Adventure

A Romance of The South Seas

BY

JACK LONDON

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(Chapter III, Continued.)

So they fought their way back up the beach. The other blacks caught hold of the man-horse and pulled and tugged. There were among them those whose fondest desire was to drag the rider in the sand and spring upon him and mash him into repulsive nothingness. But the automatic pistol in his belt, with its rattling, quick dealing death, and the automatic, death defying spirit in the man himself made them refrain and buckle down to the task of hauling him to safety through the storm.

Wet through and exhausted, he was nevertheless surprised at the ease with which he got into a change of clothing. Though he was fearfully weak, he found himself actually feeling better. The disease had spent itself, and the mend had begun.

"Now, if I don't get the fever," he said aloud and at the same moment resolved to go to taking quinine as soon as he was strong enough to dare.

He crawled out on the veranda. The rain had ceased, but the wind, which had dwindled to a half gale, was increasing. A big sea had sprung up, and the mile long breakers, curling up to the overfall 200 yards from the shore, were crashing on the beach. The Jessie was plunging madly to two anchors, and every second or third sea broke clear over her bow. Two flags were stiffly undulating from the halyards like squares of flexible sheet iron. One was blue, the other red. He knew their meaning in the Berande private code: "What are your instructions? Shall I attempt to land boat?" Tacked on the wall between the signal locker and the billiard rules was the code itself, by which he verified the signal before making answer. On the flagstaff gaff a boy hoisted a white flag over a red, which stood for, "Run to Neal island for shelter."

That Captain Oleson had been expecting this signal was apparent by the celerity with which the shackles were knocked out of both anchor chains. He slipped his anchors, leaving them buoyed to be picked up in better weather. The Jessie swung off under her full staysail; then the foresail, double reefed, was run up. She was away like a race horse, clearing Balesuna shoal with half a cable length to spare. Just before she rounded the point she was swallowed up in a terrific squall that far outblew the first.

All that night, while squall after squall smote Berande, uprooting trees, overthrowing copra sheds and rocking the house on its tall piles, Sheldon slept. He was unaware of the commotion. He never wakened, nor did he change his position or dream. He awoke a new man. Furthermore, he was hungry. It was over a week since food had passed his lips. He drank a glass of condensed cream thinned with water, and by 10 o'clock he dared to take a cup of beef tea. He was cheered also by the situation in the hospital. Despite the storm there had been but one death, and there was only one fresh case, while half a dozen boys crawled weakly away to the barracks. He wondered if it was the wind that was blowing the disease away and cleansing the pestilential land.

By eleven a messenger arrived from Balesuna village, dispatched by Seelee. The Jessie had gone ashore midway between the village and Neal island. It was not till nightfall that two of the crew arrived, reporting the drowning of Captain Oleson and of the one remaining boy. As for the Jessie, from what they told him, Sheldon could not but conclude that she was a total loss. Further to hearten him he was taken by a shivering fit. In half an hour he was burning up. And he knew that at least another day must pass before he could undertake even the smallest dose of quinine. He crawled under a heap of blankets and a little later found himself laughing aloud. He had surely reached the limit of disaster. Barring earthquake or tidal wave, the worst had already befallen him. The Flibberty-Gibbet was certainly safe in Mboli pass. Since nothing worse could happen things simply had to mend. So it was, shivering under his blankets, that he laughed until the house boys, with heads together, marveled at the devils that were in him.

CHAPTER IV.

JOAN LACKLAND.

By the second day of the northwester Sheldon was in collapse from his fever. It had taken an unfair advantage of his weak state, and, though it was only ordinary malarial fever, in forty-eight hours it had run him as low as ten days of fever would have done when he was in condition. But the dysentery had been swept away from Berande. A score of convalescents lingered in the hospital, but they were improving hourly. There had been but one more death—that of the man whose brother had wailed over him instead of brushing the flies away.

On the morning of the fourth day of his fever Sheldon lay on the veranda, gazing dimly out over the raging ocean. The wind was falling, but a mighty sea was still thundering in on Berande beach, the flying spray reaching in as far as the flagstaff mounds, the foaming wash creaming against the gateposts. He had taken thirty grains of quinine, and the drug was buzzing in his ears like a nest of hornets, making his hands and knees tremble and causing a sickening palpitation of the stomach. Once, opening his eyes, he saw what he took to be a hallucination. Not far out and coming in across the Jessie's anchorage he saw a whaleboat's nose thrust skyward on a smoky crest and disappear naturally, as an actual whaleboat's nose should disappear, as it slid down the back of the sea. He knew that no whaleboat should be out there, and he was quite certain no men in the Solomons were mad enough to be abroad in such a storm.

But the hallucination persisted. A minute later, chancing to open his eyes, he saw the whaleboat, full length, and saw right into it as it rose on the face of a wave. He saw six sweeps at work, and in the stern, clearly outlined against the overhanging wall of white, a man who stood erect, gigantic, swaying with his weight on the steering sweep. This he saw, and an eighth man who crouched in the bow and gazed shoreward. But what startled Sheldon was the sight of a woman in the sternsheets between the stroke oar and the steersman. A woman she was, for a braid of her hair was flying, and she was just in the act of recapturing it and stowing it away beneath a hat that for all the world was like his own "Baden-Powell."

The boat disappeared behind the wave and rose into view on the face of the following one. Again he looked into it. The men were dark skinned and larger than Solomon islanders, but the woman, he could plainly see, was white. Who she was and what she was doing there were thoughts that drifted vaguely through his consciousness. He was too sick to be vitally interested, and, besides, he had a half feeling that it was all a dream.

"Good boatmen," was Sheldon's verdict, as he saw the boat leap forward on the face of a huge breaker, the sweeps flying swiftly to keep her on that front of the moving mountain of water that raced madly for the shore.

It was well done. Part full of water, the boat was flung upon the beach, the men springing out and dragging its nose to the gate posts. Sheldon had called vainly to the house boys, who, at the moment, were dosing the remaining patients in the hospital. He knew he was unable to rise up and go down the path to meet the newcomers, so he lay back in the steamer chair and watched for ages while they cared for the boat. The woman stood to one side, her hand resting on the gate. Occasional surges of sea water washed over her feet, which he could see were incased in rubber sea boots. She scrutinized the house sharply, and for some time she gazed at him steadily. At last, speaking to two of the men, who turned and followed her, she started up the path.

Sheldon attempted to rise, got half up out of his chair and fell back helplessly. He was surprised at the size of the men, who loomed like giants behind her. Both were six footers, and they were heavy in proportion. He had never seen islanders like them. They were not black, like the Solomon islanders, but light brown, and their features were larger, more regular and even handsome.

The woman—or girl, rather, he decided—walked along the veranda toward him. The two men waited at the head of the steps watching curiously. The girl was angry. He could see that. Her gray eyes were flashing and her lips were quivering. That she had a temper was his thought. But the eyes were striking. He decided that they were not gray after all, or, at least, not all gray. They were large and wide apart and they looked at him from under level brows. Her face was cameolike, so clear cut was it. There were other striking things about her—the cowboy Stetson hat, the heavy braids of brown hair and the long barreled 38 Colt's revolver that hung in its holster on her hip.

"Pretty hospitality, I must say," was her greeting, "letting strangers sink or swim in your front yard."

"I—I beg your pardon," he stammered, by a supreme effort dragging himself to his feet.

His legs wabbled under him, and with a suffocating sensation he began sinking to the floor. He was aware of a feeble gratification as he saw solicitude leap into her eyes; then blackness smote him, and at the moment of smiting him his thought was that at last and for the first time in his life he had fainted.

The ringing of the big bell aroused him. He opened his eyes and found that he was on the couch indoors. A glance at the clock told him that it was 6, and from the direction the sun's rays streamed into the room he knew that it was morning. At first he puzzled over something untoward he was sure had happened. Then, on the wall, he saw a Stetson hat hanging and beneath it a full cartridge belt and a long barrelled 38 Colt's revolver.

The slender girth of the belt told its feminine story, and he remembered the whaleboat of the day before and the gray eyes that flashed beneath the level brows. She, it must have been, who had just rung the bell. The cares of the plantation rushed upon him, and he sat up in bed, clutching at the wall for support as the mosquito screen lurched dizzily around him. He was still sitting there, holding on, with eyes closed, striving to master his giddiness, when he heard her voice.

"You'll lie right down again, sir," she said.

It was sharply imperative, a voice used to command. At the same time one hand pressed him back toward the pillow while the other caught him from behind and eased him down.

"You've been unconscious for twenty-four hours now," she went on, "and I have taken charge. When I say the word you'll get up, and not until then. Now, what medicine do you take—quinine? Here are ten grains. That's right. You'll make a good patient."

"My dear madam," he began.

"You mustn't speak," she interrupted, "that is, in protest. Otherwise you can talk."

"But the plantation—"

"A dead man is of no use on a plantation. Don't you want to know about me? My vanity is hurt. Here am I, just through my first shipwreck, and here are you, not the least bit curious, talking about your miserable plantation. Can't you see that I am just bursting to tell somebody, anybody, about my shipwreck?"

He smiled. It was the first time in weeks. And he smiled, not so much at what she said, as at the way she said it—the whimsical expression on her face, the laughter in her eyes, and the several tiny lines of humor that drew in at the corners. He was curiously wondering as to what her age was, as he said aloud:

"Yes, tell me, please."

"That I will not—not now," she retorted, with a toss of the head. "I'll find somebody to tell my story to who does not have to be asked. Also, I want information. I managed to find out what time to ring the bell to turn the hands to. And that is about all. I don't understand the ridiculous speech of your people. What time do they knock off?"

"At 11—go on again at 1."

"That will do, thank you. And now, where do you keep the key to the provisions? I want to feed my men."

"Your men!" he gasped. "On tinned goods! No, no. Let them go out and eat with my boys."

Her eyes flashed as on the day before, and he saw again the imperative expression on her face.

"That I won't. My men are men. I've been out to your miserable barracks and watched them eat. Faugh! Potatoes! Nothing but potatoes. No salt. Nothing. Only potatoes. I may have been mistaken, but I thought I understood them to say that that was all they ever got to eat. Two meals a day and every day in the week.

He nodded.

"Well, my men wouldn't stand for that a single day, much less a whole week. Where is the key?"

"Hanging on that clothes hook under the clock."

He gave in easily enough, but as she was reaching down the key she heard him say:

"Fancy niggers and tinned provisions."

This time she really was angry. The blood was in her cheeks as she turned on him.

"My men are not niggers. The sooner you understand that the better for our acquaintance. As for the tinned goods, I'll pay for all they eat. Please don't worry about that. Worry is not good for you in your condition. And I won't stay any longer than I have to—just long enough to get you on your feet and not go away with the feeling of having deserted a white man."

"You're American, aren't you?" he asked quietly.

The question disconcerted her for the moment.

"Yes," she vouchsafed, with a defiant look. "Why?"

"Nothing. I merely thought so."

"Anything further?"

He shook his head.

"Why?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing. I thought you might have something pleasant to say."

"My name is Sheldon, David Sheldon," he said, with direct relevance, holding out a thin hand.

Her hand started out impulsively, then checked.

"My name is Lackland, Joan Lackland." The hand went out. "And let us be friends."

"It could not be otherwise"— he began lamely.

"And I can feed my men all the tinned goods I want?" she rushed on.

"Till the cows come home," he answered, attempting her own lightness, then adding, "that is, to Berande. You see we don't have any cows at Berande."

She fixed him coldly with her eyes.

"Is that a joke?" she demanded.

"I really don't know—I—I thought it was, but then, you see, I'm sick."

"You're English, aren't you?" was her next query.

"Now that's too much, even for a sick man," he cried. "You know well enough that I am."

"Oh," she said absently. "Then you are?"

He frowned, tightened his lips, then burst into laughter, in which she joined.

"It's my own fault," he confessed. "I shouldn't have baited you. I'll be careful in the future."

"In the meantime go on laughing and I'll see about breakfast. Is there anything you would fancy?"

He shook his head.

"It will do you good to eat something. Your fever has burned out and you are merely weak. Wait a moment."

She hurried out of the room in the direction of the kitchen, tripped at the door in a pair of sandals several times too large for her feet and disappeared in rosy confusion.

"By Jove, those are my sandals," he thought to himself. "The girl hasn't a thing to wear except what she landed on the beach in and she certainly landed in sea boots."

CHAPTER V.

SHE WOULD A PLANTER BE.

Sheldon mended rapidly. The fever had burned out, and there was nothing for him to do but gather strength. Joan had taken the cook in hand, and for the first time, as Sheldon remarked, the chop at Berande was white man's chop. With her own hands Joan prepared the sick man's food, and between that and the cheer she brought him he was able after two days to totter feebly out upon the veranda. The situation struck him as strange, and stranger still was the fact that it did not seem strange to the girl at all. She had settled down and taken charge of the household as a matter of course as if he were her father or brother or as if she were a man like himself.

"It is just too delightful for anything," she assured him. "It is like a page out of some romance. Here I come along out of the sea and find a sick man all alone with 200 slaves"—

"Recruits," he corrected. "Contract laborers. They serve only three years, and they are free agents when they enter upon their contracts."

"Yes, yes," she hurried on; "a sick man alone with 200 recruits on a cannibal island—they are cannibals, aren't they? Or is it all talk?"

"Talk!" he said, with a smile. "It's a trifle more than that. Most of my boys are from the bush, and every bushman is a cannibal."

"But not after they become recruits? Surely the boys you have here would not be guilty."

"They'd eat you if the chance afforded."

"Are you just saying so, on theory, or do you really know?" she asked.

"I know."

"Why? What makes you think so? Your own men here?"

"Yes, my own men here, the very house boys, the cook that at the present moment is making such delicious rolls, thanks to you. Not more than three months ago eleven of them sneaked a whaleboat and ran for Malaita. Nine of them belonged to Malaita. Two were bushmen from San Cristoval. They were, fools, the two from San Cristoval, I mean; so would any two Malaita men be who trusted themselves in a boat with nine from San Cristoval."

"Yes?" she asked eagerly. "Then what happened?"

"The nine Malaita men ate the two from San Cristoval, all except the heads, which are too valuable for mere eating. They stowed them away in the stern locker until they landed. And those two heads are now in some bush village back of Langa Langa."

She clapped her hands and her eyes sparkled.

"They are really and truly cannibals. And just think, this is the twentieth century! And I thought romance and adventure were fossilized!"

He looked at her with mild amusement.

"What is the matter now?" she queried.

"Oh, nothing, only I don't fancy being eaten by a lot of filthy niggers is the least bit romantic."

"No, of course not," she admitted. "But to be among them, controlling them, directing them, 200 of them, and to escape being eaten by them—that, at least, if it isn't romantic, is certainly the quintessence of adventure. And adventure and romance are allied, you know."

"By the same token, to go into a nigger's stomach should be the quintessence of adventure," he retorted.

"I don't think you have any romance in you," she exclaimed. "You're just dull and somber and sordid, like the business men at home. I don't know why you're here at all. You should be at home placidly vegetating as a banker's clerk or—or"—

"A shopkeeper's assistant, thank you."

"Yes, that—anything. What under the sun are you doing here on the edge of things?"

"Earning my bread and butter, trying to get on in the world."

"'By the bitter road the youngest son must tread ere he win to hearth and saddle of his own,'" she quoted. "Why, if that isn't romantic, then nothing is romantic. Think of all the younger sons out over the world, on a myraid of adventures, winning to those same hearths and saddles. And here you are in the thick of it, doing it, and here am I in the thick of it, doing it."

"I—I beg pardon," he drawled.

"Well, I'm a younger daughter, then," she amended; "and I have no hearth nor saddle. I haven't anybody or anything—and I'm just as far on the edge of things as you are."

"In your case, then, I'll admit there is a bit of romance," he confessed.

He could not help but think of the preceding nights and of her sleeping in the hammock on the veranda under mosquito curtains, her bodyguard of Tahitian sailors stretched out at the far corner of the veranda within call. He had been too helpless to resist, but now he resolved she should have his couch inside while he would take the hammock.

"You see, I had read and dreamed about romance all my life," she was saying, "but I never in my wildest fancies thought that I should live it. It was all so unexpected. Two years ago I thought there was nothing left to me but"— She faltered and made a moue of distaste. "Well, the only thing that remained, it seemed to me, was marriage."

"And you preferred a cannibal isle and a cartridge belt?" he suggested.

"I didn't think of the cannibal isle, but the cartridge belt was blissful."

"You wouldn't dare use the revolver if you were compelled to. Or," noting

AGAIN AND AGAIN SHE FIRED.

the glint in her eyes, "if you did use it to—well, to hit anything."

She started up suddenly to enter the house. He knew she was going for her revolver.

"Never mind," he said, "here's mine. What can you do with it?"

"Shoot the block off your flag halyards."

He smiled his unbelief.

"I don't know the gun," she said dubiously.

"It's a light trigger and you don't have to hold down. Draw fine."

"Yes, yes," she spoke impatiently. "I know automatics—they jam when they get hot—only I don't know yours." She looked at it a moment. "It's cocked. Is there a cartridge in the chamber?"

She fired, and the block remained intact.

"It's a long shot," he said, with the intention of easing her chagrin.

But she bit her lip and fired again. The bullet emitted a sharp shriek as it ricochetted into space. The metal block rattled back and forth. Again and again she fired, till the clip was emptied of its eight cartridges. Six of them were hits. The block still swayed at the gaff end, but it was battered out of all usefulness. Sheldon was astonished. It was better than he or even Hughie Drummond could have done.

"That's really good shooting—for a woman," he said. "You only missed it twice, and it was a strange weapon."

"But I can't make out the two misses," she complained. "The gun worked beautifully too. Give me another clip and I'll hit it eight times for anything you wish."

"I don't doubt it. Now I'll have to get a new block. Viaburi! Here, you fella, catch one fella block along storeroom."

"I'll wager you can't do it eight out of eight—anything you wish," she challenged.

"No fear of my taking it on," was his answer. "Who taught you to shoot?"

"Oh, my father at first and then Von and his cowboys. He was a shot—dad, I mean, though Von was splendid too."

(To be Continued next Tuesday)

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