

Adventure



A Romance of The South Seas

BY
JACK LONDON

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CHAPTER IX.

BETWEEN A MAN AND A WOMAN.

It was Satan's inexhaustible energy and good spirits that most impressed them. His teeth seemed perpetually to ache with desire, and in lieu of black legs he husked the peanuts that fell from the trees in the compound, kept the enclosure clear of intruding hens, and made a hostile acquaintance with every boss boy who came to report.

Christian Young called away in the morn, carrying an invitation (that would be delivered nobody knew when) Tommy Jones to drop in at Berande next time he was passing.

"What are your plans when you get to Sydney?" Sheldon asked that night.

"First I've heard that I'm going to Sydney," Joan retorted. "I suppose I've received information, by bush telegraph, that that third assistant unstrapper and ex-sailorman at Tulagi is going to deport me as an undesirable immigrant."

"Oh, no, nothing of the sort, I assure you," Sheldon began with awkward care, fearful of having offended, though he knew not how. "I was just wondering, that was all. You see, with the loss of the schooner and—and all that—rest—you understand—I was thinking that if—a-if—hang it all, until I could communicate with your friends, my agents at Sydney could advance you a loan, temporary you see, I'd be only too glad and all the while, you know. The proper—"

But his jaw dropped and he regarded her irritably and with apprehension. "What is the matter?" he demanded, with a show of heat. "What have I said now?"

"Certainly not the unexpected," she said quietly. "Merely ignored me in your ordinary, everyday, man god, superior fashion. Naturally it counted for nothing, my telling you that I had an idea of going to Sydney. Go to Sydney I must, because you, in your superior wisdom, have so decreed."

She paused and looked at him curiously, as though he were some strange kind of animal.

"Of course I am grateful for your offer of assistance; but even that is no offer to wounded pride. For that matter, it is no more than one white man should expect from another. Unprovoked mariners are always helped along their way. Only this particular mariner doesn't need any help. Furthermore, this mariner is not going to Sydney, thank you."

"But what do you intend to do?" "Find some spot where I shall escape the indignity of being patronized and bossed by the superior sex."

"Come now, that is putting it a bit too strongly," Sheldon laughed, but the strain in his voice destroyed the effect of spontaneity. "You know yourself how impossible the situation is."

"I know nothing of the sort, sir, and if it is impossible, well, haven't I achieved it?"

"But it cannot continue. Really?" "Oh, yes, it can. Having achieved what I can on achieving it. I intend to remain in the Solomons, but not on Berande. Tomorrow I am going to the whaleboat over to Paritula."

"I was talking with Captain Young about it. He says there are at least four hundred acres, and every sort of it good for planting. First, I'll buy the island; next, get forty or fifty recruits and start clearing and building; and at the same time I'll build up a bungalow; and then you'll be relieved of my embarrassing presence—now don't say that it isn't."

"It is embarrassing," he said bluntly. "You refuse to see my point of view, so there is no use in discussing it. Please forget all about it and consider me at your service concerning this project of yours. Suppose the government sells you Paritula at about an acre, clearing will cost you at least \$4 more—that is, \$5 for 400 acres, or, say, \$10,000. Have you that much?"

"No; I haven't quite \$8,000."

"Then here's another way of looking at it: You'll need, as you said, at least fifty boys. Not counting premiums, their wages are \$30 a year."

"I pay my Tahitians \$15 a month," he interpolated.

"They won't do on straight plantation work. But to return. The wages of fifty boys each year will come to \$750—that is, \$1,500. Very well. It will be seven years before your trees begin to bear. Seven times \$1,500 is \$10,500—more than you possess, and all eaten up by the boys' wages, with nothing to pay for bungalow, building, tools, mine, trips to Sydney and so forth."

Sheldon shook his head gravely. "You'll have to abandon the idea."

"But I won't go to Sydney," she said. "I simply won't. I'll buy in the extent of my money as a small farmer in some other plantation. Let me buy it in Berande?"

genuine dismay that she broke into hearty laughter.

"There, I won't tease you. Really, you know, I'm not accustomed to forcing my presence where it is not desired. Yet as you said yourself, it was impossible for me to go away, so I had to stay. You wouldn't let me go to Tulagi. You compelled me to force myself upon you. But I won't buy in as partner with any one. I'll buy Paritula, but I'll put only ten boys on it and clear slowly. Also, I'll invest in some old ketch and take out a trading license. For that matter, I'll go recruiting on Malaita."

She looked for protest and found it in Sheldon's clenched hand and in every line of his clean cut face.

"Go ahead and say it," she challenged. "Please don't mind me. I'm—I'm getting used to it, you know. Really I am."

"I wish I were a woman so as to tell you how preposterously insane and impossible it is," he blurted out.

"Better than that, you are a man. So there is nothing to prevent your telling me, for I demand to be considered as a man. I didn't come down here to trail my woman's skirts over the Solomons. Please forget that I am accidentally anything else than a man with a man's living to make."

"I have told you," he began stiffly, "that recruiting on Malaita is impossible for a woman and that is all I care to say—or dare."

"And I tell you, in turn, that it is nothing of the sort. I am a navigator, and that is more than your Solomons captains are. And I am a seaman—a better seaman than you, when it comes right down to it and you know it. I can shoot. I am not a fool. I can take care of myself."

Sheldon made a hopeless gesture. "That's right," she rattled on. "Wash your hands of me. But as Von used to say, 'You just watch my smoke!' I suppose you've been accustomed to Jane Eyres all your life. That's why you don't understand me. Come on, Satan; let's leave him to his old music."

He watched her morosely and without intention of speaking, till she saw her take a rifle from the stand, examine the magazine and start for the door.

"Where are you going?" he asked peremptorily.

"As between man and woman," she answered, "it would be too terribly—indecent for you to tell me why I shouldn't go alligating. Good night. Sleep well."

He shut off the phonograph with a snap, started toward the door after her, then abruptly flung himself into a chair.

"You're hoping a 'gator catches me, aren't you?" she called from the veranda, and as she went down the steps her rippling laughter drifted tantalizingly back through the wide doorway.

The next day Sheldon was left all alone. Joan had gone exploring Paritula and was not to be expected back until the late afternoon. The loss of the Jessie had hit Berande severely. Not alone was his capital depleted by the amount of her value, but her earnings were no longer to be reckoned on, and it was her earnings that largely paid the running expenses of the plantation.

"Poor old Huggle," he muttered aloud once. "I'm glad you didn't live to see it, old man. What a cropper, what a cropper."

Between squalls the Filiberty Gibbet ran into anchorage, and her skipper, Pete Oleson (brother to the Oleson of the Jessie), ancient, grizzled, wild-eyed, emaciated by fever, dragged his weary frame up the veranda steps and collapsed in a steamer chair. Whiskey and soda kept him going while he made report and turned in his accounts.

"You're rotten with fever," Sheldon said. "Why don't you run down to Sydney for a blow of decent climate?"

The old skipper shook his head. "I can't. I've been in the islands too long. I'd die. The fever comes out worse down there."

"Kill or cure," Sheldon counseled. "It's a straight kill for me. I tried it three years ago. The cool weather put me on my back before I landed. They carried me ashore and into hospital. I was unconscious one stretch for two weeks. After that the doctors sent me back to the islands—said it was the only thing that would save me. Well, I'm still alive. But I'm too soaked with fever. A month in Australia would finish me."

He declined to sleep ashore, took his orders, and went back on board the cutter. A lurid sunset was blotted out by the heaviest squall of the day, and Sheldon watched the whaleboat arrive in the thick of it. As the spirit sail was taken in and the boat headed on to the beach, he was aware of a distinct hurt at sight of Joan at the steering oar, standing erect and swaying her strength to it as she resisted the pressures that tended to throw the craft broadside in the surf. Her Tahitians

leaped out and rushed the boat high up the beach, and she led her bizarre following through the gate of the compound.

"Lovely, perfectly lovely—Paritula," she panted. "I shall buy it. I'll write to the commissioner tonight. And the site for the bungalow—I've selected it already—is wonderful. You must come over some day and advise me. You won't mind my staying here until I can get settled? Wasn't that squall beautiful? And I suppose I'm late for dinner. I'll run and get clean and be with you in a minute."

"Do you know, I'm never going to squabble with you again," he announced, when they were seated.

"Squabble!" was the retort. "It's such a sordid word. It sounds cheap and nasty. I think it's much nicer to quarrel."

"Call it what you please, but we won't do it any more, will we?" He cleared his throat nervously, for her eyes advertised the immediate beginning of hostilities. "I beg your pardon," he hurried on. "I should have spoken for myself. What I mean is that I refuse to quarrel. You have the most horrible way, without uttering a word, of making me play the fool. Why, I began with the kindest intentions, and here I am now!"

"Making nasty remarks," she completed for him.

"It's the way you have of catching me up," he complained.

"Why I never said a word. I was merely sitting here, being sweetly

lured on by promises of peace on earth and all the rest of it, when suddenly you begin to call me names."

"Hardly that, I am sure."

"Well, you said I was horrible, or that I had a horrible way about me, which is the same thing. I wish my bungalow were up. I'd move tomorrow."

But her twitching lips belied her words, and the next moment the man was more uncomfortable than ever, being made so by her laughter.

"I was only teasing you. Honest Injun. And if you don't laugh I'll suspect you of being in a temper with me. That's right, laugh. But don't—she added in alarm, "don't, if it hurts you. You look as though you had a toothache. There, there; don't say it. You know you promised not to quarrel, while I have the privilege of going on being as hateful as I please. And to begin with, there's the Filiberty Gibbet. I didn't know she was so large a cutter. But she's in disgraceful condition."

"Her skipper's bad with fever," Sheldon explained. "And he had to drop his mate off to take hold of things at Ugi—that's where I lost Oscar, my trader. And you know what sort of sailors the niggers are."

She nodded her head judiciously and he asked for a second helping of tinned beef, not because he was hungry, but because he wanted to watch her slim, firm fingers. They were brown with tan and looked exceedingly boyish. Then, and without effort, the concept came to him. Yes, that was it. He had stumbled upon the clew to her tantalizing personality. The fingers, sunburned and boyish, told the story. He had tried to treat with her as a woman when she was not a woman. She was a mere girl, and a boyish girl at that, with sunburned fingers that delighted in doing what boys' fingers did, with a body and muscles that liked swimming and violent endeavor of all sorts, with a mind that was daring but that dared no farther than boys' adventures and that delighted in rifles and revolvers. Stetson hats and a sexless camaraderie with men.

Somehow, as he pondered and watched her, it seemed as if he sat in church at home listening to the choir boys chanting. She reminded him of those boys, or their voices, rather. The same sexless quality was there. In the body of her she was a woman. In the mind of her she had not grown up. She had not been exposed to ripening influences of that sort. She had had no mother. Von, her father, native servants and rough island life had constituted her training. Horses and rifles had been her toys, camp and trail her nursery. From what she had told him her seminary days had been an exile, devoted to study and to ceaseless longing for the wild riding and swimming of Hawaii. A boy's training and a boy's point of view!

Well, there was only one thing for

him to do. He must—on his own basis of boyhood and not make the mistake of treating her as a woman. He wondered if he could love the woman she would be when her nature awoke, and he wondered if he could love her just as she was and himself wake her up. After all, whatever it was, she had come to fill quite a large place in his life, as he had discovered that afternoon while scanning the sea between the squalls. Then he remembered the accounts of Berande and the cropper that was coming and scowled.

CHAPTER X.

A MESSAGE FROM BOUCHER.

SHELDON became aware that she was speaking.

"I beg pardon," he said.

"What's that you were saying?"

"You weren't listening to a word. I knew it," she chided. "I was saying that the condition of the Filiberty Gibbet was disgraceful, and that tomorrow, when you've told the skipper and not hurt his feelings I am going to take my men out and give her an overhauling. We'll scrub her bottom too. Why, there's whiskers on her copper four inches long. I saw it when she rolled. Don't forget. I'm going cruising on the Filiberty some day, even if I have to run away with her."

While at their coffee on the veranda Satan raised a commotion in the compound near the beach gate, and Sheldon finally rescued a mauled and frightened black and dragged him on the porch for interrogation.

The black drew a scrap of newspaper from under his belt and passed it over. Sheldon scanned it hurriedly. "It's from Boucher," he explained. "The fellow who took Packard's place. Packard was the one I told you about who was killed by his boat's crew. He says that Port Adams crowd is out—fifty of them, in big canoes—and camping on his beach. They've killed half a dozen of his pigs already and seem to be looking for trouble. And he's afraid they may connect with the fifteen runaways from Lunga."

"In which case?" she queried.

"In which case Billy Pape will be compelled to send Boucher's successor. It's Pape's station, you know. I wish I knew what to do. I don't like to leave you here alone."

"Take me along, then."

He smiled and shook his head. "Then you'd better take my men along," she advised. "They're good shots, and they're not afraid of anything—except Utami, and he's afraid of ghosts."

The big bell was rung, and fifty black boys carried the whaleboat down to the water. The regular boat's crew manned her, and Matuare and three other Tahitians, belted with cartridges and armed with rifles, sat in the stern sheets, where Sheldon stood at the steering oar.

"My, I wish I could go with you," Joan said wistfully as the boat shoved off.

"I'm as good as a man," she urged.

"You really are needed here," he replied. "There's that Lunga crowd; they might reach the coast right here and, with both of us absent, rush the plantation. Goodbye. We'll get back in the morning some time. It's only twelve miles."

When Joan started to return to the house she was compelled to pass among the boat carriers, and one of them stepped up to her. In the darkness she could not make him out.

"What name?" she asked sharply.

"What name belong you?"

"Me Aron," he said.

She remembered him as one of the two sick boys she had nursed in the hospital. The other one had died.

"Me take 'm plenty fella medicine too much," Aron was saying.

"Well, and you all right now," she answered.

"Me want 'm tobacco, plenty fella tobacco; me want 'm coffee, me want 'm porpoise teeth; me want 'm one fella belt."

She looked at him humorously, expecting to see a smile, or at least a grin, on his face. The rest of the boys had crowded up at his back in a solid wall. Some one of them giggled, but the remainder regarded her in morose and silent silence.

"Well?" she asked. "What for you want plenty tea things?"

"Me take 'm medicine," quoth Aron. "You pay me."

"You go mong quarters," she said, starting to turn on her heel to enter the gate.

"You pay me," said the boy.

"Aron, you all the same one big fool. I no pay you. Now you go."

But the black was unmoved. She felt that he was regarding her almost insolently as he repeated:

"I take 'm medicine. You pay me. You pay me now."

Then it was that she lost her temper and cuffed his ears so soundly as to drive him back among his fellows. But they did not break up. Another boy stepped forward.

"Me Gogoomy," he said. "Bawo brother belong me."

Bawo, she remembered, was the sick boy who had died.

"Go on," she commanded.

"Bawo take 'm medicine. Bawo finish. Bawo my brother. You pay me. Father belong me one big fella chief along Port Adams. You pay me."

Joan laughed.

"Gogoomy, you just the same as Aron, one big fool. My word, who pay me for medicine?"

the gate and got him. It was a sweeping, broad handed slap, so heavy that he staggered sideways and nearly fell. He sprang for the gate as if to force it open, while the crowd surged forward against the fence. Joan thought rapidly. Her revolver was hanging on the wall of her grass house. Yet one cry would bring her sailors, and she knew she was safe. So she did not cry for help. Instead, she whistled for Satan, at the same time calling him by name. She knew he was shut up in the living room, but the blacks did not wait to see. They fled with wild yells through the darkness, followed reluctantly by Gogoomy, while she entered the bungalow, laughing at first, but finally vexed to the verge of tears by what had taken place. She had sat up a whole night with the boy who had died, and yet his brother demanded to be paid for his life.

"Ugh! The ungrateful beast!" she muttered, while she debated whether or not she would confess the incident to Sheldon.

"And so it was all settled easily enough," Sheldon was saying. He was on the veranda, drinking coffee. The whaleboat was being carried into its shed. "Boucher was a bit timid at first to carry off the situation with a strong hand, but he did very well once we got started. We made a play at holding a court, and Telepass, the old scoundrel, accepted the findings. He's a Port Adams chief, a filthy beggar. We fined him ten times the value of the pigs and made him move on with his mob. Oh, they're a sweet lot, I must say, at least sixty of them, in five big canoes, and out for trouble. They've got a dozen Sniders that ought to be confiscated."

"Why didn't you?" Joan asked.

"And have a row on my hands with the commissioner? He's terribly touchy about his black wards, as he calls them. Well, we started them along their way, though they went in on the beach to kai-kai several miles back. They ought to pass here some time today."

(To be Continued next Tuesday)

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