

CHAPTER XXV--THE HEAD-HUNTERS

The morning's action had been settled the night before. Tudor was to stay behind in his banyan refuge and gather strength while the expedition proceeded. On the far chance that they might rescue even one solitary survivor of Tudor's party, Joan was fixed in her determination to push on; and neither Sheldon nor Tudor could persuade her to remain quietly at the banyan tree while Sheldon went on and searched. With Tudor, Adamu Adam and Arahua were to stop as guards, the latter Tahitian being selected to remain because of a bad foot which had been brought about by stepping on one of the thorns concealed by the bushmen. It was evidently a slow poison, and not too strong, that the bushmen used, for the wounded Poonga-Poonga man was still alive, and though his swollen shoulder was enormous, the inflammation had already begun to go down. He, too, remained with Tudor.

Binu Charley led the way, by proxy, however, for, by means of the poisoned spear, he drove the captive bushman ahead. The run-way still ran through the dank and rotten jungle, and they knew no villages would be encountered till rising ground was gained. They plodded on, panting and sweating in the humid, stagnant air. They were immersed in a sea of wanton, prodigal vegetation. All about them the huge-rooted trees blocked their footing, while coiled and knotted climbers, of the girth of a man's arm, were thrown from lofty branch to lofty branch, or hung in tangled masses like so many monstrous snakes. Lush-stalked plants,

larger-leaved than the body of a man, exuded a sweaty moisture from all their surfaces. Here and there, banyan trees, like rocky islands, shouldered aside the streaming riot of vegetation between their crowded columns, showing portals and passages wherein all daylight was lost and only midnight gloom remained. Tree-ferns and mosses and a myriad other parasitic forms jostled with gay-coloured fungoid growths for room to live, and the very atmosphere itself seemed to afford clinging space to airy fairy creepers, light and delicate as gem-dust, tremulous with microscopic blooms. Pale-golden and vermilion orchids flaunted their unhealthy blossoms in the golden, dripping sunshine that filtered through the matted roof. It was the mysterious, evil forest, a charnel house of silence, wherein naught moved save strange tiny birds--the strangeness of them making the mystery more profound, for they flitted on noiseless wings, emitting neither song nor chirp, and they were mottled with morbid colours, having all the seeming of orchids, flying blossoms of sickness and decay.

He was caught by surprise, fifteen feet in the air above the path, in the forks of a many-branched tree. All saw him as he dropped like a shadow, naked as on his natal morn, landing springily on his bent knees, and like a shadow leaping along the run-way. It was hard for them to realize that it was a man, for he seemed a weird jungle spirit, a goblin of the forest. Only Binu Charley was not perturbed. He flung his poisoned spear over the head of the captive at the flitting form. It was a mighty cast, well intended, but the shadow, leaping, received the spear harmlessly between the legs, and, tripping upon it, was flung sprawling.

Before he could get away, Binu Charley was upon him, clutching him by his snow-white hair. He was only a young man, and a dandy at that, his face blackened with charcoal, his hair whitened with wood-ashes, with the freshly severed tail of a wild pig thrust through his perforated nose, and two more thrust through his ears. His only other ornament was a necklace of human finger-bones. At sight of their other prisoner he chattered in a high querulous falsetto, with puckered brows and troubled, wild-animal eyes. He was disposed of along the middle of the line, one of the Poonga-Poonga men leading him at the end of a length of bark-rope.

The trail began to rise out of the jungle, dipping at times into festering hollows of unwholesome vegetation, but rising more and more over swelling, unseen hill-slopes or climbing steep hog-backs and rocky hummocks where the forest thinned and blue patches of sky appeared overhead.

"Close up he stop," Binu Charley warned them in a whisper.

Even as he spoke, from high overhead came the deep resonant boom of a village drum. But the beat was slow, there was no panic in the sound. They were directly beneath the village, and they could hear the crowing of roosters, two women's voices raised in brief dispute, and, once, the crying of a child. The run-way now became a deeply worn path, rising so steeply that several times the party paused for breath. The path never widened, and in places the feet and the rains of generations had scoured it till it was sunken twenty feet beneath the surface.

"One man with a rifle could hold it against a thousand," Sheldon whispered to Joan. "And twenty men could hold it with spears and arrows."

They came out on the village, situated on a small, upland plateau, grass-covered, and with only occasional trees. There was a wild chorus of warning cries from the women, who scurried out of the grass houses, and like frightened quail dived over the opposite edge of the clearing, gathering up their babies and children as they ran. At the same time spears and arrows began to fall among the invaders. At Sheldon's command, the Tahitians and Poonga-Poonga men got into action with their rifles. The spears and arrows ceased, the last bushman disappeared, and the fight was over almost as soon as it had begun. On their own side no one had been hurt, while half a dozen bushmen had been killed. These alone remained, the wounded having been carried off. The Tahitians and Poonga-Poonga men had warmed up and were for pursuit, but this Sheldon would not permit. To his pleased surprise, Joan backed him up in the decision; for, glancing at her once during the firing, he had seen her white face, like a glittering sword in its fighting intensity, the nostrils dilated, the eyes bright and steady and shining.

"Poor brutes," she said. "They act only according to their natures. To eat their kind and take heads is good morality for them."

"But they should be taught not to take white men's heads," Sheldon

argued.

She nodded approval, and said, "If we find one head we'll burn the village. Hey, you, Charley! What fella place head he stop?"

"S'pose he stop along devil-devil house," was the answer. "That big fella house, he devil-devil."

It was the largest house in the village, ambitiously ornamented with fancy-plaited mats and king-posts carved into obscene and monstrous forms half-human and half-animal. Into it they went, in the obscure light stumbling across the sleeping-logs of the village bachelors and knocking their heads against strings of weird votive-offerings, dried and shrivelled, that hung from the roof-beams. On either side were rude gods, some grotesquely carved, others no more than shapeless logs swathed in rotten and indescribably filthy matting. The air was mouldy and heavy with decay, while strings of fish-tails and of half-cleaned dog and crocodile skulls did not add to the wholesomeness of the place.

In the centre, crouched before a slow-smoking fire, in the littered ashes of a thousand fires, was an old man who blinked apathetically at the invaders. He was extremely old--so old that his withered skin hung about him in loose folds and did not look like skin. His hands were bony claws, his emaciated face a sheer death's-head. His task, it seemed, was to tend the fire, and while he blinked at them he added to it a handful of dead and mouldy wood. And hung in the smoke they found the object of

their search. Joan turned and stumbled out hastily, deathly sick, reeling into the sunshine and clutching at the air for support.

"See if all are there," she called back faintly, and tottered aimlessly on for a few steps, breathing the air in great draughts and trying to forget the sight she had seen.

Upon Sheldon fell the unpleasant task of tallying the heads. They were all there, nine of them, white men's heads, the faces of which he had been familiar with when their owners had camped in Berande compound and set up the poling-boats. Binu Charley, hugely interested, lent a hand, turning the heads around for identification, noting the hatchet-strokes, and remarking the distorted expressions. The Poonga-Poonga men gloated as usual, and as usual the Tahitians were shocked and angry, several of them cursing and muttering in undertones. So angry was Matapuu, that he strode suddenly over to the fire-tender and kicked him in the ribs, whereupon the old savage emitted an appalling squeal, pig-like in its wild-animal fear, and fell face downward in the ashes and lay quivering in momentary expectation of death.

Other heads, thoroughly sun-dried and smoke-cured, were found in abundance, but, with two exceptions, they were the heads of blacks. So this was the manner of hunting that went on in the dark and evil forest, Sheldon thought, as he regarded them. The atmosphere of the place was sickening, yet he could not forbear to pause before one of Binu Charley's finds.

"Me savvee black Mary, me savvee white Mary," quoth Binu Charley. "Me no savvee that fella Mary. What name belong him?"

Sheldon looked. Ancient and withered, blackened by many years of the smoke of the devil-devil house, nevertheless the shrunken, mummy-like face was unmistakably Chinese. How it had come there was the mystery. It was a woman's head, and he had never heard of a Chinese woman in the history of the Solomons. From the ears hung two-inch-long ear-rings, and at Sheldon's direction the Binu man rubbed away the accretions of smoke and dirt, and from under his fingers appeared the polished green of jade, the sheen of pearl, and the warm red of Oriental gold. The other head, equally ancient, was a white man's, as the heavy blond moustache, twisted and askew on the shrivelled upper lip, gave sufficient advertisement; and Sheldon wondered what forgotten beche-de-mer fisherman or sandalwood trader had gone to furnish that ghastly trophy.

Telling Binu Charley to remove the ear-rings, and directing the Poonga-Poonga men to carry out the old fire-tender, Sheldon cleared the devil-devil house and set fire to it. Soon every house was blazing merrily, while the ancient fire-tender sat upright in the sunshine blinking at the destruction of his village. From the heights above, where were evidently other villages, came the booming of drums and a wild blowing of war-conchs; but Sheldon had dared all he cared to with his small following. Besides, his mission was accomplished. Every member of Tudor's expedition was accounted for; and it was a long, dark way out of

the head-hunters' country. Releasing their two prisoners, who leaped away like startled deer, they plunged down the steep path into the steaming jungle.

Joan, still shocked by what she had seen, walked on in front of Sheldon, subdued and silent. At the end of half an hour she turned to him with a wan smile and said,--

"I don't think I care to visit the head-hunters any more. It's adventure, I know; but there is such a thing as having too much of a good thing. Riding around the plantation will henceforth be good enough for me, or perhaps salving another Martha; but the bushmen of Guadalcanar need never worry for fear that I shall visit them again. I shall have nightmares for months to come, I know I shall. Ugh!--the horrid beasts!"

That night found them back in camp with Tudor, who, while improved, would still have to be carried down on a stretcher. The swelling of the Poonga-Poonga man's shoulder was going down slowly, but Arahua still limped on his thorn-poisoned foot.

Two days later they rejoined the boats at Carli; and at high noon of the third day, travelling with the current and shooting the rapids, the expedition arrived at Berande. Joan, with a sigh, unbuckled her revolver-belt and hung it on the nail in the living-room, while Sheldon, who had been lurking about for the sheer joy of seeing her perform that particular home-coming act, sighed, too, with satisfaction. But the home-

coming was not all joy to him, for Joan set about nursing Tudor, and spent much time on the veranda where he lay in the hammock under the mosquito-netting.