

CHAPTER XXVI--BURNING DAYLIGHT

The ten days of Tudor's convalescence that followed were peaceful days on Berande. The work of the plantation went on like clock-work. With the crushing of the premature outbreak of Gogoomy and his following, all insubordination seemed to have vanished. Twenty more of the old-time boys, their term of service up, were carried away by the Martha, and the fresh stock of labour, treated fairly, was proving of excellent quality. As Sheldon rode about the plantation, acknowledging to himself the comfort and convenience of a horse and wondering why he had not thought of getting one himself, he pondered the various improvements for which Joan was responsible--the splendid Poonga-Poonga recruits; the fruits and vegetables; the Martha herself, snatched from the sea for a song and earning money hand over fist despite old Kinross's slow and safe method of running her; and Berande, once more financially secure, approaching each day nearer the dividend-paying time, and growing each day as the black toilers cleared the bush, cut the cane-grass, and planted more cocoanut palms.

In these and a thousand ways Sheldon was made aware of how much he was indebted for material prosperity to Joan--to the slender, level-browed girl with romance shining out of her gray eyes and adventure shouting from the long-barrelled Colt's on her hip, who had landed on the beach that piping gale, along with her stalwart Tahitian crew, and who had entered his bungalow to hang with boy's hands her revolver-belt and Baden-

Powell hat on the nail by the billiard table. He forgot all the early exasperations, remembering only her charms and sweetnesses and glorying much in the traits he at first had disliked most--her boyishness and adventurousness, her delight to swim and risk the sharks, her desire to go recruiting, her love of the sea and ships, her sharp authoritative words when she launched the whale-boat and, with firestick in one hand and dynamite-stick in the other, departed with her picturesque crew to shoot fish in the Balesuna; her super-innocent disdain for the commonest conventions, her juvenile joy in argument, her fluttering, wild-bird love of freedom and mad passion for independence. All this he now loved, and he no longer desired to tame and hold her, though the paradox was the winning of her without the taming and the holding.

There were times when he was dizzy with thought of her and love of her, when he would stop his horse and with closed eyes picture her as he had seen her that first day, in the stern-sheets of the whale-boat, dashing madly in to shore and marching belligerently along his veranda to remark that it was pretty hospitality this letting strangers sink or swim in his front yard. And as he opened his eyes and urged his horse onward, he would ponder for the ten thousandth time how possibly he was ever to hold her when she was so wild and bird-like that she was bound to flutter out and away from under his hand.

It was patent to Sheldon that Tudor had become interested in Joan. That convalescent visitor practically lived on the veranda, though, while preposterously weak and shaky in the legs, he had for some time insisted

on coming in to join them at the table at meals. The first warning Sheldon had of the other's growing interest in the girl was when Tudor eased down and finally ceased pricking him with his habitual sharpness of quip and speech. This cessation of verbal sparring was like the breaking off of diplomatic relations between countries at the beginning of war, and, once Sheldon's suspicions were aroused, he was not long in finding other confirmations. Tudor too obviously joyed in Joan's presence, too obviously laid himself out to amuse and fascinate her with his own glorious and adventurous personality. Often, after his morning ride over the plantation, or coming in from the store or from inspection of the copra-drying, Sheldon found the pair of them together on the veranda, Joan listening, intent and excited, and Tudor deep in some recital of personal adventure at the ends of the earth.

Sheldon noticed, too, the way Tudor looked at her and followed her about with his eyes, and in those eyes he noted a certain hungry look, and on the face a certain wistful expression; and he wondered if on his own face he carried a similar involuntary advertisement. He was sure of several things: first, that Tudor was not the right man for Joan and could not possibly make her permanently happy; next, that Joan was too sensible a girl really to fall in love with a man of such superficial stamp; and, finally, that Tudor would blunder his love-making somehow. And at the same time, with true lover's anxiety, Sheldon feared that the other might somehow fail to blunder, and win the girl with purely fortuitous and successful meretricious show. But of the one thing Sheldon was sure: Tudor had no intimate knowledge of her and was unaware of how vital in

her was her wildness and love of independence. That was where he would blunder--in the catching and the holding of her. And then, in spite of all his certitude, Sheldon could not forbear wondering if his theories of Joan might not be wrong, and if Tudor was not going the right way about after all.

The situation was very unsatisfactory and perplexing. Sheldon played the difficult part of waiting and looking on, while his rival devoted himself energetically to reaching out and grasping at the fluttering prize. Then, again, Tudor had such an irritating way about him. It had become quite elusive and intangible, now that he had tacitly severed diplomatic relations; but Sheldon sensed what he deemed a growing antagonism and promptly magnified it through the jealous lenses of his own lover's eyes. The other was an interloper. He did not belong to Berande, and now that he was well and strong again it was time for him to go. Instead of which, and despite the calling in of the mail steamer bound for Sydney, Tudor had settled himself down comfortably, resumed swimming, went dynamiting fish with Joan, spent hours with her hunting pigeons, trapping crocodiles, and at target practice with rifle and revolver.

But there were certain traditions of hospitality that prevented Sheldon from breathing a hint that it was time for his guest to take himself off. And in similar fashion, feeling that it was not playing the game, he fought down the temptation to warn Joan. Had he known anything, not too serious, to Tudor's detriment, he would have been unable to utter it; but the worst of it was that he knew nothing at all against the man. That

was the confounded part of it, and sometimes he was so baffled and overwrought by his feelings that he assumed a super-judicial calm and assured himself that his dislike of Tudor was a matter of unsubstantial prejudice and jealousy.

Outwardly, he maintained a calm and smiling aspect. The work of the plantation went on. The Martha and the Flibberty-Gibbet came and went, as did all the miscellany of coasting craft that dropped in to wait for a breeze and have a gossip, a drink or two, and a game of billiards. Satan kept the compound free of niggers. Boucher came down regularly in his whale-boat to pass Sunday. Twice a day, at breakfast and dinner, Joan and Sheldon and Tudor met amicably at table, and the evenings were as amicably spent on the veranda.

And then it happened. Tudor made his blunder. Never divining Joan's fluttering wildness, her blind hatred of restraint and compulsion, her abhorrence of mastery by another, and mistaking the warmth and enthusiasm in her eyes (aroused by his latest tale) for something tender and acquiescent, he drew her to him, laid a forcible detaining arm about her waist, and misapprehended her frantic revolt for an exhibition of maidenly reluctance. It occurred on the veranda, after breakfast, and Sheldon, within, pondering a Sydney wholesaler's catalogue and making up his orders for next steamer-day, heard the sharp exclamation of Joan, followed by the equally sharp impact of an open hand against a cheek. Jerking free from the arm that was all distasteful compulsion, Joan had slapped Tudor's face resoundingly and with far more vim and weight than

when she had cuffed Gogoomy.

Sheldon had half-started up, then controlled himself and sunk back in his chair, so that by the time Joan entered the door his composure was recovered. Her right forearm was clutched tightly in her left hand, while the white cheeks, centred with the spots of flaming red, reminded him of the time he had first seen her angry.

"He hurt my arm," she blurted out, in reply to his look of inquiry.

He smiled involuntarily. It was so like her, so like the boy she was, to come running to complain of the physical hurt which had been done her. She was certainly not a woman versed in the ways of man and in the ways of handling man. The resounding slap she had given Tudor seemed still echoing in Sheldon's ears, and as he looked at the girl before him crying out that her arm was hurt, his smile grew broader.

It was the smile that did it, convicting Joan in her own eyes of the silliness of her cry and sending over her face the most amazing blush he had ever seen. Throat, cheeks, and forehead flamed with the rush of the shamed blood.

"He--he--" she attempted to vindicate her deeper indignation, then whirled abruptly away and passed out the rear door and down the steps.

Sheldon sat and mused. He was a trifle angry, and the more he dwelt upon

the happening the angrier he grew. If it had been any woman except Joan it would have been amusing. But Joan was the last woman in the world to attempt to kiss forcibly. The thing smacked of the back stairs anyway--a sordid little comedy perhaps, but to have tried it on Joan was nothing less than sacrilege. The man should have had better sense. Then, too, Sheldon was personally aggrieved. He had been filched of something that he felt was almost his, and his lover's jealousy was rampant at thought of this forced familiarity.

It was while in this mood that the screen door banged loudly behind the heels of Tudor, who strode into the room and paused before him. Sheldon was unprepared, though it was very apparent that the other was furious.

"Well?" Tudor demanded defiantly.

And on the instant speech rushed to Sheldon's lips.

"I hope you won't attempt anything like it again, that's all--except that I shall be only too happy any time to extend to you the courtesy of my whale-boat. It will land you in Tulagi in a few hours."

"As if that would settle it," was the retort.

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

"Then it is because you don't wish to understand."

"Still I don't understand," Sheldon said in steady, level tones. "All that is clear to me is that you are exaggerating your own blunder into something serious."

Tudor grinned maliciously and replied,--

"It would seem that you are doing the exaggerating, inviting me to leave in your whale-boat. It is telling me that Berande is not big enough for the pair of us. Now let me tell you that the Solomon Islands is not big enough for the pair of us. This thing's got to be settled between us, and it may as well be settled right here and now."

"I can understand your fire-eating manners as being natural to you," Sheldon went on wearily, "but why you should try them on me is what I can't comprehend. You surely don't want to quarrel with me."

"I certainly do."

"But what in heaven's name for?"

Tudor surveyed him with withering disgust.

"You haven't the soul of a louse. I suppose any man could make love to your wife--"

"But I have no wife," Sheldon interrupted.

"Then you ought to have. The situation is outrageous. You might at least marry her, as I am honourably willing to do."

For the first time Sheldon's rising anger boiled over.

"You--" he began violently, then abruptly caught control of himself and went on soothingly, "you'd better take a drink and think it over. That's my advice to you. Of course, when you do get cool, after talking to me in this fashion you won't want to stay on any longer, so while you're getting that drink I'll call the boat's-crew and launch a boat. You'll be in Tulagi by eight this evening."

He turned toward the door, as if to put his words into execution, but the other caught him by the shoulder and twirled him around.

"Look here, Sheldon, I told you the Solomons were too small for the pair of us, and I meant it."

"Is that an offer to buy Berande, lock, stock, and barrel?" Sheldon queried.

"No, it isn't. It's an invitation to fight."

"But what the devil do you want to fight with me for?" Sheldon's

irritation was growing at the other's persistence. "I've no quarrel with you. And what quarrel can you have with me? I have never interfered with you. You were my guest. Miss Lackland is my partner. If you saw fit to make love to her, and somehow failed to succeed, why should you want to fight with me? This is the twentieth century, my dear fellow, and duelling went out of fashion before you and I were born."

"You began the row," Tudor doggedly asserted. "You gave me to understand that it was time for me to go. You fired me out of your house, in short. And then you have the cheek to want to know why I am starting the row. It won't do, I tell you. You started it, and I am going to see it through."

Sheldon smiled tolerantly and proceeded to light a cigarette. But Tudor was not to be turned aside.

"You started this row," he urged.

"There isn't any row. It takes two to make a row, and I, for one, refuse to have anything to do with such tomfoolery."

"You started it, I say, and I'll tell you why you started it."

"I fancy you've been drinking," Sheldon interposed. "It's the only explanation I can find for your unreasonableness."

"And I'll tell you why you started it. It wasn't silliness on your part

to exaggerate this little trifle of love-making into something serious. I was poaching on your preserves, and you wanted to get rid of me. It was all very nice and snug here, you and the girl, until I came along. And now you're jealous--that's it, jealousy--and want me out of it. But I won't go."

"Then stay on by all means. I won't quarrel with you about it. Make yourself comfortable. Stay for a year, if you wish."

"She's not your wife," Tudor continued, as though the other had not spoken. "A fellow has the right to make love to her unless she's your--well, perhaps it was an error after all, due to ignorance, perfectly excusable, on my part. I might have seen it with half an eye if I'd listened to the gossip on the beach. All Guvutu and Tulagi were laughing about it. I was a fool, and I certainly made the mistake of taking the situation on its assumed innocent face-value."

So angry was Sheldon becoming that the face and form of the other seemed to vibrate and oscillate before his eyes. Yet outwardly Sheldon was calm and apparently weary of the discussion.

"Please keep her out of the conversation," he said.

"But why should I?" was the demand. "The pair of you trapped me into making a fool of myself. How was I to know that everything was not all right? You and she acted as if everything were on the square. But my

eyes are open now. Why, she played the outraged wife to perfection, slapped the transgressor and fled to you. Pretty good proof of what all the beach has been saying. Partners, eh?--a business partnership? Gammon my eye, that's what it is."

Then it was that Sheldon struck out, coolly and deliberately, with all the strength of his arm, and Tudor, caught on the jaw, fell sideways, crumpling as he did so and crushing a chair to kindling wood beneath the weight of his falling body. He pulled himself slowly to his feet, but did not offer to rush.

"Now will you fight?" Tudor said grimly.

Sheldon laughed, and for the first time with true spontaneity. The intrinsic ridiculousness of the situation was too much for his sense of humour. He made as if to repeat the blow, but Tudor, white of face, with arms hanging resistlessly at his sides, offered no defence.

"I don't mean a fight with fists," he said slowly. "I mean to a finish, to the death. You're a good shot with revolver and rifle. So am I. That's the way we'll settle it."

"You have gone clean mad. You are a lunatic."

"No, I'm not," Tudor retorted. "I'm a man in love. And once again I ask you to go outside and settle it, with any weapons you choose."

Sheldon regarded him for the first time with genuine seriousness, wondering what strange maggots could be gnawing in his brain to drive him to such unusual conduct.

"But men don't act this way in real life," Sheldon remarked.

"You'll find I'm pretty real before you're done with me. I'm going to kill you to-day."

"Bosh and nonsense, man." This time Sheldon had lost his temper over the superficial aspects of the situation. "Bosh and nonsense, that's all it is. Men don't fight duels in the twentieth century. It's--it's antediluvian, I tell you."

"Speaking of Joan--"

"Please keep her name out of it," Sheldon warned him.

"I will, if you'll fight."

Sheldon threw up his arms despairingly.

"Speaking of Joan--"

"Look out," Sheldon warned again.

"Oh, go ahead, knock me down. But that won't close my mouth. You can knock me down all day, but as fast as I get to my feet I'll speak of Joan again. Now will you fight?"

"Listen to me, Tudor," Sheldon began, with an effort at decisiveness. "I am not used to taking from men a tithe of what I've already taken from you."

"You'll take a lot more before the day's out," was the answer. "I tell you, you simply must fight. I'll give you a fair chance to kill me, but I'll kill you before the day's out. This isn't civilization. It's the Solomon Islands, and a pretty primitive proposition for all that. King Edward and law and order are represented by the Commissioner at Tulagi and an occasional visiting gunboat. And two men and one woman is an equally primitive proposition. We'll settle it in the good old primitive way."

As Sheldon looked at him the thought came to his mind that after all there might be something in the other's wild adventures over the earth. It required a man of that calibre, a man capable of obtruding a duel into orderly twentieth century life, to find such wild adventures.

"There's only one way to stop me," Tudor went on. "I can't insult you directly, I know. You are too easy-going, or cowardly, or both, for that. But I can narrate for you the talk of the beach--ah, that grinds

you, doesn't it? I can tell you what the beach has to say about you and this young girl running a plantation under a business partnership."

"Stop!" Sheldon cried, for the other was beginning to vibrate and oscillate before his eyes. "You want a duel. I'll give it to you." Then his common-sense and dislike for the ridiculous asserted themselves, and he added, "But it's absurd, impossible."

"Joan and David--partners, eh? Joan and David--partners," Tudor began to iterate and reiterate in a malicious and scornful chant.

"For heaven's sake keep quiet, and I'll let you have your way," Sheldon cried. "I never saw a fool so bent on his folly. What kind of a duel shall it be? There are no seconds. What weapons shall we use?"

Immediately Tudor's monkey-like impishness left him, and he was once more the cool, self-possessed man of the world.

"I've often thought that the ideal duel should be somewhat different from the conventional one," he said. "I've fought several of that sort, you know--"

"French ones," Sheldon interrupted.

"Call them that. But speaking of this ideal duel, here it is. No seconds, of course, and no onlookers. The two principals alone are

necessary. They may use any weapons they please, from revolvers and rifles to machine guns and pompoms. They start a mile apart, and advance on each other, taking advantage of cover, retreating, circling, feinting--anything and everything permissible. In short, the principals shall hunt each other--"

"Like a couple of wild Indians?"

"Precisely," cried Tudor, delighted. "You've got the idea. And Berande is just the place, and this is just the right time. Miss Lackland will be taking her siesta, and she'll think we are. We've got two hours for it before she wakes. So hurry up and come on. You start out from the Balesuna and I start from the Berande. Those two rivers are the boundaries of the plantation, aren't they? Very well. The field of the duel will be the plantation. Neither principal must go outside its boundaries. Are you satisfied?"

"Quite. But have you any objections if I leave some orders?"

"Not at all," Tudor acquiesced, the pink of courtesy now that his wish had been granted.

Sheldon clapped his hands, and the running house-boy hurried away to bring back Adamu Adam and Noa Noah.

"Listen," Sheldon said to them. "This man and me, we have one big fight

to-day. Maybe he die. Maybe I die. If he die, all right. If I die, you two look after Missie Lackalanna. You take rifles, and you look after her daytime and night-time. If she want to talk with Mr. Tudor, all right. If she not want to talk, you make him keep away. Savvee?"

They grunted and nodded. They had had much to do with white men, and had learned never to question the strange ways of the strange breed. If these two saw fit to go out and kill each other, that was their business and not the business of the islanders, who took orders from them. They stepped to the gun-rack, and each picked a rifle.

"Better all Tahitian men have rifles," suggested Adamu Adam. "Maybe big trouble come."

"All right, you take them," Sheldon answered, busy with issuing the ammunition.

They went to the door and down the steps, carrying the eight rifles to their quarters. Tudor, with cartridge-belts for rifle and pistol strapped around him, rifle in hand, stood impatiently waiting.

"Come on, hurry up; we're burning daylight," he urged, as Sheldon searched after extra clips for his automatic pistol.

Together they passed down the steps and out of the compound to the beach, where they turned their backs to each other, and each proceeded toward

his destination, their rifles in the hollows of their arms, Tudor walking toward the Berande and Sheldon toward the Balesuna.