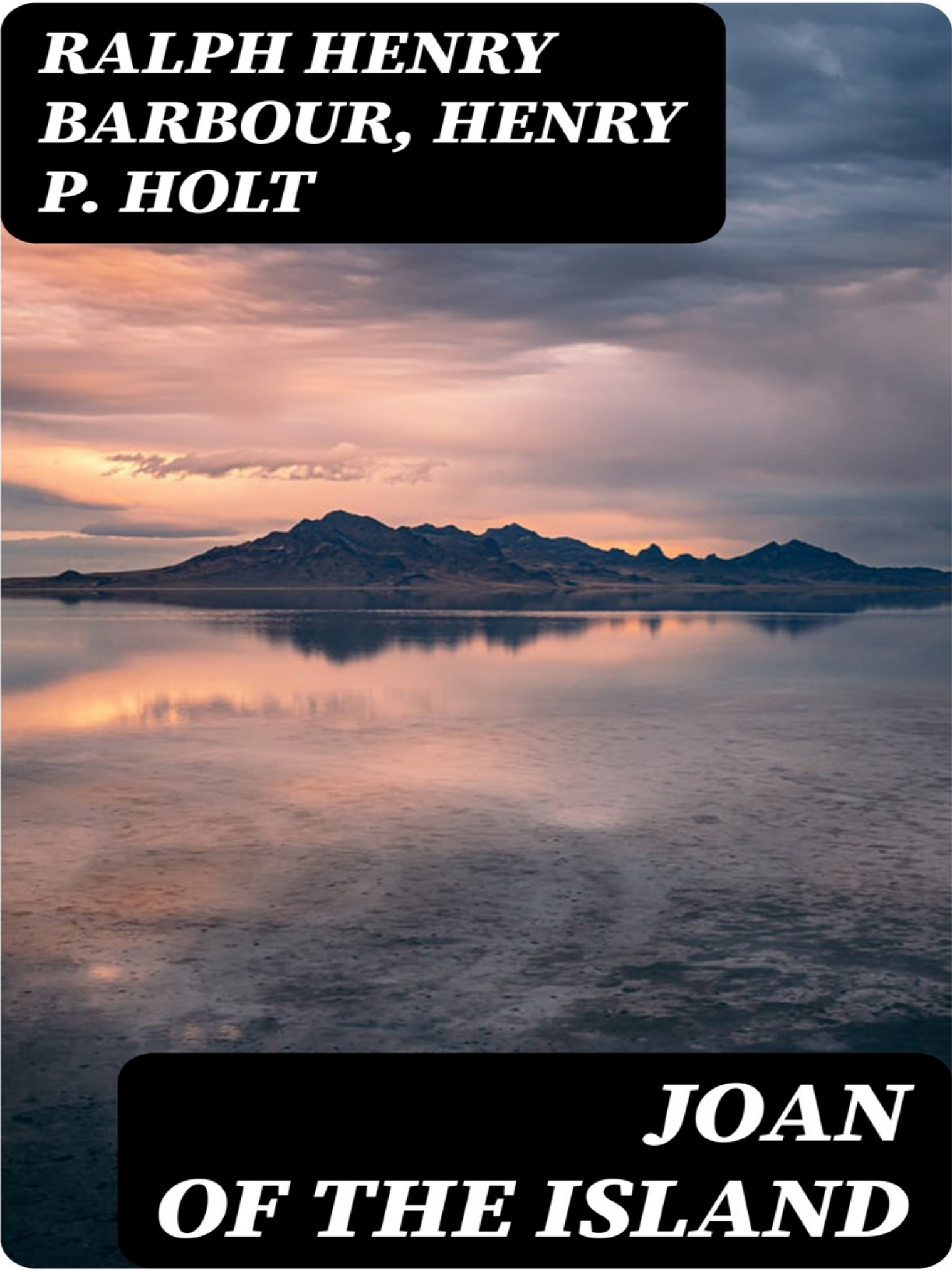


***RALPH HENRY  
BARBOUR, HENRY  
P. HOLT***

A landscape photograph showing a calm body of water in the foreground, reflecting the sky and distant mountains. The sky is filled with soft, orange and pink clouds, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The mountains in the background are dark and silhouetted against the lighter sky. The water is still, creating a clear reflection of the sky and mountains.

***JOAN  
OF THE ISLAND***

***RALPH HENRY  
BARBOUR, HENRY  
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***JOAN  
OF THE ISLAND***

**Ralph Henry Barbour, Henry P. Holt**

# **Joan of the Island**

EAN 8596547086703

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: [DigiCat@okpublishing.info](mailto:DigiCat@okpublishing.info)



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# CHAPTER I

## FLOTSAM FROM THE FOUR WINDS

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THE door of the skipper's cabin opened slowly, and the head of a man emerged. There was something sinister in the way he paused and listened. For a few moments he was irresolute. Then he glanced back over his shoulder into the cabin, and a queer, grim little smile flashed over his face. He remained irresolute no longer.

Without a sound he closed the door behind him, and moving stealthily, made his way to the deck, where he walked in the direction of the after wheel-house.

Only the soft swish of the water as it rippled along the sides of the steamer, and the steady *thud thud* of the propeller. A fitful moon occasionally glared down on a dead calm sea. Up on the bridge of the *Four Winds* a Kanaka helmsman mechanically kept her sou'east-by-south, and wondered vaguely about a little brown baby that ought to be able to swim by now. The officer on watch was leaning in a corner of the bridge in his shirt sleeves, sucking an empty pipe, with two more hours of monotony to kill before he could turn in. A thousand flying fish shot up near the vessel's prow, glittered in the moon beams for a space, and sank back into the depths. Astern a lone gull sailed steadily over the wake.

The man who had come from the skipper's cabin paused when he reached a small boat which hung in-board on its davits. With fingers that had suddenly become strangely awkward he started to loosen one of the ropes. The block

squeaked as a few inches of manila ran through it, and the man muttered a curse. The night was too still. He glanced over his shoulder apprehensively and scowled. It would be impossible to get the boat overboard, however careful he might be, without fetching half the crew tumbling aft to ascertain what was wrong.

He thrust his hands deep into his trouser pockets, winced, and drew one hand out again. Then he fumbled in the boat in the darkness until he fished out a folded cork life-belt. This he laid on the deck. Without further delay he started to unlace his shoes, but his quick ear caught foot-falls.

Like lightning he whipped up the life-belt and moved toward the after rail. There he halted long enough to make sure the steps were coming nearer, and then he lifted one long leg over the rail. Beneath, the water, churned to creamy whiteness by the propeller, was gleaming with phosphorus. The screw would cleave him in half if he fouled it. A man needed nerves of iron to drop into that death trap, and his nerves were none too steady at the moment. Only a fraction of a second he hesitated, and then, gripping the life-belt firmly, he slid down into the boiling wake of the *Four Winds*.

It seemed an eternity before the swirling water ceased to spin him round beneath the surface, but even while his lungs felt as though they were bursting for one good breath of sweet air, his chief thought was that the propeller had missed him. When at last, with a mighty effort, he raised his mouth above the foam-flecked surface and gasped, the lights of the *Four Winds* were dwindling in the distance. He

could hear the steady *thud thud thud* of the screw, which was driving the ship further away every second, but otherwise everywhere there was deathly stillness.

He was alone with the stars in the middle of the Sulu Sea.

For a few moments the man lay in the water, supported by the life-belt in his arms, watching the disappearance of the steamer, as though reluctant to begin life anew in his peculiar circumstances until the tramp had gone. Soon she was a mile away, and her engines were running as regularly as ever. There was small chance of the vessel stopping now, and the man gave a grunt of satisfaction. He reached down to one shoe, unlaced it, and kicked it off. The thing was sinking in about a mile of water, he reflected, as he tackled the other shoe. His socks went next, but then he stopped undressing. He now only had on thin trousers and a shirt, neither of which would counterbalance the buoyancy of the life-belt which he opened out and fastened round his waist. For the present he was not physically uncomfortable. The water was warm—almost tepid—and though he moved his arms and legs slowly as a swimmer mechanically does in water, it needed no exertion to keep afloat.

He wondered vaguely what would happen. Of course there were the sharks. There are always plenty of them in the Sulu Sea, but they are not all man-eaters. A shiver crept down his spine, and then he banished the thought of them from his mind. If they came it would soon be over at any rate; but he hoped they would not come.

Presently he turned over and lay on his back, staring up at the stars. It was horribly quiet. He had no idea that such

stillness could be. Not a quiver stirred the glassy surface. It was eerie.

From where he lay, with eyes a few inches above the water, the steamer was now only a dot on the horizon. He wondered who would go into the captain's cabin first and find—it. Probably Carson, the second mate, when nobody relieved him on the bridge. Carson might get a shock but he wouldn't be particularly sorry. A brute like Captain Murdock was better out of the way anyhow, the man in the water reflected. There was no remorse in his heart. He had never killed anyone before, and he sincerely hoped he never would again. Probably he was not to get the chance. But it wasn't murder—not murder in his eyes, that is. Of course nobody on board would believe it. Nor would anyone in any civilized court of law, in face of the evidence. He and Captain Murdock had been at daggers drawn for months. It was just natural antagonism such as springs up between natures which grate on one another. Murdock was a bully, with the temper of a fiend and the manners of a pig. Moreover he was part owner of the *Four Winds*, which fact he never forgot, and he took advantage of it to the full. The friction began soon after the *Four Winds* sailed out of New York harbour, and constant nagging, extending over many months, had only made matters worse. Several times they had quarrelled openly. While floating in the water the man remembered over-hearing a significant remark made by one of the crew.

"Either Legs or the Old Man will start shooting afore this trip ends, you mark my words." It was the boatswain who



delivered the prophecy. It did not end that way, though the result came to much the same thing.

The swimmer's eyes picked out the silvery dots, far overhead, that formed the Southern Cross. Sailor-fashion, he began from that to take his bearings. Over there, between those two bright fairy lamps suspended from the sky near the horizon, was the east, where the sun would come up in a few hours. Yes, he would see it again. He sincerely hoped to see it the next time it rose also, but things might be becoming unpleasant by then.

It was a long way to the nearest land. Powerful swimmer though he was, it would never have occurred to him to try to reach it unaided, but with a life-belt on the thing became less impossible. He was going to try, at any rate. He could rest without sinking when he chose. There were a few scattered islands away to the west. The *Four Winds'* course was to have brought her within twenty miles of them. It must have been just short of four bells when he dropped over the stern of the steamer. The *Four Winds* was making a little better than nine knots. Maybe he was now twenty-five miles, as the crow flies, from the nearest island. It was only a dot on the chart, and it was doubtful whether it was inhabited. But it was a secure foothold, which one could not say of water a mile deep. And, moreover, there were other islands.

Largely by guesswork he set his course, and then rolling his great frame over, struck out with slow, powerful strokes to the westward. It was no consolation to reflect that some current might be carrying him in a totally wrong direction,

but on the contrary it was just as likely to be taking him toward his goal.

For two hours he kept up the regular stroke with effortless ease, and then for a rest, turned over on to his back. The exercise had helped to steady his nerves. While he lay there the sun rode up over the sky-line and infused the spirit of hope into him. It was a perfect dawn. The world in which the man off the *Four Winds* had lived recently had not been a particularly perfect one, but that was finished with, anyway—utterly, irrevocably finished with.

He turned over again, and for a long time breasted the oily sea. He was getting tired, but it helped to keep his mind off thoughts which were none too pleasant. He was growing thirsty, with the brine constantly kissing his lips. He watched the sun creep steadily upward until it hung like a ball of fire almost directly overhead. The strain was beginning to tell even on his enormous strength. It was now eighteen hours since he had eaten anything. Occasionally he was annoyed to find his memory playing quaint tricks—catching up incidents of his boyhood and parading them before him now when all his thoughts should be concentrated on the effort of cleaving his way further through the ocean. There was a girl with greenish eyes when he was eighteen. Allwyn? No, she wouldn't have a man's name. Eileen—that was it. Something happened to her—or was it some other girl?

His right hand was hurting all the time, and constant swimming did not improve it. Murdock did that with his chin.

The swimmer rested many times during the day, but the sea dazzled him. There were half a dozen suns, all blinding and scorching, and yet he knew that there was really only

one sun, and that he must keep on swimming as long as he could pick out the genuine from the counterfeits, or lose his sense of direction altogether. He was still worrying absurdly about the girl with the greenish eyes when the sun set, in what was clearly a gigantic bath of blood.

After that the man grew confused. The thirst was there all the time. He moistened his tongue deliberately once or twice with the water that wet his face when he took an awkward stroke, but it did not mend matters. Also his right hand was very painful now. These things he understood only in a dreamy fashion. His predominant thought—when he did think rationally—was that he had to keep his heavy arms and legs moving, because somewhere ahead there was land. His brain seemed to have slipped a cog on the subject of time. He tried to calculate how many hours this struggle had been going on, but he could not work it out, and he was resting, wrestling with the problem, when his knee hit something hard.

That brought him back with a crash to the world of reality. He put his feet down and found there was but half a fathom of water. Dimly the outline of a low reef could be made out not far off. His strength was almost gone, but he managed to stagger ashore, and then stretched his six foot frame gratefully on a bed of seaweed. Thirsty and exhausted though he was, he fell into a sleep which became almost a stupor, and still another dawn was near when he opened his eyes.

It was little more than a ledge on which he lay; probably the highest spring tides submerged it entirely. But his interest was not centered on the ledge. About three miles

away, distinct in the growing light, was an island on which cocoa palms grew, an island on which there must be water. And the man craved for water as he had never craved for anything in his life.

He rose unsteadily to his feet, and walked off the reef. His limbs were stiff with the long swim, but he struck out eagerly and in less than an hour dragged himself up on to a silvery beach. Away to the right there was a creek into which a stream trickled from over a rock. Lurching and stumbling, the man hurried over the sand. Then he lay full length on the ground and buried his head in the water.

# The Girl on Tao Tao

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## CHAPTER II

### THE GIRL ON TAO TAO

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**A** GIRL stood on a veranda, scanning the sea with a tense, anxious expression. Her long hair hung in two heavy, braided ropes, which gleamed like burnished copper in the early morning sun. Her dress was white and loose, of the simplest cut, while her feet, innocent of stockings, were thrust into sandals.

She was undeniably beautiful, from the top of the high forehead on which a loose strand stirred in the gentle breeze, to the graceful curves of her neck. Her brown eyes were clear and steady, and her figure was straight and lithe. For the moment, at any rate, she looked all of her twenty-three summers. There was a tinge of something akin to grief stamped on her face—grief, or bewilderment, perhaps, but not fear. The girl's eyes, the set of her square little chin, and her very poise indicated clearly enough that fear, such as one may reasonably associate with her sex, had no part in her composition. And yet there were more than the elements of danger in her position. At best the lonely isles of the South Seas are places where there are perils for stout hearts to overcome, comforts which would satisfy few women, work which only men with iron wills and iron constitutions can hope to accomplish.

The air was wonderfully clear, even for those latitudes. Through a break in the trees, to the east, a small reef, three miles off, seemed to be scarcely more than a thousand yards distant. To the south, twenty miles from the silvery

shore near where the girl stood, loomed the outline of another island. The girl trained a pair of binoculars on to this blur for full five minutes, and then swept the wide expanse of the ocean without finding anything to arrest her attention.

With a gesture of impatience, and a slight frown on her sun-tanned forehead, she lowered the field glasses and turned on her heel just as the sound of a guttural voice reached her.

"Marster Trent!"

Beyond the compound a kinky-haired black of alarming mien, who was, however, the "boss boy" on the plantation, and tractable for his kind, stood awaiting permission to cross the narrow clearing, which was sacrosanct.

"What you want, Taleile?" the girl asked, instantly assuming a more authoritative manner. "Come here."

"Want big Marster Trent," said the black, in the curiously unpitched voice of the South Sea islander.

"Mr. Trent he no back yet," replied the girl firmly. "He come bimeby. What for you want him?"

Taleile shrugged his shoulders, as though to indicate that the matter could wait.

"Plenty nigger lazy devil. Big Marster Trent he say clear um top patch. Um top patch plenty clear."

There was the subtle suggestion that in the absence of the planter, and definite instructions from him for the gang, they might as well loaf. Your South Sea islander seeks work neither for himself nor for those under him. When he is driven, by fear or by the magnetic power of a white man, he will just about earn the few dollars a month he is paid.

"Let plenty gang work on the one-year trees, savvy?" the girl replied without a second's hesitation. "Whole lot of work must be done there. Keep them at it, no stop, till Mr. Trent come back."

With a gesture she indicated that the interview was finished. Taleile, however, stood his ground, shifting awkwardly from one foot to the other, and grimacing after the fashion of an ape. The girl was on the point of ordering him to go when it struck her he might want to say something of importance.

"What you want now, Taleile?" she asked, half suspiciously.

Taleile had been the "boss boy" on the plantation ever since she first saw the island, four years before. He had been "recruited" originally from New Guinea. His brothers and sisters and mothers-in-law were all, doubtless, raw cannibals, and Taleile had bred true up to a point, but he had had little opportunity lately of indulging any cannibalistic tendencies inherited from his forebears. This was the second plantation on which he had worked. For a New Guinea native he had a certain amount of common sense, and that had shown him the infinite wisdom of being on the side of law and order as prescribed by the white man. There were occasions when Taleile had been almost human.

There was nothing to encourage the girl in his little beady eyes, which glittered and shifted, but at the moment the fact remained he came the nearest thing to being a protector of any kind that she had. Not that she felt desperately in need of protection. On a peg, within easy reach, hung a .45 Colt with which she could pierce a match



box six times in ten seconds at fifteen paces, and not a black on the island was ignorant of that significant fact. But Boris, her Great Dane, had died mysteriously the previous day; and in the presence of Boris every black had felt the necessity of circumspection if not even politeness. More than once Taleile had gone out of his way to show that his sympathies were not altogether with his kinky-haired brethren. The girl remembered that before she put her question. He squirmed and grimaced for a few moments while the girl stood imperiously waiting.

"Um nigger he give big dog *kai-kai*," he said mysteriously at last.

There was a catch in her breath which she endeavored to hide. One of the men, then, had fed Boris and, as she had shrewdly suspected, poisoned him.

"What nigger?" she asked, going a step nearer the black, her blood boiling.

"Um nigger," he repeated foolishly, either not knowing or not caring to air his knowledge for reasons best known to himself.

The girl, too well versed in the ways of the breed to press more closely, signalled him to go. In all probability Taleile was not lying, nor merely voicing a guess. That gave a sinister aspect to the dog's death. Of course it might have been simple revenge for some casual bite earned and administered. If she had not been alone that theory might have satisfied her; but she was alone, and doubly alone since Boris was no longer following her like a shadow. She felt that the clouds were indeed gathering.

For a time, while her brain raced over events of the last few days, the girl busied herself with simple duties in the bungalow, and the giving of orders to the house boy, until a black, clapping his hands at the wicket gate on the far side of the compound, attracted her attention.

She beckoned him toward her.

"What you want, eh, Baloo?" she asked.

The nigger opened his vast mouth, and pointed to a tooth.

"Um plenty sick. Want terback," he said in a tone that made her look at him sharply.

"Toothache?" she observed. "You take um medicine."

Leaving the man on the veranda, she turned into the bungalow and, opening a small case, selected a bottle. She glanced through the open window at Baloo, wondering momentarily whether he had consciously spoken insolently. Her eyes wandered to the long whip which hung just within the door in case of emergency. Hitherto she had never used it, though the thing was used occasionally as a means of assisting a native to distinguish between right and wrong.

With a wad of cotton wool in one hand and the bottle in the other, she returned to the veranda.

Baloo, whose tooth did not ache, scowled. Medicine was of no use to him.

"Want plenty stick terback," he said, with growing boldness.

"No get tobacco," the girl declared with an air of finality. "You take um medicine."

She met the creature's eyes squarely and saw something in them that stirred her unpleasantly. Had the Great Dane

been there she would have had the man bolting like a rabbit. Baloo, who had never come into direct conflict with the girl before, misjudged her. He wanted tobacco, and knew there was plenty in the store. Moreover, he knew the planter was within neither sight nor hearing. He was a raw native, recruited but a few months before, with almost no ideas on the subject of restraint, and accustomed all his life to the doctrine of right and might being synonymous.

Without removing her eyes from him, the girl stepped backward, and unhooked the long, evil-looking whip.

Baloo knew that whip. His introduction to it was effected within a week of his being taken to the island, and the recollection was highly painful.

"Go," the girl cried, gripping the short handle and allowing the pliant lash to wave menacingly.

The black half crouched, but not cringingly. He was getting ready to leap, and as the girl divined this she became aware for the first time in her life of her own physical weakness. Thrashing blacks with a whip is not a woman's work. The mere idea of it was repellent to her, but without dallying further she sent the lash coiling against his shoulders. Baloo, who had anticipated this by the fraction of a second, sprang forward and seized the thick end of the lash, near the stock. She gripped the handle, but knew she was no match for the black in strength. The idea flashed across her mind of releasing her grasp of the whip and making a dash for the loaded revolver, but the black was now between her and the door.

He gave a wrench: her slender wrist barely stood the strain.

"Boris! Boris! Here!" she called; but Baloo well knew the dog's fate.

No further word was spoken, and the savage glitter of the man's eyes and the cruel smirk on his coarse face told the girl more plainly than words what dire peril she was in. Fear clutched at her heart as, clinging desperately to the whip, and still confronting the mutinous black with an expression of mingled courage, disdain and righteous anger, she strove to think of some way to safety.

Again the black wrenched at the whip, and, as the tug almost lifted her from her feet, her strained fingers relaxed and the weapon slipped from her grasp.

And then two things she saw simultaneously—the brutal triumph on the hideous countenance and the astounding figure of a white man, clad in shirt and trousers, hurling himself across the compound!

He was within ten feet of the steps before the black saw him. For a moment the latter was too startled to move. Then, as the stranger leaped up the steps Baloo dropped the whip and sprang to the rail. But he was too late. A pair of firm hands gripped him, and in a flash he was lifted above the veranda rail and sent crashing to the compound below.

For a moment he lay there, in the hot dust, stunned, bewildered. Then, with a malevolent grimace he scrambled to his feet and beat a hasty retreat.

The stranger, snatching up the whip, leaped down the steps and, overtaking the black at the gate, sent the lash hissing through the air. A shrill cry of pain rang out as the leather thong bit into the ebony flesh, and then the offender

was gone in a rush of bare feet. The stranger crossed back to the steps.

"I hope you aren't hurt," he said, really seeing her now for the first time, when standing awkwardly below, as though he were an intruder, he looked up into the still surprised eyes of the girl. The surprise was mutual, for, while he had been prepared to find a few blacks, breech-clouted and odoriferous, or, if fortunate, a white planter, pajamaed and rum-soaked, such a brown-eyed, slender vision as gazed down on him from the veranda had been far outside his imaginings. A sense of inadequacy as to his attire troubled him, for his water-soaked shirt and trousers seemed sadly out of place just then.

"No. Thanks—no, no, I'm not," she said, bewildered. "Who are you? Are—are you from a trading steamer?"

"Why—yes, that is, a tramp," the man replied.

Her face cleared.

"The best anchorage is off here," she said, pointing down to the stretch of water between reef and island. Then her eyes fell on his clothing, steaming in the hot sun. "But—but you are wet through," she added. "You never *swam* ashore!"

"There wasn't anything else to do," he said. "They did not hear me after I fell overboard."

"Where was that?" the girl asked solicitously.

"Away off there," he replied, pointing vaguely: and then, feeling strangely weak, it dawned on him suddenly that he was ravenously hungry.

"Sit down on the veranda," she urged. "You must be starving."

As she turned into the bungalow he heard her giving orders to the house boy in *beche-de-mer* English, the strange polyglot spoken wherever whites and blacks commingle in the South Seas.

"My word, Maromi, you fetch *kai-kai* and coffee plenty quick. White marster plenty too much hungry."

Soon the unmistakable sizzle of frying ham set the guest's mouth watering, and the rich aroma of coffee reached his nostrils tantalizingly. It seemed an age, though it was really only a few minutes, before he found himself seated at a table spread with white linen, before a breakfast such as a prince might have hungered for. The girl left him while he ate, for he was clearly famished, and he had nearly finished when she came back.

"How long had you been without food?' she asked.

"About thirty hours. But I shouldn't have minded so much if I'd known there was a breakfast like that waiting for me. I'm up to the neck in debt to you now."

"I am afraid the balance is still a long way in your favour," the girl replied. "When my brother returns I hope he will be able to thank you better than I can and help me to repay you still further. Our name is Trent," she said. "My brother is Chester Trent. I am Joan Trent."

A flicker of embarrassment passed over the man's face.

"Mine is—is Keith," he said awkwardly. "I'm—I'm a sea-going man, with no visible means of support for the moment, as you see, and my ship is some hundreds of miles away by now."

She gave him a quick, feminine, comprehensive glance which revealed ten times more to her than a man would

have seen in an hour. Even with his face bristling with a two days' growth of beard he was, she decided, not unattractive as to countenance, while he was tall and evidently strong, as witness his treatment of Baloo. His dark hair was tinged at the temples with grey, though he could not yet be thirty. He had a firm mouth about which were humorous lines, and his grey eyes suggested determination and quiet power, but could twinkle pleasantly enough at times. He neither spoke nor acted as did the only deck hands she had ever seen, and yet there was no reason for disbelieving his story.

Where Joan expected her brother to return from did not immediately become clear to the man who called himself Keith. Obviously the planter was not on the island, for it was only three miles across and the visitor learned that Chester Trent had been absent several days. Without being unduly inquisitive, Keith was puzzled to know what pressing business had called him away, leaving his sister alone with a gang of natives in charge of a "boss boy," who was a South Sea islander himself, and a house boy who, in the event of trouble, would naturally join his black brothers. Joan, however, avoided the subject as though reluctant to allow blame to rest on her brother's shoulders; and Keith, anxious though he was to do anything in his power for this unprotected girl, refrained from questioning her. During the day she took him over the plantation, which struck him as being woefully neglected. There was missing from it that air of prosperity and order which he had seen on many island plantations in the course of his trading experiences in the Sulu Sea and all along the other rim of the equator away to the south, even as far as the far flung Solomons. He

concluded that as Trent had had the place four years he was either singularly incompetent as a planter or that he had other fish to fry. And as there are many different kinds of fish in the South Seas, some reputable, some doubtful, and some frankly disreputable, Keith decided to accept the position without making the girl uncomfortable. For her part, Joan asked little or nothing about his world from which he had appeared so surprisingly, and their talk was chiefly of plantations, and trade, and freights, concerning all of which she had considerable knowledge.

"To such hospitality as we have to offer you are very welcome," the girl said after the simply furnished guest room had been prepared for him, "but I am afraid you will be a sort of prisoner on Tao Tao for several weeks. Tramps and schooners do call occasionally on the off chance of picking up cargo, but they are infrequent."

Keith pondered the statement for some time after he stretched his great frame between the sheets, and gave vent to a sigh of utter contentment. For reasons of his own he did not desire to become too closely associated with any members of the shipping fraternity for the present. The longer he remained buried in obscurity the better it would suit him. His needs, for the present, were few, and at any rate he would have no difficulty in making himself sufficiently useful about the place to balance the cost of his keep. But apart from his own convenience in being precipitated into this elysium, he reflected, as he buried his head deep into a pillow softer than any that ever touched his head on the *Four Winds*, it occurred to him that he was peculiarly fortunate in having arrived there, for Joan Trent's



sake. Yes, and also for his own sake because Joan Trent was there. Musing over this fact contentedly, and without a thought for the morrow—the morrow of months hence when Tao Tao would remain but a pleasant dream for him, to be recalled through the long watches of the night on some steamer's bridge in far-off seas—he drifted off to sleep.

But his sleep was not dreamless. The last forty-eight hours had been crowded with too much adventure for placid slumber. He was back on the *Four Winds*, where everything was topsy-turvy. The ship would persist in going backward though the engines were driving her full ahead; and the man at the helm was a deaf mute. But he must keep on swimming at all costs, though the water got into his mouth and was choking him. Drifting seaweed had become entangled round his throat, tighter and tighter. He could hardly breathe ... Then he was suddenly and horribly awake in the heavy darkness of the unfamiliar room, awake to a vivid consciousness of pain and danger. In his nostrils was the reek of a black body, and at his throat two hands were fastened like steel bands.

# Joan Trent's Story

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## CHAPTER III

### JOAN TRENT'S STORY

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**K** EITH strove to cry out, strove to give one frantic twist of his body, but was still pinned down by the neck. The pain was excruciating. His eyes were starting out of his head.. He was now quite unable to breathe. His brain worked like lightning. He realized that from that moment onward he would be losing strength. In thirty seconds or so he would be helpless. Gripping the wrists that were killing him, he began to make a supreme physical effort. He could get little purchase, for his opponent's knee was holding him down, but Keith threw his last ounce of strength into the strain, and by the time his rapidly beating heart had thumped a dozen strokes his unseen enemy's fingers began to loosen. Once they had started to slide Keith was able to gasp a breath, and the crucial instant passed. There was no sound save that of two men breathing hard. Each knew his life was forfeit if he were beaten.

Keith kept his own fingers closed as tightly as ever, even when the pressure on his throat was removed. His assailant had now become his prisoner. All Keith had to do was to call, and Joan, who was sleeping in the next room, would come to his assistance with the Colt. But he hesitated to summon her, partly because he now felt equal to tackling the situation alone, and partly because he wanted the grim satisfaction of triumph single-handed. It was a stifflingly hot night, and the struggle had made him burst into sweat.