

Adventure



A Romance of The South Seas

BY JACK LONDON

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(CHAPTER XVI—Continued)

Coming into the compound from the rear, Sheldon saw everything at once—first, a glimpse at the sea, where the Martha floated huge alongside the cutter and the ketch which had rescued her; and next, the ground in front of the veranda steps, where a great crowd of fresh caught cannibals stood at attention. From the fact that each was attired in a new, snow white lava-lava, Sheldon knew that they were recruits. Part way up the steps one of them was just backing down into the crowd, while another, called out by name, was coming up. It was Joan's voice that had called him, and Sheldon reined in his horse and watched. She sat at the head of the steps, behind a table, between Munster and his white mate, the three of them checking long lists, Joan asking the questions and writing the answers in the big, red covered, Berande labor journal.

"What name?" she demanded of the black man on the steps.

"Tagari," came the answer, accompanied by a grin and a rolling of curl-



ONE OF THE HOUSE BOYS RAN HIM DOWN WITH THE NEWS.

ous eyes; for it was the first white man's house the black had ever seen. The black stepped down, and no other mounted to take his place. But Tagari just before he reached the bottom step caught sight of Sheldon. It was the first horse the fellow had ever seen, and he let out a frightened scream and dashed madly up the steps. At the same moment the great mass of blacks surged away panic-stricken from Sheldon's vicinity. The grinning house boys shouted encouragement and explanation, and the stampede was checked, the new caught head hunters huddling closely together and staring dubiously at the fearful monster.

"Hello!" Joan called out. "What do you mean by frightening all my boys? Come on up."

"What do you think of them?" she asked when they had shaken hands. "And what do you think of her?" with a wave of the hand toward the Martha. "I thought you'd deserted the plantation and that I might as well go ahead and get the men into barracks. Aren't they beauties? Do you see that one with the split nose? He's the only man who doesn't hail from the Poonga-Poonga coast, and they said the Poonga-Poonga natives wouldn't recruit. Just look at them and congratulate me. They're men, every last one of them. I have such a long story I don't know where to begin, and I won't begin anyway till we're through with this and until you have told me that you are not angry with me."

"Ogu, what place belong you?" she went on with her catechism.

But Ogu was a bushman, lacking knowledge of the almost universal beche de mer English, and half a dozen of his fellows wrangled to explain.

"There are only two or three more," Joan said to Sheldon, "and then we're done. But you haven't told me that you are not angry."

Sheldon looked into her clear eyes as she favored him with a direct, untroubled gaze that threatened, he knew from experience, to turn teasingly defiant on an instant's notice. And as he looked at her, it came to him that he had never half anticipated the gladness her return would bring to him.

"I was angry," he said deliberately. "I am still angry, very angry"—he noted the glint of defiance in her eyes

and thrilled—"but I forgave, and I now forgive all over again. Though I still insist"—

"That I should have a guardian," she interrupted. "But that day will never come. Thank goodness, I'm of legal age and able to transact business in my own right. And, speaking of business, how do you like my forcible American methods?"

"Mr Raff, from what I hear, doesn't take kindly to them," he temporized, "and you've certainly set the dry bones rattling for many a day. But what I want to know is, if other American women are as successful in business ventures?"

"Luck, most all luck," she disclaimed modestly, though her eyes lighted with sudden pleasure, and he knew her boy's vanity had been touched by his trifle of tempered praise.

"Luck be blowed!" broke out the long mate, Sparrowhawk, his face shining with admiration. "It was hard work, that's what it was. We earned our pay. She worked us till we dropped, and we were down with fever half the time. So was she, for that matter, only she wouldn't stay down, and she wouldn't let us stay down. My word, she's a slave driver. As the Lord lumme, the way she made love to old Kina-Kina!"

"He was older than Telepassé and dirtier," she assured Sheldon, "and I am sure much wickeder. Now I must run and wash up. Did the Sydney orders arrive?"

"Yours are in your quarters," Sheldon said. "Hurry, for breakfast is waiting. Let me have your hat and belt. Do, please, allow me. There's only one hook for them, and I know where it is."

She gave him a quick scrutiny that was almost womanlike, then sighed with relief as she unbuckled the heavy belt and passed it to him.

"I doubt if I ever want to see another revolver," she complained. "That one has worn a hole in me, I'm sure. I never dreamed I could get so weary of one."

Sheldon watched her to the foot of the steps, where she turned and called back:

"My, I can't tell you how good it is to be home again!"

"And Burnett said, 'Well, I'll be d—d! I beg your pardon, Miss Lackland, but you have wantonly broken the recruiting laws and you know it.' Captain Munster narrated as they sat over their whisky, waiting for Joan to come back. "And says she to him, 'Mr. Burnett, can you show me any law against taking the passengers off a vessel that's on a reef? What could Burnett do? He passed the whole hundred and fifty, though the Emily was only licensed for forty and the Filiberty Gibbet for thirty-five.'"

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

"This is the way she worked it. When the Martha was floated we had to beach her right away at the head of the bay, and whilst repairs were going on, a new rudder being made, sails bent, gear recovered from the riggers, and so forth, Miss Lackland borrows Sparrowhawk to run the Filiberty along with Curtis, lends me Brahm's to take Sparrowhawk's place and starts both craft off recruiting. My word, the niggers came easy, it was virgin ground. Since the Scottish Chiefs no recruiter had ever even tried to work the coast. When we filled up we came back to see how the Martha was progressing."

"And thinking we was going home with our recruits," Sparrowhawk slipped in. "Lord lumme, that Miss Lackland ain't never satisfied. 'I'll take 'em on the Martha,' says she, 'and you can go back and fill up again.'"

"But I told her it couldn't be done," Munster went on. "I told her the Martha hadn't a license for recruiting. 'Oh,' she said, 'it can't be done, eh?' and she stood and thought a few minutes."

"And I'd seen her think before," cried Sparrowhawk, "and I knew at wunst that the thing was as good as done."

Munster lighted his cigarette and resumed:

"You see that spit," she says to me, 'with the little ripple breaking around it? There's a current sets right across it and on it, and it will set you nicely aground. Then I'll rescue your recruits and sail away—simple, ain't it?'" says she. "Munster continued. "'You hang up one tide,' says she; 'the next is the big high water. Then you hedge off and go after more recruits. There's no law against recruiting when you're empty.' 'But there is against starving 'em,' I said. 'You know there ain't any kai-kai to speak of aboard of us and there ain't a crumb on the Martha.'"

"Don't let the kai-kai worry you, Captain Munster," says she. "If I can find grub for eighty-four mouths on the Martha, the two of you can do as much by your two vessels. Now go

ahead and get aground before a steady breeze comes up and spoils the maneuver. I'll send my boats the moment you strike."

"And we went and did it," Sparrowhawk said solemnly and then emitted a series of chuckling noises. "Miss Lackland transferred the recruits, and the trick was done."

CHAPTER XVII.

AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE.

"BUT where was she during the nor'wester?" Sheldon asked.

"At Langa-Langa. Ran up there as it was coming on and laid there the whole week and traded for grub with the niggers. When we got to Tulagi there she was waiting for us and scrapping with Burnett. I tell you, Mr. Sheldon, she's a wonder, that girl, a perfect wonder."

Munster refilled his glass, and while Sheldon glanced across at Joan's house, anxious for her coming, Sparrowhawk took up the tale.

"Gritty! She's the grittiest thing, man or woman, that ever blew into the Solomons. You should have seen Poonga-Poonga the morning we arrived—Sadders popping on the beach and in the mangroves, war drums booming in the bush and signal smokes raising everywhere. 'It's all up,' says Captain Munster. 'Up your granny,' she says to him. 'Sparrowhawk went on. "'Why, we haven't arrived yet, much less got started. Wait till the anchor's down before you get afraid.'"

"That's what she said to me," Munster proclaimed. "And of course it made me mad, so that I didn't care what happened. We tried to send a boat ashore for a powwow, but it was fired upon. 'What we want,' says Miss Lackland, 'is a hostage. I'm going ashore tonight to fetch Kina-Kina himself on board, and I'm not asking who's game to go with me, for I've got every man's word arranged for him. I'm taking my sailors with me and one white man.' 'Of course I'm that white man,' I said, for by that time I was mad. 'Of course you're not,' says she. 'You'll have charge of the covering boat. Curtis stands by the landing boat. Fowler goes with me. Brahm's takes charge of the Filiberty and Sparrowhawk of the Emily. And we start at 1 o'clock.'"

"My word, it was a tough job lying there in the covering boat. I never thought doing nothing could be such hard work. We stopped about fifty fathoms off and watched the other boat go in."

"Of course there was a row. It had to come, and I knew it, but it startled me just the same. I never heard such screeching and yelling in my life. The niggers must have just divined for the bush without looking to see what was up, while her Tahitians let loose, shooting in the air and yelling to hurry 'em on. And then I heard them coming through the mangroves and an ear strike on a gunwale and Miss Lackland laugh, and I knew everything was all right. We pulled on board without a shot being fired. And there was old Kina-Kina himself, being hoisted over the rail, shivering and chattering like an ape. The rest was easy. Kina-Kina's word was law, and he was scared to death. And we kept him on board issuing proclamations all the time we were in Poonga-Poonga."

"It was a good move, too, in other ways. She made Kina-Kina order his people to return all the gear they'd stripped from the Martha. She—here she comes now."

It was with a shock of surprise that Sheldon greeted her appearance. The ready-made clothes from Sydney had transformed her. A simple skirt and shift waist of some sort of wash goods set off her trim figure with a hint of elegant womanhood that was new to him. Brown slippers peeped out as she crossed the compound, and he once caught a glimpse to the ankle of brown openwork stockings. Somehow she had been made many times the woman by these mere extraneous trappings.

"I've opened up a new field," she said as she began pouring the coffee. "Old Kina-Kina will never forget me, I'm sure, and I can recruit there whenever I want. I saw Morgan at Guvutu. He's willing to contract for a thousand boys at 40 shillings per head. Did I tell you that I'd taken out a recruiting license for the Martha? I did, and the Martha can sign eighty boys every trip."

Sheldon smiled a trifle bitterly to himself. The wonderful woman who had tripped across the compound in her Sydney clothes was gone, and he was listening to the boy come back again.

"Well," Joan said, with a sigh. "I've shown you hustling American methods that succeed and get somewhere, and here you are beginning your muddling again."

Joan stood beside Sheldon and sighed as she watched the Martha beating out to sea, old Kinross, brought over from Savo, in command.

"My, but she is a witch! Look at her eating up the water, and there's no wind to speak of. Honestly, if I'd dreamed of the chance waiting for me at Guvutu when I bought her for less than \$300 I'd never have gone partners with you. And in that case I'd be sailing her right now."

The justice of her contention came abruptly home to Sheldon.

"You make me feel like a big man who has robbed a small child of a jolly," he said, with sudden contrition.

"And the small child is crying for it," she looked at him, and he noted that her lip was slightly trembling and that her eyes were moist.

"But the small child won't cry any more for it," she was saying. "This is the last sob. But some day I'm going to sail the Martha again. I know it. I know it."

In reply, and quite without premeditation, his hand went out to hers, covering it as it lay on the railing. But he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that it was the boy that returned the pressure he gave, the boy sorrowing over the lost toy. The thought chilled him.

"Never mind," he said. "You can



"I DOUBT IF I EVER WANT TO SEE ANOTHER REVOLVER."

go sailing on the Martha any time you please—recruiting on Maaita if you want to."

It was a great concession he was making, and he felt that he did it against his better judgment. Her reception of it was a surprise to him.

"With old Kinross in command?" she queried. "No, thank you. He'd drive me to suicide. I couldn't stand his handling of her. I'll never step on the Martha again unless it is to take charge of her. I'm a sailor, like my father, and he could never bear to see a vessel mishandled."

An hour later, just as they were riding out of the compound, Sheldon glanced at her sharply and noted her face motting, even as he looked, and turning orange and green.

"It's the fever," she said. "I'll have to turn back."

By the time they were in the compound she was shivering and shaking and he had to help her from her horse. "Funny, isn't it?" she said, with chattering teeth. "Like seasickness—not serious, but horribly miserable while it lasts. I'm going to bed. Send Noa Noah and Viaburi to me. Tell Onufiri to make hot water. I'll be out of my head in fifteen minutes. But I'll be all right by evening. Short and sharp is the way it takes me."

Sheldon obeyed her instructions, rushed hot water bottles along to her and then sat on the veranda glancing across the compound to the grass house. Yes, he decided, the contention of every white man in the islands was right—the Solomons was no place for a woman.

He clapped his hands and Lalaperu came running.

"Here, you," he ordered; "go along barracks, bring 'm black fella Mary, plenty, too much, altogether."

A few minutes later the dozen black women of Berande were ranged before him. He looked them over critically, finally selecting one that was young, comely as such creatures went, and whose body bore no signs of skin disease.

"What name, you," he demanded. "Sangui?"

"Me Mabua," was the answer. "All right, you fella Mabua. You finish cook along boys. You stop along white Mary. All the time you stop along, you savvy?"

"Me savvy," she grunted and obeyed his gesture to go to the grass house immediately.

"What name?" he asked Viaburi, who had just come out of the grass house.

"Big fella sick," was the answer. "White fella Mary talk 'm too much allee time. Allee time talk 'm big fella schooner."

Sheldon nodded. He understood. It was the joss of the Martha that had brought on the fever. He lighted a cigarette, and in the curling smoke of it caught visions of his English mother and wondered if she would understand how her son could love a woman who cried because she could not be skipper of a schooner in the cannibal isles.

The most patient man in the world is prone to impatience in love, and Sheldon was no love.

But how to approach her? He divined the fanatical love of freedom in her, the deep seated antipathy for restraint of any sort. No man could ever put his arm around her and win her. She would flutter away like a frightened bird. Approach by contract—that, he realized, was the one thing he must never do. His hand clasp must be what it had always been—the hand clasp of hearty friendship, and nothing more. And then, one morning, quite fortuitously the opportunity came.

"My dearest wish is the success of Berande," Joan had just said apropos of a discussion about the cheapening of freights on copra to market.

"Do you mind if I tell you the dearest wish of my heart?" he promptly returned. "I long for it. I dream

about it. It is my dearest desire. It is for you some day when you are ready to be my wife."

She started back from him as if she had been stung. Her face went white on the instant, not from maidenly embarrassment, but from the anger which he could see flaming in her eyes.

"This taking for granted! This when I am ready!" she cried passionately. "Listen to me, Mr. Sheldon. I like you very well, though you are slow and a muddler, but I want you to understand once and for all that I did not come to the Solomons to get married. Getting married is not making my way in the world. It may do for some women, but not for me, thank you. When I sit down to talk over the freight on copra I don't care to have proposals of marriage sandwiched in. Besides—besides—"

Her voice broke for the moment, and when she went on there was a note of appeal in it that well nigh convicted him to himself of being a brute.

"Don't you see? It spoils everything. It makes the whole situation impossible—and I so loved our partnership and was proud of it. Don't you see? I can't go on being your partner if you make love to me. And I was so happy!"

Tears of disappointment were in her eyes, and she caught a swift sob in her throat.

"I warned you," he said gravely. "Such unusual situations between men and women cannot endure. I told you so at the beginning."

"Oh, yes; it is quite clear to me what you did. You took good care to warn me against every other man in the Solomons except yourself."

It was a blow in the face to Sheldon. He smarted with the truth of it, and at the same time he smarted with what he was convinced was the injustice of it. A gleam of triumph that

flickered in her eye because of the bit she had made decided him.

"It is not so one-sided as you seem to think it is," he began. "I was doing very nicely on Hevande before you came. I did not want you to stay. I wasn't in love with you then. I wanted you to go to Sydney, to go back to Hawaii. But you insisted on staying. You virtually—"

He paused for a softer word than the one that had risen to his lips, and she took it away from him.

"Forced myself on you—that's what you meant to say," she cried, the flags of battle painting her cheeks. "Go ahead. Don't mind my feelings."

"All right, I won't," he said decisively, realizing that the discussion was in danger of becoming a vituperative, schoolboy argument. "You have insisted on being considered as a man. Consistency would demand that you talk like a man and like a man listen to man talk. And listen you shall. It is not your fault that this unpleasantness has arisen. I do not blame you for anything—remember that—and for the same reason you should not blame me for anything."

"You can't help being yourself. You can't help being a very desirable creature so far as I am concerned. You have made me want you. You didn't intend to; you didn't try to. You were so made, that is all. And I was so made that I was ripe to want you. But I can't help being myself. I can't by an effort of will cease from wanting you any more than you by an effort of will can make yourself undesirable to me."

"Oh, this desire, this want, want," she broke in rebelliously. "I am not quite a fool. I understand some things. I really think it would be a good idea for me to marry Noa Noah or Adamu Adam or Lalaperu there or any black boy. Then I could give him orders and keep him penned away from me and men like you would leave me alone and not talk marriage and I want, I want."

Sheldon laughed in spite of himself and far from any genuine impulse to laugh.

"You are positively soulless," he said sarcastically.

"Because I've a soul that doesn't yearn for a man for master?" she took up the gauge. "Very well, then, I am soulless, and what are you going to do about it?"

"I am going to ask you why you look like a woman? Why you have the form of a woman, the lips of a woman, the wonderful hair of a woman? And I am going to answer because you are a woman, though the woman in you is asleep and that some day the woman will wake up."

"Heaven forbid!" she cried in such sudden and genuine dismay as to make him laugh and to bring a smile to her own lips against herself.

"I've got some more to say to you," Sheldon pursued. "I did try to protect you from every other man in the Solomons and from yourself as well. As for me, I didn't dream that danger lay in that quarter. So I failed to protect you from myself. I failed to protect you at all. You went your own wilful way just as though I didn't exist—wrecking schooners, recruiting on Malaita and sailing schooners, one lone, unprotected girl in the company of some of the worst scoundrels in the Solomons. I love you for that too. I love you for all of you, just as you are."

She made a move of distaste and raised a hand protestingly.

"Don't," he said. "You have no right to recoil from the mention of my love for you. Remember, this is a man talk. From the point of view of the talk, you are a man. The woman in you is only incidental, accidental and irrelevant. You've got to listen to the bald statement of fact, strange though it is, that I love you. You are better off and safer on Berande, in spite of the fact that I love you, than anywhere else in the Solomons. But I want you, as a final item of man talk, to remember from time to time that I

love you and that it will be the best day of my life when you are ready to marry me. I want you to think it sometimes. And now we've said about it any more. As between there's my hand."

He held out his hand. She hesitated then gripped it heartily and squeezed through her tears.

"I wish"—she faltered. "I wish that that black Mary, you'd give me somebody to swear for me." And with this enigmatic statement she turned away.

(To be Continued next Tuesday)

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