbrush is gone."

"And two boxes of my cartridges," she added, "to say nothing of handkerchiefs, towels, sheets, and my best pair of slippers. But what they want with your toothbrush is more than I can imagine. They'll be stealing the billiard balls next."

"One did disappear a few weeks before you came," Sheldon laughed. "We'll search the boxes this afternoon."

And a busy afternoon it was. Joan and Sheldon, both armed, went through the barracks, house by house, the boss-boys assisting, and half a dozen messengers, in relay, shouting along the line the names of the boys wanted. Each boy brought the key to his particular box, and was permitted to look on while the contents were overhauled by the boss-boys.

A wealth of loot was recovered. There were fully a dozen cane-knives--big hacking weapons with razor-edges, capable of decapitating a man at a stroke. Towels, sheets, shirts, and slippers, along with toothbrushes, wisp-brooms, soap, the missing billiard ball, and all the lost and forgotten trifles of many months, came to light. But most astonishing was the quantity of ammunition-cartridges for Lee-Metfords, for Winchesters and Marlins, for revolvers from thirty-two calibre to forty-five, shot-gun cartridges, Joan's two boxes of thirty-eight, cartridges of prodigious bore for the ancient Sniders of Malaita, flasks of black powder, sticks of dynamite, yards of fuse, and boxes of detonators. But the great find was in the house occupied by Gogoomy and five Port Adams recruits. The fact that the boxes yielded nothing excited Sheldon's suspicions, and he gave orders to dig up the earthen floor. Wrapped in matting, well oiled, free from rust, and brand new, two Winchesters were first unearthed. Sheldon did not recognize them. They had not come from Berande; neither had the forty flasks of black powder found under the corner-post of the house; and while he could not be sure, he could remember no loss of eight boxes of detonators. A big Colt's revolver he recognized as Hughie Drummond's; while Joan identified a thirty-two Ivor and Johnson as a loss reported by Matapuu the first week he landed at Berande. The absence of any cartridges made Sheldon persist in the digging up of the floor, and a fifty-pound flour tin was his reward. With glowering eyes Gogoomy looked on while Sheldon took from the tin a hundred rounds each for the two Winchesters and fully as many rounds more of nondescript cartridges of all sorts and makes and calibres.

The contraband and stolen property was piled in assorted heaps on the back veranda of the bungalow. A few paces from the bottom of the steps were grouped the forty-odd culprits, with behind them, in solid array, the several hundred blacks of the plantation. At the head of the steps Joan and Sheldon were seated, while on the steps stood the gang-bosses. One by one the culprits were called up and examined. Nothing definite could be extracted from them. They lied transparently, but persistently, and when caught in one lie explained it away with half a dozen others. One boy complacently announced that he had found eleven sticks of dynamite on the beach. Matapuu's revolver, found in the box of one Kapu, was explained away by that boy as having been given to him by Lervumie. Lervumie, called forth to testify, said he had got it from Noni; Noni had got it from Sulefatoi; Sulefatoi from Choka; Choka from Ngava; and Ngava completed the circle by stating that it had been given to him by Kapu. Kapu, thus doubly damned, calmly gave full details of how it had been given to him by Lervumie; and Lervumie, with equal wealth of detail, told how he had received it from Noni; and from Noni to Sulefatoi it went on around the circle again.

Divers articles were traced indubitably to the house-boys, each of whom steadfastly proclaimed his own innocence and cast doubts on his fellows. The boy with the billiard ball said that he had never seen it in his life before, and hazarded the suggestion that it had got into his box through some mysterious and occultly evil agency. So far as he was concerned it might have dropped down from heaven for all he knew how it got there. To

the cooks and boats'-crews of every vessel that had dropped anchor off Berande in the past several years were ascribed the arrival of scores of the stolen articles and of the major portion of the ammunition. There was no tracing the truth in any of it, though it was without doubt that the unidentified weapons and unfamiliar cartridges had come ashore off visiting craft.

"Look at it," Sheldon said to Joan. "We've been sleeping over a volcano. They ought to be whipped--"

"No whip me," Gogoomy cried out from below. "Father belong me big fella chief. Me whip, too much trouble along you, close up, my word."

"What name you fella Gogoomy!" Sheldon shouted. "I knock seven bells out of you. Here, you Kwaque, put 'm irons along that fella Gogoomy."

Kwaque, a strapping gang-boss, plucked Gogoomy from out of his following, and, helped by the other gang-bosses; twisted his arms behind him and snapped on the heavy handcuffs.

"Me finish along you, close up, you die altogether," Gogoomy, with wrath-distorted face, threatened the boss-boy.

"Please, no whipping," Joan said in a low voice. "If whipping is necessary, send them to Tulagi and let the Government do it. Give them their choice between a fine or an official whipping."

Sheldon nodded and stood up, facing the blacks.

"Manonmie!" he called.

Manonmie stood forth and waited.

"You fella boy bad fella too much," Sheldon charged. "You steal 'm plenty. You steal 'm one fella towel, one fella cane-knife, two-ten fella cartridge. My word, plenty bad fella steal 'm you. Me cross along you too much. S'pose you like 'm, me take 'm one fella pound along you in big book. S'pose you no like 'm me take 'm one fella pound, then me send you fella along Tulagi catch 'm one strong fella government whipping. Plenty New Georgia boys, plenty Ysabel boys stop along jail along Tulagi. Them fella no like Malaita boys little bit. My word, they give 'm you strong fella whipping. What you say?"

"You take 'm one fella pound along me," was the answer.

And Manonmie, patently relieved, stepped back, while Sheldon entered the fine in the plantation labour journal.

Boy after boy, he called the offenders out and gave them their choice; and, boy by boy, each one elected to pay the fine imposed. Some fines were as low as several shillings; while in the more serious cases, such as thefts of guns and ammunition, the fines were correspondingly heavy.

Gogoomy and his five tribesmen were fined three pounds each, and at Gogoomy's guttural command they refused to pay.

"S'pose you go along Tulagi," Sheldon warned him, "you catch 'm strong fella whipping and you stop along jail three fella year. Mr. Burnett, he look 'm along Winchester, look 'm along cartridge, look 'm along revolver, look 'm along black powder, look 'm along dynamite--my word, he cross too much, he give you three fella year along jail. S'pose you no like 'm pay three fella pound you stop along jail. Savvee?"

Gogoomy wavered.

"It's true--that's what Burnett would give them," Sheldon said in an aside to Joan.

"You take 'm three fella pound along me," Gogoomy muttered, at the same time scowling his hatred at Sheldon, and transferring half the scowl to Joan and Kwaque. "Me finish along you, you catch 'm big fella trouble, my word. Father belong me big fella chief along Port Adams."

"That will do," Sheldon warned him. "You shut mouth belong you."

"Me no fright," the son of a chief retorted, by his insolence increasing his stature in the eyes of his fellows.

"Lock him up for to-night," Sheldon said to Kwaque. "Sun he come up put 'm that fella and five fella belong him along grass-cutting. Savvee?"

Kwaque grinned.

"Me savvee," he said. "Cut 'm grass, ngari-ngari {4} stop 'm along grass. My word!"

"There will be trouble with Gogoomy yet," Sheldon said to Joan, as the boss-boys marshalled their gangs and led them away to their work. "Keep an eye on him. Be careful when you are riding alone on the plantation. The loss of those Winchesters and all that ammunition has hit him harder than your cuffing did. He is dead-ripe for mischief."