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Adventure

A Romance of The South Seas



BY JACK LONDON

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CHAPTER XI
 MR. MORGAN AND MR. RAFF.

HE put her fingers into her mouth, and Sheldon winced as he saw her blow, like a boy, a sharp, imperious whistle, the call she always used for her sailors and that always made him wince.

"They're gone up the Balesuna, shooting fish," he explained. "But there comes Oleson with his boat's crew. He's an old warhorse when he gets started. See him banging the boys. They don't pull fast enough for him." "And now what's to be done?" she asked. "You've treed your game, but you can't keep it treed."

"No, but I can teach them a lesson," Sheldon walked over to the big bell. "It is all right," he replied to her gesture of protest. "My boys are practically all bushmen, while these chaps are salt water men, and there's no love lost between them. You watch the fun."

He rang a general call, and by the time the 200 laborers trooped into the compound Satan was once more penned in the living room, complaining to high heaven at his abominable treatment. The plantation hands were dancing war dances around the base of every tree and filling the air with abuse and vituperation of their hereditary enemies. The skipper of the Flibberty Gibbet arrived in the thick of it, in the third throes of oncoming fever, staggering as he walked and shivering so severely that he could scarcely hold the rifle he carried. His face was ghastly blue, his teeth clicked and chattered, and the violent sunshine through which he walked could not warm him.

"I'll s---t it down and k-keep a guard on 'em," he chattered. "D-d-dash it all, I always g-get f-fever when there's any excitement. W-w-wh-what are you going to do?" "Gather up the guns first of all." Under Sheldon's direction the house boys and gang bosses collected the scattered arms and piled them in a heap on the veranda. The modern rifles, stolen from Lunga, Sheldon set aside, the Sniders he smashed into fragments, the pile of spears, clubs and tomahawks he presented to Joan. Down on the beach he built a bonfire out of the contents of the canoes, his blacks smashing, breaking and looting everything they laid hands on. The canoes themselves, splintered and broken, filled with sand and coral bowlders, were towed out to ten fathoms of water and sunk.

"Ten fathoms will be deep enough for them to work in," Sheldon said as they walked back to the compound. Here a saturnalia had broken loose. The war songs and dances were more unrestrained, and from abuse the plantation blacks had turned to pelting their helpless foes with pieces of wood, handfuls of pebbles and chunks of coral rock. And the seventy-five lusty cannibals clung stoically to their tree perches, enduring the rain of missiles and snarling down promises of vengeance.

"There'll be wars for forty years on Malaita on account of this," Sheldon laughed. "But I fancy old Telepasse will never again attempt to rush a plantation."

"Oh, you old scoundrel," he added, turning to the old chief, who sat gibbering in impotent rage at the foot of the steps. "Now head belong you bang 'm too. Come on, Miss Lackland, bang 'm just once. It will be the crowning indignity."

"Ugh, he's too dirty. I'd rather give him a bath. Here you, Adamu Adam, give this devil a wash. Soap and water! Fill that wash tub. Ornfrin, run and fetch 'm scrub brush."

The Tahitians, back from their fishing and grinning at the bedlam of the compound, entered into the joke. "Tambo! Tambo!" shrieked the cannibals from the trees, appalled at so awful a desecration, as they saw their chief tumbled into the tub and the sacred dirt rubbed and soused from his body.

Joan, who had gone into the bungalow, tossed down a strip of white calico, in which old Telepasse was promptly wrapped, and he stood forth, resplendent and purified, withal he still spat and strangled from the soap suds with which Noa Noah had gargled his throat.

"The house boys were directed to fetch handcuffs, and one by one, the Lunga runaways were hauled down out of their trees and made fast. Sheldon ironed them in pairs and ran a steel chain through the links of the iron. Gogoomy was given a lecture for his mutinous conduct and locked up for the afternoon. Then Sheldon rewarded the plantation hands with an afternoon's holiday, and when they had withdrawn from the compound permitted the Port Adams men to descend from the trees. And all afternoon he and Joan loafed in the cool of the veranda and watched them diving down and

emptying itself sunken canoes of the sand and rocks. It was twilight when they embarked and paddled away with a few broken paddles. A breeze had sprung up, and the Flibberty Gibbet had already sailed for Lunga to return the runaways.

Sheldon was back in the plantation superintending the building of a bridge when the schooner Malakula ran in close and dropped anchor. Joan watched the taking in of sail and the swinging out of the boat with a sailor's interest, and herself met the two men who came ashore.

They seemed awkward and constrained in her presence, and she caught first one and then the other looking at her with secret curiosity. She felt that they were weighing her, appraising her, and for the first time the anomalous position she occupied on Berande sank sharply home to her. On the other hand, they puzzled her.

The elder one, Morgan, was a huge man, bronzed and mustached, with a deep bass voice and an almost guttural speech, and the other, Raff, was slight and effeminate, with nervous hands and watery washed out gray eyes.

She watched Sheldon closely when he arrived and divined that he was not particularly delighted to see them. But she knew he must, and so pressing was the need that he led the two men into the study office. Later in the afternoon, she asked Lalaperu where they had gone.

"My word," quoth Lalaperu, "plenty walk about, plenty look 'm. Look 'm tree; look 'm ground behind tree; look 'm all fella bridge; look 'm copra



HE STOOD FORTH RESPLENDENT AND PURIFIED.

house; look 'm grass land; look 'm river; look 'm whaleboat—my word, plenty big fella look 'm too much."

"What fella man them two fella?" she queried. "Big fella marster along white man," was the extent of his description.

But Joan decided that they were men of importance in the Solomons and that their examination of the plantation and of its accounts was of sinister significance.

At dinner no word was dropped that gave a hint of their errand. The conversation was on general topics, but Joan could not help noticing the troubled, absent expression that occasionally came into Sheldon's eyes. After coffee she left them, and at midnight, from across the compound, she could hear the low murmur of their voices and see glowing the fiery ends of their cigars. Up early herself, she found they had already departed on another tramp over the plantation.

"What you think?" she asked Viaburi. "Sheldon marster he go along finish short time little bit," was the answer.

"What do you think?" she asked Ornfrin. "Sheldon marster big fella walk about along Sydney. Yes, me 'ink so. He finish along Berande."

"What name?" she asked lightly when Sheldon sat down to dinner. He looked at her and smiled, but it was a very wan and wistful smile.

"My word," she went on. "One big fella talk. Sun he go down—talk-talk; sun he come up—talk-talk; all the time talk-talk. What name that fella talk-talk?" "Oh, nothing much." He shrugged his shoulders. "They were trying to buy Berande, that was all."

"Don't let us fence about it," she urged. "Let it be straight talk, between us. You're in trouble. I've not

received such a dressing down in my life. If any one had ever told me that I'd be a party even to the present situation—Yes, I confess you have rattled my dry bones pretty considerably."

"But that is nothing to the rattling they are going to get," she assured him as he rose and took her hand. "Good night. And do, do give me a rational decision in the morning."

"I wish I knew whether you are merely headstrong or whether you really intend to be a Solomon planter," Sheldon said in the morning at breakfast.

"I wish you were more adaptable," Joan retorted. "You have more preconceived notions than any man I ever met. Why in the name of common sense, in the name of—fair play, can't you get it into your head that I am different from the women you have known and treat me accordingly? You surely ought to know I am different. I sailed my own schooner here—skipper, if you please. I came here to make my living. You know that; I've told you often enough. It was dad's plan, and I'm carrying it out, just as you are trying to carry out your Hughie's plan. Dad started to sail and sail until he could find the proper islands for planting. He died, and I sailed and sailed until I arrived here. Well," she shrugged her shoulders, "the schooner is at the bottom of the sea; I can't sail any farther; therefore I remain here. And a planter I shall certainly be. Do you want me for a partner?"

"But do you realize that I would be looked upon as the most foolish jack-anapes in the south seas if I took a young girl like you in with me here on Berande?" he asked.

"No; decidedly not. But there you are again, worrying about what idiots and the generally evil minded will think of you. I should have thought you had learned self reliance on Berande, instead of needing to lean upon the moral support of every whisky guzzling, worthless south sea vagabond."

He smiled and said: "Yes, that is the worst of it. You are unanswerable. Yours is the logic of youth, and no man can answer that. The facts of life have no place in the logic of youth. Youth must try to live according to its logic. The facts always smash youth's logic, and they usually smash youth's heart, too. It's like platonic friendships and—and all such things; they are all right in theory, but they won't work in practice."

"Suppose we do become partners on Berande," he said. "either I'll fall in love with you or you with me. Propinquity is dangerous, you know. In fact, it is propinquity that usually gives the face to the logic of youth."

"If you think I came to the Solomons to get married," she began wrathfully. "Well, there are better men in Hawaii, that's all. Really, you know, the way you harp on that one string would lead an unprejudiced listener to conclude that you are prudent minded."

She stopped, appalled. His face had gone red and white with such abruptness as to startle her. He was patiently very angry. She sipped the last of her coffee, and arose, saying: "I'll wait until you are in a better temper before taking up the discussion again. That is what's the matter with you. You get angry too easily. Will you come swimming? The tide is just right."

"If she were a man, I'd bundle her off the plantation, root and crop, whaleboat, Tahitian sailors, coverings, and all," he said to himself after she had left the room.

But that was the trouble. She was not a man, and where would she go, and what would happen to her? He got to his feet, lighted a cigarette, and her Stetson hat, hanging on the wall over her revolver belt, caught his eye. That was the devil of it, too. He did not want her to go. After all, she had not grown up yet. Never again would he lose his temper with her. She was a child; he must remember that. He sighed heavily. But

"You can't get them to look at plantations down there. They've been taken in too often. But I do hate to give the place up—more for Hughie's sake, I swear, than my own. He was bound up in it. We were running slowly behind, but with the Jessie we hoped to muddle through in some fashion."

"You were muddlers, the pair of you, without doubt. But you needn't sell to Morgan and Raff. I shall go down to Sydney on the next steamer, and I'll come back in a secondhand schooner. I should be able to buy one for \$5,000 or \$6,000."

He held up his hand in protest, but she waived it aside. "I may manage to freight a cargo back as well. At any rate, the schooner will take over the Jessie's business. I'm going to become a partner in Berande to the extent of my bag of sovereigns—I've got over fifteen hundred of them, you know. We'll draw up an agreement right now—that is, with your permission, and I know you won't refuse it."

He looked at her with good natured amusement. "You know I sailed here all the way from Tahiti in order to become a planter," she insisted. "You know what my plans were. Now I've changed them, that's all. I'd rather be a part owner of Berande and get my returns in three years, than break ground on Pari-Sulay and wait seven years."

"And this—this schooner"—Sheldon changed his mind and stopped. "Yes, go on."

"You won't be angry?" he queried. "No, no; this is business. Go on."

"You—er—you would run her yourself? Be the captain, in short, and go recruiting on Malaita?" "Certainly. We would save the cost of a skipper. Under an agreement you would be credited with a manager's salary and I with a captain's. It's quite simple. Besides, if you won't let me be your partner I shall buy Pari-Sulay, get a much smaller vessel and run her myself. So what is the difference?"

"The difference? Why, all the difference in the world. In the case of Pari-Sulay you would be on an independent venture. You could turn cannibal for all I could interfere in the matter. But on Berande you would be my partner, and then I would be responsible. And of course I couldn't permit you, as my partner, to be skipper of a recruiter. I tell you, the thing is what I would not permit any sister or wife of mine."

"But I'm not going to be your wife, thank goodness—only your partner."

"Besides, it's all ridiculous," he held on steadily. "Think of the situation. A man and a woman, both young, partners on an isolated plantation. Why, the only practical way out would be that I'd have to marry you."

"Mine was a business proposition, not a marriage proposal," she interrupted, coldly angry. "I wonder if somewhere in this world there is one man who could accept me for a comrade."

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