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# SEA-SCOUT AND SAVAGE



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**SEA SCOUT AND SAVAGE**



*BY THE SAME AUTHOR.*

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**WOOLLY OF THE  
WILDS.**

A Story of Pluck and Adventure  
in North Canada.





# SEA SCOUT AND SAVAGE

Adventures among the Cannibals of the  
Solomon Islands

BY

ROBERT LEIGHTON

Author of "The White Man's Trail," etc.

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED  
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# SEA SCOUT AND SAVAGE

## CHAPTER I

### SIGNAL FIRES

“**O**-OO! Do come and look at the scenery!”  
There has been a wild night of shouting thunder and deluging tropic rain; the schooner had been hove-to during the darkness, and at dawn, when the rain ceased, she was still hemmed round by a curtain of mist that shut off the land sighted on the previous evening. The hands busy on the wet deck with cleaning rags, swabs, and mops had taken no interest in things beyond their work until Sam Hendon's excited cry of admiration called them to attention.

Sam was a matter-of-fact London boy, seldom moved to enthusiasm over beautiful surroundings; but as the sun burst above the blue rim of the horizon and shot piercing beams of golden light through the mist that lay upon the sea, and the land was revealed to him in all its glory of green mountain, feathery palm trees and shimmering coral beach, he was impressed by the unusual splendour. The land on the starboard beam was different from the low-lying coral islands with



which he had been made familiar during the schooner's long voyage across the Pacific.

"We're abreast of a lovely island," he went on. "Come and have a look at it, Chris! It's like a fairy scene in a Drury Lane pantomime."

"It's simply splendid!" agreed Chris Wingrove, propping his mop against the rail and resting his bare, sunburnt arms on the cushion of Sam's greasy cleaning rag. "It's about the loveliest bit we've yet seen on all the Pacific. But I dare say there's something black and ugly at the back of all the beauty."

"Ay, ye're no' far wrong there," broke in the Scots engineer, dropping his squeegee and wading barefoot into the wash of rain-water that he had been sweeping into the lee channel. "She's a bonnie island, yon—bonnie, even from this distance. Smiles at you through the morning mist like a proud cannibal queen; but she'll biff you o'er the head wi' her tomahawk when you're not looking. I wouldna trust her."

"The natives are savages, of course," resumed Wingrove, straightening the front of his weather-worn Sea Scout's jersey. "But are they as fierce and cruel as the book talk would make out, Angus? You've been here before. They're not really head-hunters and cannibals, are they?"

Angus Tait swept his hand over his perspiring bald head. The sun was not yet high, but already the still air was stifling as the air of a

conservatory and laden with the warm heavy perfume of tropic vegetation.

"They're all that," he answered grimly. "They're just the most evil, bloodthirsty, treacherous savages on the face of the earth. Head-hunters to a man, cannibals whenever they can get a chance. It was along this same coast a while back that the *Scottish Chief* was cut out and all hands killed. Ay, killed and cooked and eaten! I know the Solomons, even as Sam here knows the streets of London; and this big, bad island on our beam—Malaita, it's called—is just the blackest and worst of the whole boiling."

"Malaita?" repeated Chris Wingrove. "That was my Uncle Basil's island. At least he was ashore here often enough when he was a trader in these parts. But Uncle Basil never came to any harm. He got home all right."

"Then he was one of the lucky ones," declared Tait; "or he knew how to keep the upper hand of the natives. I wonder at your uncle allowing you to come to such a place."

"Well, you see, he's not alive," explained Wingrove. "He died in England when I was a kid at school. But we had heaps of curios that he got in the Solomons. It was he that brought home the orchids that started my grandfather as a collector. He got the orchids in Malaita and Guadalcanar, where Dr. Molesey counts on bagging his best specimens."

"Wingrove's grandfather's a baronet and a

millionaire, you know," said Sam. "It's he who's financing this expedition."

"Yes, yes," nodded the engineer. "I've heard of Sir Mortimer Wingrove. But you're not his heir, are ye, Chris?"

"Well, my father comes first, naturally," answered Chris. "Uncle Basil was killed on the hunting field. If he'd had a son I should have been out of the running."

"I see, I see," blinked Angus. "Then you're the heir after all, and I'm even more surprised at their allowing you to come on such a dangerous adventure—risking your life for the sake of getting a few rare hot-house flowers. Orchids are well enough for folk like your grandfather. But for mysel', I wouldna exchange a Scottish bluebell or a field daisy for all the orchids of the Pacific."

"Go along!" exclaimed Sam Hendon. "Fancy you, a Scotsman, preferrin' a daisy to a orchid worth two or three hundred pounds! Think of the money they'll fetch when they're put up for auction in Covent Garden!" He sniffed the warm aromatic air as he leaned over the rail. "Flowers? Can't you smell the scent of 'em, even out here? It's like Kew Gardens of a Sunday afternoon. And look down there at that flower drifting alongside of us."

Sam pointed down to the long green swell of the sea below him. It was littered with seaweed, fruit, banyan leaves and coco-nut shells; but the

flower that had attracted him was a gorgeous hibiscus, floating almost within reach. He was swinging a naked leg over the rail when a hand was laid on his shoulder.

“Be careful, Sam. Don’t you see that fellow shark?”

Sam had not observed the black fin moving lazily along the glassy surface.

“All right, doctor,” he laughed, drawing back. “I wasn’t thinking of giving him a breakfast.”

Dr. Molesey, having glanced at the floating flower, stood back under the shadow of the sagging mainsail and resumed his interrupted scrutiny of the island through his binoculars. Lowering the glass, he turned to the captain, who had now come on deck in a clean suit of white drill.

“I suppose we have made what you consider a good landfall, Croft?” the doctor questioned. “You have brought us to the Solomon Islands, right enough. But by the bearing of that mountain, we must be a good thirty miles out of our course. How’s that?”

Captain Croft shrugged his shoulders.

“We’re off the island of Malaita, where you wanted to be, sir,” he said. “If we’re a bit wide of our reckoning, it’s no fault of mine. I haven’t been able to work out our true position for days past. The chronometer’s out of tune, the charts are wrong, and there’s the everlasting equatorial current.”

Dr. Molesey shook his head incredulously.

“A capable shipmaster doesn’t allow his chronometer to go wrong,” he objected. “You neglected to wind it, just as you neglected to stream your patent log. When you failed to get an observation in the dull weather there were other ways of ascertaining your position, and you could have got Greenwich time by means of our wireless when we were in communication with the cruiser off Motuiti.”

“But I don’t understand your new-fangled wireless,” complained the captain.

“Perhaps not,” acknowledged the doctor. “But I do. So does Mr. Bagley ; so does young Wingrove. I am not asking you to understand our scientific outfit. It’s enough if you do your duty as a plain sailorman and keep things ship-shape. But I can’t say you do even that much. You were told a week ago that the main boom tackle needed repair, and it’s not done yet. The schooner may shake herself into kindling wood for all you care. Why don’t you see that the boats are properly lashed ? Why have you allowed the big anchor to hang outboard and knock holes in our planks ? It ought to have been stowed on deck when we left Nanumanga. You trust too much to luck, captain, just as you did when you got lost among the uncharted reefs of Sikiana.”

“Sikiana ? ” repeated Croft. “But I never shut my eyes for two nights. I brought her safely through, didn’t I ? ”

“Not you. It was sheer luck and the promptitude of young Wingrove that saved us from disaster. And now again you’ve brought us out of our course. I told you that it was important we should approach through the Santa Anna channel and slip into the lagoon unobserved by the natives, and you’ve brought us slap up against this dangerous east coast!”

The captain laughed derisively.

“We’ve got plenty of sea room,” he pointed out, “and a good score fathoms under our keel. Where’s the danger, doc?”

“Look landward,” pursued Dr. Molesey. “Look landward; and if you’re not blind you will understand. What do you make of those little columns of smoke sneaking up above the bush?”

Captain Croft stood with his legs apart and his hands in his pockets, contemplating the mountainous island and its densely-wooded slopes. Here and there above the feathery fringe of coco-nut palms tall pillars of blue smoke rose into the sunlit air.

“I suppose they indicate native villages, sir,” he carelessly decided.

“No,” insisted the doctor, “they are signal fires. We have been discovered. There’s not a mother’s son on this side of Malaita but knows this schooner is here and is wondering whether she’ll dare to enter the lagoon. I’ll undertake to say that the eyes of hundreds of cannibals are looking straight at us now from the ambush of

those palm trees. By the time we reach our anchorage, thousands of bush savages with their poisoned spears and tomahawks will be waiting in their war canoes to receive us."

"Oh, I'm noways afraid of a gang of South Sea natives, even if you are," the captain retorted, turning on his heel. "Gabbitas," he called to one of the seamen, "lay aft to the wheel. We'll luff up on the port tack. Tait," he added to the engineer, "you can get your sewing machine to work until a decent breeze comes along. Here, you, Wingrove, none of your lazy slacking. I've had enough of it. Lay aloft and keep a smart look-out for shoals."

Chris Wingrove saluted politely as he passed, and ran forward to climb to the fore cross-trees.

"Lazy, good-for-nothing kid!" muttered the skipper. "We want men, not schoolboys, on a trip like this."

"I should hardly accuse Wingrove of laziness," observed Dr. Molesey. "He attends to his duties splendidly. And besides, I would remind you, Croft, that he is my assistant; he is not one of the working crew, and you have no right to order him about as if he were. In future please remember that."

## CHAPTER II

### SOMETHING IN EXCHANGE

**B**Y the time Christopher Wingrove had comfortably settled himself as look-out in the fore cross-trees, the *Albatross* had caught up a light breeze and her sails were drawing. She heaved lazily on the mile-long ocean swell that rolled landward to break in foamy surf on the barrier reef.

Presently, when Angus Tait had coaxed his paraffin engine to work, the propeller ruffled the smooth water under her stern and she moved with increasing headway, southward along the green coast.

From his high perch, Chris could look down into the clear emerald depths, where fish of strange shape and brilliant colour could be seen darting among the swaying weeds and branching coral far beneath the schooner's keel. It was like a submarine garden; but his eyes were drawn always to the sunlit island with its endless groves of coco-nut palms and feathery tree-ferns. He enjoyed being aloft in the foretop when land was in sight. Here, for his own convenience, he had rigged up a telephone, communicating with the deck-house and Dr. Mole-



sey's laboratory, so that he could report anything of special interest that he might happen to see.

He waited until Dr. Molesey had entered the deck-house, and then took up the receiver.

"I've counted seven of those signal smokes, doctor," he announced, "and there's a new one now rising on the shoulder of the mountain. But that's not what I rang you up for. I want to tell you that there's an enormous butterfly alighted on the topsail above my head. I can't capture him, he's beyond my reach, but he's as big as a swallow, quite ten inches across the wings. He's made of dark green velvet, splashed with rubies. I wish I could land him. We'd send him to the British Museum."

"I expect we shall find others as big when we go ashore," the doctor responded. "They kill them with shot-guns in the Solomons, you know. Never mind butterflies just now. Keep your eye on the island. I'm anxious about those signal fires. Ring me up again if you see anything suspicious."

It was an hour later when Chris hailed the deck with the cry of "Sail-ho on the starboard bow!" and again he took up his telephone receiver.

"We're abreast of a gap in the reef," he told the doctor. "I can see a native village on the far side of the lagoon, and three huge canoes, crowded with naked blacks, are coming out. They're in a tremendous hurry, paddling like

fiends. Mr. Bagley's got his eye on them now. He seems to think they only want to board us to do trade. But I'm pretty sure they're war canoes. I wish you'd have a look at 'em."

He saw Dr. Molesey come hurriedly out on deck and train his binoculars on the swiftly approaching canoes. Mr. Bagley, the chief officer, went to his side, and Angus Tait joined them. The canoes were very large, with high graceful ends curiously carved and decorated with scrolls and lines of pearl shell and cowries.

About a hundred woolly-headed and very black natives worked in each with their club paddles, which they used with amazing skill and regularity of stroke, sending the long light craft rushing through the blue water. They were making a slant to head off the schooner, to board her and take possession of her—as they might easily have done had she been under sail alone.

Angus Tait returned to his engine to put on more speed, and while Dr. Molesey went below by way of the companion stairs, Chris Wingrove watched the canoes with growing excitement as they came nearer and nearer. He knew that the savages could do no harm yet. He wanted to see them closely. He was intensely interested in them.

With her 110 horse-power auxiliary engine working at full pressure and all her sails drawing, the *Albatross* quickly gathered headway and

very soon outdistanced the canoes, which came to an abrupt stop in the frothy wake, the savages resting on their paddles and staring in amazement at the white-hulled vessel with the unaccountable speed.

They could not know that her swift movement was connected with the strange chug-chug noise that they heard, or with the stuttering puffs of vapour that issued from the exhaust in her hollow steel mainmast. With a wild yell of disappointment they shook their evil-looking weapons at the escaping schooner and slowly turned back to their lagoon.

At eight bells Chris was relieved by Tom Squirrel, one of the able seamen, and was for the time off duty. As a privileged member of the expedition he was berthed aft with the officers, and when he had taken his breakfast in the saloon and changed into his tropic clothes, he returned on deck to find that the sight of those menacing savages had impressed Captain Croft with a wholesome dread of the Solomon Islands.

The hands were busy in the work of rigging up a significant double line fence of barbed wire about the schooner's rail, with festoons of the same material hanging like life-lines round her sides, while forward of the binnacle Mr. Pride, the second officer, was occupied with Sam Hendon in cleaning and oiling a formidable collection of Winchester rifles, Sniders, Lewis guns and Colt's revolvers.

“What’s the idea, Angus?” Chris inquired of the engineer. “We’re not going into action. We’ve never needed such defences at any of the other islands.”

Angus smiled grimly.

“I’m thinkin’ you’ll soon understand the need of it,” he answered. “These Solomon Islanders have an astonishing skill in swimming out and climbing over a vessel’s sides when she’s lying at anchor in a lagoon. And it’s just as well to be ready for such visitors.”

“Let rifles and cartridges be served out to all hands,” the captain ordered. “We must leave nothing to chance. If I had my way, we should give a wide berth to this blistering island. But we’re bound to enter the Su’u Lagoon to report ourselves to the Resident Commissioner and to fill our water tanks.”

“Is it still George Drummond that’s commissioner in these parts, captain?” inquired Angus Tait.

“I believe that’s his name,” nodded Captain Croft. “Do you know him, Tait?”

“Weel do I know him,” answered the engineer. “He’s a wonder, is Geordie. The biggest cannibal savage in the Solomons is a docile lamb when Geordie’s around.”

“Ah, that’s a good thing,” said the captain with a deep breath of relief. “Our anchorage will be safe, anyhow, protected by a capable white man under the Union Jack.”

In the early afternoon the *Albatross* was sailing close abreast of a line of tumbling white surf. Across the jagged confusion of outer reef a background of palms and lofty thatched roofs indicated the position of Su'u. As she ran on, a stretch of calm sea showed a break in the reef. The wheel was put down, Tait again threw on the propeller and the sails were taken in. She rounded a jutting point of coral and slowly entered the quiet lagoon, followed by sharks.

"I see no sign of the Union Jack," muttered Abel Croft in nervous apprehension. He sounded the siren and flocks of parrots and birds of paradise took flight above the palms.

"By the mark five," cried Gabbitas, working the lead line.

"Mr. Drummond is perhaps having an afternoon sleep," conjectured Dr. Molesey. "There's a bungalow at the mouth of the creek among the pandanus palms yonder. I expect that's his home. We might get right up to his quay."

"Too far in," decided the captain. He rang the indicator and the engine promptly slowed down. "Let go the anchor, there!" he commanded.

The anchor chain was paid out, but the anchor refused to move. One of the flukes had ground its way through the timber heads and was firmly jammed. It occupied many minutes to get it free, and the schooner was drifting inward towards a jungly side of the harbour. But at

last there was a heavy splash and the chain grated through the hawse hole with a loud rattle that might have been heard miles away. Still there was no sign of the Commissioner, and not a native to be seen.

"Looks as if they'd gone off on a holiday," laughed Sam Hendon. "What price our wire entanglements?"

"They'll mebbe be needed even yet," returned the engineer. "I'll be bound there's hundreds of natives watchin' us. They're not missing an eye-winker."

Mr. Knight, the young electrician, was getting the electric motor to work in the launch already lowered to the foot of the accommodation ladder, while the second mate was passing loaded rifles and other material down to Chris Wingrove in front of the engine box.

"Be careful, now," cautioned the captain, when all was ready. "If you see any suspicious movements or hear any suspicious sound in among the trees, come right back. Don't step ashore. Wait till Mr. Drummond appears or sends a messenger down to you."

The second mate took the tiller, Mr. Knight was in charge of the motor. Tom Squirrel was stationed forward, and Chris Wingrove posted himself in the cockpit. With a further caution from the captain they started shoreward. The bright verdure of palms and ferns and flowering bushes became more and more beautiful

with the nearer approach, but still there was no sign of human inhabitants. Nothing happened until the launch was within two hundred yards of the rough, stone-built sally-port. Then suddenly a small canoe dashed into sight from among the mangroves beyond, paddled by a solitary youth with shining brown skin and a fuzzy mop of hair in which the wing feathers of a red bird of paradise fluttered.

His agitated face was scored with tattooing, the lobes of his ears were pierced with large holes, expanded with wooden plugs, and a large turtle-shell ring was suspended from his nose. He looked very barbaric; but what surprised Chris Wingrove was the unexpected fairness of his skin and the terror in his big dark eyes. He paddled in desperate haste straight for the launch, calling aloud as if in fear of some unseen enemy :

“ Save ! White man ! Save ! ”

Tom Squirrel covered him with his rifle, and he ducked, but continued his desperate paddling. Mr. Pride thrust over the tiller to avoid a collision, and the launch swerved round. As he came within reach the youth flung himself forward and caught at the gunwale with trembling hands that were wet with perspiration.

At this moment Chris Wingrove was looking back to the mangroves. He saw a large war canoe shoot out from among the trees, followed by another and yet another.

“Back! Back to the schooner, quick!” he cried. “There’s a whole fleet of war canoes coming after us!”

The youth clinging to the launch glanced over his shoulder.

“Them fella bushmen!” he gasped. “You fella white man you no go shore. Them bad man belong bush, go catch’m fella ship, kill’m plenty, kai-kai too much, eat you fella white man. I speak you true. I no gammon along you. My name Koroku. I all same friend belong Marster Drummond.”

He drew his frail canoe closer alongside. Chris Wingrove caught him by the wrist and, looking down into the canoe, he saw a curious round bundle in the covering of a torn and dirty Union Jack held tightly between Koroku’s bare feet.

From one of the foremost of the war canoes there came a rifle shot, and a shower of arrows filled the air.

“You shall have something in exchange for that,” cried Mr. Pride as a bullet chipped a splinter off the gunwale under Chris Wingrove’s elbow. And, pulling out the safety pin, he flung a small depth-charge over the stern in the direction of the swiftly oncoming savages.

As they approached the place where the missile had fallen, an immense column of smoke and spray leapt into the air, and there was a terrific explosion.



## CHAPTER III

### THE RED BIRD OF PARADISE

SAM HENDON had climbed half-way up the main shrouds to get a fuller view of the launch as she sped shoreward over the glassy lagoon. It seemed to him that the island was uninhabited, or at least that the Commissioner's bungalow and its neighbouring thatched huts had been deserted. There was no sign or movement among the palm trees to show that any natives were aware of the newly-arrived *Albatross*.

Then, as Sam's busy eyes searched along the shores, the small canoe with its solitary occupant had darted out from a hidden creek among the mangroves. It turned quickly towards the approaching launch, as if the native working desperately at his paddle were an escaping fugitive making for the nearest refuge.

While he watched, Sam saw the tall prow of a huge war canoe moving slowly through the green curtain of feathery palms that formed a projecting point of the island. The carved peak and the forward part of the canoe came in sight, and he could make out the woolly heads of the savages swaying to and fro as they worked their unseen paddles.

There was a crowd of evil-looking warriors at

the bow. One pointed excitedly at the fugitive in the small canoe, now half-way between the shore and the launch. The paddles were plied, and the long, slim war canoe dashed forward into full view, followed by many others. Sam estimated that in each of them there was not fewer than a hundred naked savages.

He scrambled down to the deck. But Captain Croft, Dr. Molesey, and Angus Tait had already seen what was happening, and Mr. Bagley had snatched at the lanyard of the electric siren to sound three shrieking blasts, which were the signal for the launch to come back to the schooner.

“That big flotilla didn’t put out to give chase to one insignificant cockboat,” declared the first officer. “They’ve been waiting in ambush back of the headland until we should be lying at anchor.”

“The leader is one of the three we saw this morning,” added Dr. Molesey. “I know that canoe again by its high beak and enormous figurehead. The eyes painted on the bows, too, are unmistakable. But she’s more crowded now. She has picked up reinforcements coming through the lagoon. They’ve been watching us all the time.”

“What in thunder’s Pride up to, bothering with that native?” questioned the captain. He was exceedingly nervous at sight of the menacing savages. “Why doesn’t he hurry back when he’s called? They’ll cut him off if he doesn’t

look out. And then the brutes will come along here to the schooner. And we're at their mercy, with the anchor down and the engine asleep. We can't escape!"

"Mr. Pride seems to be rescuing the runaway, sir," observed Angus Tait. "It's the small canoe they're after just now; though I wouldn't say they've not got their greedy eyes on us as well."

"I can't think what has become of the Commissioner," deplored the anxious captain. "It's his duty to protect ships coming into his lagoon. You told me he had the savages well in hand, Tait. But this doesn't look like it."

The launch had now turned and was towing the canoe alongside, the rescued native clinging desperately to the gunwale, held there by Chris Wingrove. The war canoes, of which Sam Hendon counted eleven, were dividing into two squadrons, one on either beam of their leader. It was from the leader, now astern of the launch, that the first rifle shot was fired.

"They'll not overhaul the launch," Mr. Bagley decided. "She's showing them a clean pair of heels already."

"Ay, but they're within firing range, and they've got rifles," added the engineer. "What's Mr. Pride doing—see?"

The second mate had stood up in the stern-sheets of the launch and was throwing something.

“A stick of dynamite, I expect,” conjectured Mr. Bagley, “unless he took a depth-charge with him.”

“He did that,” nodded the engineer. “It was one of the small ones. Its bark’ll be worse than its bite, I’m thinking.”

Its bark was certainly startling. The watching group on the schooner’s deck saw the immense column of spray and smoke rise from the deep blue water midway between the launch and the foremost canoe. The deafening explosion followed, and when the fountain of spray subsided two of the nearer canoes were seen floating bottom upward, rocking on the agitated surface and surrounded by a confusion of loose paddles, discarded weapons and the bobbing black heads of the swimming savages.

The launch was now running home at full speed. Chris Wingrove, glancing astern to know the effects of the explosion, saw the head and shoulders of a giant shark rise in the midst of the swimmers.

“Look! Look at the sharks!” he cried. “Aren’t we going to turn back and save some of those savages from the sharks, Mr. Pride?”

He had himself seen quite half a dozen of these tigers of the lagoon shoot upward from the depths. But even as he spoke he observed that they were making no movement towards the natives that were swimming so close to them. One of the monsters, indeed, came up

tail-foremost, and then fell on its side and lay motionless.

“Don’t trouble about the sharks,” said Mr. Pride. “Can’t you see they’re dead? That depth-charge has done for them. As for the savages, they can swim ashore. They’re more frightened than hurt.”

Some of them made for the island, some got astride of the capsized canoes; many of them, however, preferred to swim to the schooner, and the launch was followed by a long procession of woolly heads and glistening black arms.

The davit falls had been lowered and the launch glided smoothly beneath them. Angus Tait shouted down from the deck.

“Lift the canoe aboard of you, and we’ll hoist you all up together. Have a care of the barbed wire as you come up.”

Sam Hendon worked the winch, and the launch, with the canoe lying along it, was soon hoisted up and swung inboard.

In the canoe were many coco-nuts, yams and ripe bananas.

“Looks as if he’d been provisioning himself for a long voyage,” remarked Tait. And, turning to the young native, he asked: “What name you fella walk along here?”

He spoke in sandalwood English, which the native seemed to understand, for he promptly answered:

## THE RED BIRD OF PARADISE 29

“ Me altogether too much fright along fella bushaman. Malaita no good along this fella. All finish. Me walk away. Me no gammon along you. Me good fella boy, stop along white man. My word.”

“ What d’ye call yourself ? What fella name you keep ? ” asked Tait.

“ Koroku,” the boy answered, looking apprehensively over the side towards the war canoes that were gathering round in a threatening circle.

“ Koroku ? ” repeated Dr. Molesey, standing near. “ That’s the native name of the bird whose feathers he’s wearing—the red bird of paradise. See if you can get him to tell you anything about the Resident Commissioner, Tait. Hullo ? What’s that ? ”

A yell of pain had sounded from overside. The doctor crossed to the rail and looked down, to see that one of the swimming savages, trying to climb on board, had entangled himself in a twisted festoon of barbed wire. He was a fierce-looking barbarian, with huge ear-plugs and carved nose-ring ; and, gripped between his blackened teeth, he carried a wicked-looking knife. Struggling to free himself from the entanglement, he fell back with several deep scratches showing red on his tattooed body and muscular limbs.

Others of the islanders attempted to climb on board. They discovered that there was no barbed wire at the gangway, and that there

were battens that afforded a hold for foot and hand; but whenever one of them mounted by this seemingly easy way and got his tattooed face on a level with the bulwark rail, it was to look into the shining barrel of Tom Squirrel's revolver.

One of the war canoes approached the schooner, apparently with the intention of taking her by assault, while pretending to have come near with the purpose of picking up their tribesmen who were still swimming. When the last of them was rescued the long canoe was broadside on to the schooner's port side, with hardly half a dozen fathoms of space between. The off-side paddles were being cunningly worked as sculls to bring her nearer and nearer.

"There's another on our starboard side, sir," Chris Wingrove reported to Mr. Bagley. "Tait says they're headhunters and cannibals to a man."

"I don't doubt it," nodded the officer. "I never saw such a villainous gang in my life. Here, Chris, you can aim straight. Take this squib—it's only a Fifth-of-November firework—put a light to it, and throw it nicely, so that it'll drop among their feet. If that doesn't frighten them off we must give them a stick of dynamite."

Chris applied a lighted match to the fuse of touch paper, mounted with his feet on a bollard and took deliberate aim. The smoking squib fell cleanly in the centre of the huge canoe,

spluttered for a moment among the naked legs, and then leapt about with a long succession of explosions—rip-rap-crack-fizz-rip-rap-bang!—while the savages yelled in frantic alarm and tumbled over one another in the effort to escape from the strange fiery demon in their midst.

When the squib had exhausted itself Chris raised his hand as if to throw another; but the savages seized their paddles and sheered off beyond possible danger.

As Chris strode across the deck to deal similarly with the second canoe on the starboard side he saw Angus Tait with young Koroku beside a pile of coco-nuts and bananas. Tait was stooping over the strange round bundle in its wrappings of the tattered Union Jack, which had been lying in the bottom of the small canoe. He had drawn aside a fold of the torn flag and was staring aghast at the contents. Then he took up a marline-spike from the deck and enclosed it in the bundle, tying it up very carefully.

The second war canoe was already close alongside. Chris Wingrove was striking a match to light the fuse of another squib when the engineer elbowed him aside, holding the bundle in his two hands. He raised his hands above his head and, bending over the rail, muttered something which Chris did not hear, and dropped the weighted bundle into the lagoon between the schooner and the big canoe.



The savages, watching him, burst into a wild yell of unmistakable anger. Chris lighted his second squib and threw it into the yelling throng. The effect was the same as in the earlier case, spreading terror and consternation. Paddles were seized and plied in a mad panic to escape. The whole flotilla drew slowly away, and very soon the *Albatross* was left quietly riding at her anchor; although still it was suspected that the canoes were only hidden behind sheltering points of the thickly-wooded island, waiting in ambush to creep out once more in the darkness of night.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE SIMPLE FACTS

CHRIS WINGROVE stood beside the doctor and Captain Croft when Angus Tait strode up to them.

"We've not done with them even yet," the captain was saying. "For two pins I'd up anchor and quit. We can do very well with what fresh water is left in our tanks. But we've got to report to the Resident Commissioner and get a clean bill of health. Where he has hidden himself, I can't think. Does he expect us to go hunting him up?"

"If it's Geordie Drummond you're speaking about, sir," interposed Angus Tait, "I'm able to tell you that he's dead. The cannibals got him. His remains—if you can call it so—are now at the bottom of the lagoon. They were brought out by the boy in the canoe, decently covered in a Union Jack. That's why the head-hunters gave chase to Koroku, and why Koroku was so eager to take refuge in the launch."

The captain was horrified, the doctor stared at the engineer in dumb amazement; Chris Wingrove began vaguely to understand why Angus had weighted the bundle with a marline-spike.

“What did the boy tell you?” asked Dr. Molesey in an awed voice.

“He just told me the simple facts, sir,” Angus answered. “It seems that Koroku has some white blood in him. He doesn’t know the name or the country of his father. But he’s not a thoroughbred Solomon Islander; although you can see by the look of him that he’s a genuine savage. He understands English better than he can speak it. I gather that it was Mr. Drummond who taught him. He lived with Mr. Drummond in the bungalow yonder, and was with him whenever he visited the other islands of the group. The Commissioner, a countryman of my own and a real nice man, was the only white person on Malaita. He got along famously with the peaceful, salt-water islanders, who were faithful to him. But there was always trouble with the headhunting bushmen of the interior—these savages that we have seen to-day. They’re the same lot that cut out the *Scottish Chief* a year or two ago and massacred the whole crew, and they would have done the same by the *Albatross* this forenoon if it hadna been for our engine.”

“There’s not a doubt about that,” commented Captain Croft. “And that was their game just now when they came out in their war canoes.”

“But what about Mr. Drummond, Tait?” urged Dr. Molesey. “You say the cannibals got him?”

“Yes,” resumed the engineer. “They got him and all his household and all the natives in the village here. There was a big cannibal feast. Young Koroku was the only one who escaped. It happened about a week ago. Koroku risked his life a hundred times over to rescue what remained of Mr. Drummond.”

“Look here, doctor,” the captain interrupted in unmistakable agitation. “Let us up anchor and get out of this. It isn’t safe from one minute to another. Let us get out of it.”

“My dear man,” returned the doctor, “look at the setting sun. It will be black darkness in a few minutes’ time. We’re fixed in the lagoon for the night, anyhow.”

“We can manage with our searchlight,” objected Captain Croft.

“Very possibly,” admitted Dr. Molesey. “But we can’t slip out without being seen, and the moment you begin to lift your anchor those canoes will be round us like a swarm of hornets. From what I’ve heard and read about Solomon Islanders, the one way to deal with them is to show a bold front. If you turn from them they’ll have you in the back.”

“That’s their way, sir,” agreed Angus Tait. “And what’s the good of our Lewis guns, our Winchesters, our depth-charges and dynamite, if we canna defend ourselves against a parcel of savages that are frightened off by a schoolboy cracker?”

“There is another thing, Croft,” pursued the doctor. “It is our duty to report this terrible affair to the proper authorities. Even at this moment there may be one of His Majesty’s cruisers within reach of our wireless, and we must at least try to communicate.”

He turned to Chris Wingrove, who was seated near on the cabin skylight.

“That’s a nice quiet job for you, Chris,” he smiled. “Send out an S.O.S. and listen-in for an answer.”

During the two hours after sundown Chris was occupied in the wireless cabinet amidships, trying rather hopelessly to get into communication with any ship or island station that might be provided with aerials. His dinner was handed in to him by Sam Hendon.

“I don’t believe those natives in the canoes are really cannibals, do you, Chris?” said Sam as he peeled a ripe banana.

“Oh yes, I do,” returned Chris. “In fact, I’m sure of it. You mustn’t think because the Solomon Islands are British that the natives are as mild as this coco-nut milk that you’ve brought me. Why, you’ve only to look at the chart to see how little is known of them. Many of the islands have never been explored. No white man has ever been in the interior of Malaita or Guadalcanar. The bushmen are absolutely untamed; they’re simply wild animals, and that’s all that anybody knows about them,

except that they're cannibals and headhunters. Headhunters? Why, they collect human heads the same as you or I might collect foreign stamps, only with them it's something more serious than a hobby. Don't wait for the dishes. Hop off! You take my attention off my job."

He was exceedingly patient listening for messages that never came, and he was glad when at last Dr. Molesey relieved him.

"It's quite possible that ours is the only set of aerals within a thousand miles of this lagoon," said the doctor as he fixed the phones about his ears. "But we must peg away at it. Hush! Go on out. I think I hear something. Tell them to keep quiet on deck."

When Chris went out of the cabinet he saw Mr. Knight opening up the searchlight apparatus. Mr. Bagley and Angus Tait were aft at the taffrail conning the lagoon and the shores of the island through their marine glasses. Chris went up to them.

"Dr. Molesey is listening-in, sir," he reported, "and he hopes the schooner will be kept very quiet. He's in touch with someone."

"Very good, Wingrove," nodded Mr. Bagley. "We'll be like mice. But there's something going on at the rear of the village over there. Have a look."

Chris did not need the binoculars. Even as he took hold of them he made out the sinister shapes of several war canoes creeping from

beyond the mangroves. The schooner's searchlight shot forth a long and brilliant beam upon them and their paddles abruptly ceased to work.

Their attempt at making a surprise attack was wholly frustrated; the white men were not asleep. They were strange and wonderful people, these white men, with their canoes that needed no paddles, their fireballs that made the lagoon jump up, and their serpents that leapt about spitting flames. And now they were making daylight in the middle of the night, so that every palm and bush and blade of grass showed up green, as if the sun were shining!

"A rocket would maybe startle them, sir," suggested Angus Tait.

"Too much noise for the doctor," objected Mr. Bagley. "Wait till he gets his message through. But we can give them some red fire. Chris, you know where to find the stuff. Fetch it up."

Undaunted by the searchlight, which did no more harm than reveal their movements, the savages again plied their paddles, dividing their forces, as before, into two sections to encircle the schooner and close round upon her in a tightening ring. They tried to gain time by their speed, and to the watchers in the *Albatross* their pace was astonishing. The circle was joined before Chris Wingrove reappeared on deck with the material for the red fire.

The powder was lighted on one of the cook's

frying-pans, forward of the galley, and the whole lagoon was illumined by the crimson glare, while the searchlight was played through it upon each of the canoes in turn, and the savages yelled in fearful consternation, afraid now to come nearer. Some of them, however, were bold enough to discharge their Snider rifles, and they were within close enough range for their bullets to patter against the schooner's outer planks.

It was during this pandemonium that Dr. Molesey came rushing out of the wireless cabinet.

"I can't make out another word while all this unearthly racket is going on," he complained to Mr. Bagley. Then, seeing the captain, he added: "I've picked up a cruiser, Croft. She's off the island of Nitendi, in the Santa Cruz group. I'm told that we've to stick to our present anchorage until she arrives."

"Oh, my birthday cake!" exclaimed the captain. "We shall all be turned into long pig by then! Look around at all these canoes!"

"Bring along the rockets, Tait," ordered the first officer, "and a few sticks of dynamite. Don't forget the detonators. Go and help him, Wingrove. And you, too, Hendon. And look smart about it. They'll close in on us soon."

The red fire was soon burned out. But it was followed by blue fire, which was equally alarming to the savages, who still kept a discreet distance. They appeared to be short of ammuni-



tion, for their rifle fire was not continued. But perhaps they were reserving it for close quarters.

Hendon rigged up a revolving tripod stand abaft the mainmast, where the fireworks would not interfere with the aerals. Wingrove fixed a rocket at a slight angle and applied a light. The rocket hissed upward with a long wriggling trail of sparks, and then burst high up with a loud bang, dropping its shower of glowing balls of blue and red fire directly over the canoes on the starboard side. A maroon was sent up next, spreading terror with its deafening explosion, and then three more rockets of different kinds were fired in other directions.

The savages were in so much terror over this demonstration of noise and fire that they lost all sense of their intended purpose. Instead of keeping to their circular formation they fell into hopeless confusion, paddling hither and thither and quarrelling and fighting when their canoes came into violent collision.

“If they dare to come nearer,” said Captain Croft, “we will give them a Mills’ bomb or two, and a taste of our Lewis guns.”

“We are instructed by the commander of the cruiser to defend our ship at all costs,” the doctor informed him. “And he warns us against allowing a single savage to set foot on our decks.”

“I’m glad to hear it, sir,” said the captain. “But it seems we’ve already allowed one of them

on board. What about that youngster with the red feathers in his head-dress ? ”

“ Koroku ? Oh, he’ll do no harm. He’s sound asleep in the cable tier. Seems to know by instinct that he’s safe among white men.”

“ Nevertheless, mischief will come of him, sir,” grumbled Captain Croft. “ Take my word for it, mischief will come of him.”

“ Look ! Mr. Bagley, look ! ” cried Wingrove “ They’re closing in on us now ! ”

## CHAPTER V

### ATTACK AND DEFENCE

**M**R. KNIGHT had swung the long, piercing beam of the searchlight round and was keeping it concentrated upon a patch of the lagoon, where three of the war canoes had come together in close confusion. The savages in them were fighting amongst themselves.

Possibly they were of different villages on the big island, serving different tribal totems, and therefore at enmity with each other. The one in the middle had certainly been attacked at close quarters by the other two. A fierce broadside battle was going on within the bright beam of the schooner's searchlight. Barbaric war-cries and the clashing of spears and clubs could be heard across the intervening water.

Then a fourth canoe was seen racing up to join in the fray. It crashed bow-on into the nearest, ramming it amidships, the tall prow cutting its way through the thin wood. Many of the savages were flung into the lagoon.

"They're but bushmen, sir," cried Angus Tait. "They're not the salt-water islanders that can swim."

"Keep your light playing on them, Mr. Knight," ordered Captain Croft. "Let them

see what they're doing. That's all we can do to help them."

This is what was done. It was impossible to put out a boat to the rescue, but already many of the natives struggling in the water had seized paddles and floating pieces of wreckage and were striving to climb back into their disabled canoe, while those who could swim were assisting their incapable friends.

But this keeping of the searchlight in one direction over the port side of the *Albatross* left [a good half of the lagoon in a darkness which encouraged the savages lying off the starboard side to bring their canoes nearer to the anchored schooner. They dashed forward like a pack of wolves upon their quarry, and it was his discovery of this manœuvre which caused Chris Wingrove to call out :

"Look, Mr. Bagley, look ! They're closing in on us !"

Without waiting for an order he crossed to the open box under a hanging electric light abaft the mainmast and picked out a magnesium rocket. With Sam Hendon's help he fixed it in the holder of the tripod stand and applied a match. The rocket soared high into the still air, breaking into a ball of clear white light that floated slowly and steadily downward, revealing three great war canoes, crowded with warriors, their rifles, spears and clubs sticking out in all directions.

The magnesium light cast weird black shadows about them, making them look doubly formidable. Instead of retreating on being discovered, they spurred onward with a great splashing of paddles and a chorus of yells that were thrilling and awful in their savagery. They opened fire from their Sniders, aiming from the hip. A bullet smashed a pane of glass in the cook's galley.

"Give it 'em! Give it 'em!" cried Captain Croft, whipping out his Colt's revolver. "Here—Gabbitas—get your Lewis gun to work. Squirrel, lay aft here, with that Winchester. Where are your Mills' bombs, Pride? Give it 'em hot and strong!"

"No, sir," interposed Dr. Molesey. "There must be no needless killing. Those are the cruiser's orders."

Gabbitas already had his Lewis gun in position, with its long belt of cartridges. He had been an expert gunner in Flanders.

"Aim below their gunwales, Gabbitas," ordered Mr. Bagley, at his elbow. "Put 'em out of action, but don't kill."

Gabbitas had already pressed his trigger when the magnesium rocket went out. The quickly-repeated flashes from his gun cut the darkness, and there was a whirlwind clatter as he swept his aim along the dimly-seen line of paddles and moving black arms projecting over the side of the nearest canoe.

“ Belay ! ” commanded Mr. Bagley. “ That will do.”

Gabbitas ceased fire. The searchlight was swung round and directed downward as the canoes came close alongside. From stem to stern they were each as long as the *Albatross* herself; and their graceful lines and towering beaks, decorated with carved designs and inlaid shells, were wonderful examples of barbaric art.

Along the gunwale of the nearest, the paddle men were giving first-aid to their wounded arms and hands. At prow and stern, and from the connecting gangway running fore and aft between them cruel-looking savages were preparing to fling their poisoned spears, fixing arrows to their bowstrings, or gripping their fearsome battle clubs that bristled with shark's teeth.

Arrows begun to fly over the bulwarks of the *Albatross* and to rattle against mast and deck-house, or to plunge their barbed points into the upper planking. The night was full of noises.

“ Stave them off, there,” cried the agitated captain. “ Don't let them board us! Keep them off!” He had boasted that he was not afraid of a gang of South Sea natives, but he was now betraying a considerable amount of nervousness. The situation, however, was decidedly alarming. The warriors were evidently deter-

mined to gain their coveted prize by a final onslaught in mass.

There was a wide gap between two of the canoes. Mr. Pride had seen his chance. He had lighted the detonating fuse of a stick of dynamite, which he threw with deadly accuracy into the open piece of water. The resulting explosion lifted the two canoes and flung their occupants into hopeless confusion.

Some of the savages in their terror jumped overboard, preferring risks from prowling sharks rather than danger from the white man's magic. Yet many of them swam towards the schooner and attempted to climb her side, determined still to get on board of her. Here the barbed wire entanglements served their intended purpose, and many a naked limb was deeply scored by the vicious spikes.

One native, bolder than the rest, succeeded, however, in mounting to the quarter-rail. He got his knees upon its support and then his feet, ready to jump on board.

Chris Wingrove stood near him, unconscious of danger, looking forward along the deck to where he had seen a curious dark shape crawling stealthily athwart a gleam of electric light that shone through the cabin skylight. Chris was not aware of his peril. Neither sound nor shadow warned him of the savage climbing up behind him. He did not see the up-lifted spear poised ready to be plunged into his exposed back.

He was about to move forward when from the side of the skylight there came a revolver shot. A bullet sang over his head, a heavy weight fell upon the planks behind him, and a spear slithered past him along the deck. He wheeled round and saw the wet, black form of a savage lying at his feet, writhing, moaning, with empty hands clutching at the tattooed chest that heaved beneath the fingers.

Wingrove turned and ran forward, knowing that the bullet had not been meant for himself. He trod his bare foot on the shaft of the spear and stopped to look down at it in the glow from the searchlight. Then a dark shadow came between, a hand pushed him back.

“No, no. You no touch'm fella spear. Bushman spear poison too much. My word, you no touch!”

Chris looked up and beheld young Koroku standing in front of him with an automatic pistol in his fist. He realized that Koroku had saved his life.

“Thank you,” he said, and held out his hand.

Koroku submissively gave him the weapon.

“Piccaninny fella gun belong you he walk along plenty good,” he said, staring aside at the savage lying motionless on the deck. “Him fella bushman altogether finish. My word, he finish close up!” Then, glancing inquiringly at Chris, he asked bluntly: “What fella name belong you?”



But if he wanted to know Wingrove's name, he did not wait to hear it. With a shrill scream of terror he turned and fled along the deck with a big black dog following close at his heels.

"Shot! Shot!" cried Chris. "Come back here!"

Shot was Dr. Molesey's Labrador retriever, one of the ship's company. He was a dog of such startling size as Koroku had probably never seen in his life before, and he had always evinced a curious dislike of natives.

Koroku may well have imagined the dog to be the ghost of the lifeless Solomon Islander chasing him to take swift vengeance. In obedience to Chris Wingrove's call, however, Shot abandoned his pursuit of the young native and returned, wagging a repentant tail.

"Go back to your kennel," Chris ordered, and the retriever trotted away and escaped into the deck-house.

The Lewis gun, the dynamite and the barbed wire had apparently proved to the headhunters that the white men on board the schooner were prepared to defend themselves with weapons more powerful and harmful than red fire, noisy rockets and a revolving searchlight.

The schooner, they knew, would be a valuable prize, if she could be captured, and there was no resident commissioner now to interfere with their freedom and their tribal customs. But although this trim, white-painted schooner

was smaller than many a trading and recruiting ship which they had successfully attacked and seized, yet it was not so simple and easy as it had seemed to be for the canoes to get near her.

The white men were too quick, too much awake; and their mysterious weapons were beyond the comprehension of the savage mind. It would have been better to wait and appear friendly and then fall upon them suddenly and unexpectedly when their eyes and backs were turned and their guns were asleep.

So the disappointed cannibals drew away, finally dispersed their close formation, and lay around in the secure shelter of their island bays.

## CHAPTER VI

### AN INTERESTING EXPERIMENT

**D**URING the rest of the night the searchlight still flashed its penetrating beam around the lagoon. All through the silent hours Angus Tait, relieved by his assistant, Sam Hendon, kept the dynamo at work, while a close watch was kept lest there should be signs of further hostilities. But at sunrise all was quiet, and there was not even a floating paddle to show that there had been any disturbance.

It was not discovered until daylight that the native who had fallen a victim to Koroku's timely bullet was an important headhunting chief. Chris Wingrove had come up in his rough working clothes to join in the exercise of washing the deck and to give help in cleaning up after the battle. He was accompanied by Dr. Molesey's dog.

"I'm going to keep this wicked-looking spear as a trophy, Mr. Pride," he told the second mate as he picked up the weapon that had so nearly cost him his life.

"Right," agreed Mr. Pride, "you can add a few arrows to your collection. But don't scratch yourself with their poisoned barbs. Perhaps you'd care to have some of the out-

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landish decorations from the chap lying under the sailcloth, abaft the skylight. I was going to chuck them overboard ; but the doctor wants to see them. I've sent Sam below to fetch that young native. Ah, here he comes, togged out in Sam's old pyjama pants."

Koroku shrank back at sight of the dog.

"Me fright along'm fella dog," he objected timidly. "What name he cross along me?"

"He isn't cross with you," Wingrove assured him. "He won't touch you. Don't be afraid. Make friends with him. He's like your Solomon Islanders. If he sees you're afraid he'll go for you."

Still Koroku shrank back. Shot growled deep in his throat and curled his lip.

"Quiet, Shot," Chris commanded. "He's a friend."

Shot sat down on his hindquarters and thumped the deck with his tail as he raised a friendly paw.

"Now stroke his head and show you're not afraid," said Chris. "Go on! Stroke him fella head. He plenty good dog belong fella white man."

Koroku steeled himself to the ordeal. Drawing a deep breath he dared to put out a hand and touch one of Shot's velvety ears.

"My word!" he exclaimed in surprise. "He altogether good dog. He no cross alonga me. He savee talk along fella white man too much."

“Yes,” nodded Wingrove. “He understands everything we say to him. And now that I’ve introduced you, don’t be afraid of him ever again.”

“Um,” Koroku responded. “Me like’m give fella bistic, fella yam.”

“All right,” smiled Wingrove. “You can feed him. We’ve got heaps of dog biscuit on board. But wait a bit. You’re wanted.”

Mr. Pride had removed the sailcloth that had covered the dead native. Koroku went nearer and stared down at the gruesome thing lying on the deck.

“My word!” he gasped in surprise. “Me fella savee him alla same Seto. He big fella marster belong Poonga Poonga, heap fella bad man altogether.”

“Oh, a chief, was he?” interrogated Mr. Pride. “Then I expect his people in Poonga Poonga will pay us another visit. They’ll want to get him back, or else collect someone else’s head to make up for the loss of his.”

Koroku assured him that this was so. But he hoped that the white men would not grant the headhunters such a favour. Seto, he explained, had been war chief of all the bushmen of Malaita, the leader of the raid on the Commissioner’s compound. He was, indeed, the actual savage who had taken Mr. Drummond’s life.

To give proof to this statement Koroku

pointed to the necklace of miscellaneous ornaments that decorated the dead chief's shoulders and chest. Amongst these there was a brass door-knob, the handle of a china cup, the burner of an oil-lamp, and, more conspicuous than all else, a gold hunter watch. It was at the watch that the boy pointed.

"Me savee that fella clock belong'm Marster Drummond," he said.

Mr. Pride cut the loop of coco-nut sennit by which the watch was suspended. Pressing the spring, he opened the burnished case and saw there an inscription intimating that the watch had been "Presented to Mr. George Drummond by the owners of the barque *Winifred* as a token of gratitude for his bravery in saving the vessel and her crew from marauding savages in the Solomon Islands."

While the mate was reading this, Sam Hendon and Chris Wingrove were looking down in boyish curiosity at the Chief's painted and tattooed face. It was the grimly forbidding face of a true head-hunting cannibal. The mouth was open, revealing the teeth, blackened by much chewing of betel nut, the perforated nostrils were thrust through with a bone bodkin the size of a lead pencil, and from a hole in the end of the nose there hung a large ring of carved clam shell. Both ears were pierced round with many holes of various sizes to accommodate such treasures as a clay pipe, a safety pin, an empty cartridge

case, porpoise teeth and other trifles. In a large hole in the lobe of the left ear was what Koroku at once recognized as Mr. Drummond's spectacle case. Sam drew it out very gingerly and found a pair of spectacles inside. It seemed as if the Chief had not succeeded in opening either the spectacle case or the watch.

"That bullet went near to smashing this nice chronometer," ruminated Mr. Pride as he turned the self-winding key. "Another half-inch and it would have been the watch instead of the Chief that got it. Yes, Chris, take possession of any souvenirs that are worth keeping. We'll heave the rest overside for the sharks and then set about washing the deck."

Dr. Molesey appeared from the companion while Sam Hendon was removing a formidable cane-knife from the Chief's belt.

"Have we come to any harm, Pride?" he inquired.

"No, sir," the officer answered; "nothing worse than a smashed pane of glass and a bullet hole in a door-panel. I can't imagine how these natives get hold of modern rifles—soft-nosed bullets, too!"

"I can guess," conjectured the doctor. "Many of the Solomon Islanders go as labour recruits to the Queensland plantations, you know, and they smuggle the Sniders back home with them."

"You talk along fella gun?" questioned Koroku.

“Yes. Where do the islanders get them?” pursued the doctor. “What name them fella bushman find fella gun stop along white man?”

Koroku explained that Mr. Drummond had kept many rifles and boxes of ammunition in a padlocked storeroom at his bungalow, and that these had been looted during the recent raid on the station. Mr. Drummond had always been troubled by the mysterious disappearance of the firearms served out to his trusted house-boys, who were taught how to use them, but were careless in leaving them lying around.

“By what happened last night,” said Wingrove, “Koroku himself had been taught pretty well. He took wonderfully sure aim; and quick, too.”

“We might even turn him into a useful member of our ship’s company,” reflected the doctor, contemplating the young savage. “I see someone has been good enough to supply him with a rag of civilized clothing. He’ll always be a savage, of course, with those big ear-holes and his tattooed skin. But we can get rid of that hideous nose-ring and the feathered head-dress. I wonder at Mr. Drummond enduring them.”

“The feathers are a lovely colour,” remarked Chris.

“The tattooing isn’t finished,” added Hendon. “The artist has only sketched it in, excepting the finished scroll on the right arm.”



“It would be a rather interesting experiment to civilize him,” resumed the doctor. “Should you care to take him in hand, Wingrove, and have a try? He belongs to you, I think, seeing that it was you who rescued him. Or does Mr. Pride claim him?”

“Oh, don’t shove him on to me, sir,” Mr. Pride objected. “Wingrove is welcome to him, so far as I’m concerned. Take him below, Wingrove. Give him a wash and a brush-up. Lick him into shape. Try him with white man’s food. And he can have that spare bunk in the seamen’s quarters.”

Koroku had wandered aside during this conversation about himself. He was exploring the schooner’s deck with lively curiosity, inquiring into the mysteries of the binnacle and the steering gear. Chris discovered him leaping like a cat into the main shrouds and climbing up hand over hand with the skill of an accomplished acrobat until he reached the top. There he hung suspended by one hand, as if he were about to drop to the deck. But swinging slowly round, he flung out his free arm and his two feet to the mast and drew himself to it, climbing down with astonishing ease, regaining the deck breathing as calmly as if he had never attempted the unfamiliar feat.

“You fella come along fella me?” Chris invited.

“Me likee walk along you too much,” agreed Koroku. “What name?”

“Me take you in fella cabin belong me,” Chris explained, pointing to the companion.

Koroku shook his head in doubt.

“No taboo?” he asked, as if he feared that he would be trespassing.

“No. I shall not let you do anything that’s taboo,” Wingrove assured him, leading the way down, back foremost. He had been schooled by Angus Tait never to allow a South Sea native, and especially a Solomon Islander, to come behind him.

Half an hour later the two reappeared on deck. Koroku was wearing a clean pair of white shorts, with a red silk waist scarf; but no other clothing. He had objected that “fella jacket him belong fella white man.” His nose-ring had been removed, and he still had his shell armlets and his red feather head-dress. The latter, he said, was his totem, which could not be discarded. He had had a hot bath, and his fluffy hair, now clean, had made the acquaintance of a comb. Even his nails had been trimmed.

Captain Croft stared at him with approval.

“If this youngster’s going to be one of our ship’s company,” he said to the doctor, “he’ll have to sign on in the usual way. I don’t relish being accused of kidnapping natives. I’m no blackbirder. And even if I were, I’d see my nose cheese and the mice eating it before I’d fill up from a rotten island like this. How’re you going to rate him, sir? Not as one of the deck hands, I hope?”

“ We can rate him as interpreter and guide,” suggested the doctor. “ He seems to know the native dialects and has visited most of the islands of the group. I am in hope that he may prove useful to the expedition.”

“ If you ask me,” retorted the captain, “ he’ll prove to be the expedition’s disaster.”

“ Well, I intend to take him ashore with me to-day,” Dr. Molesey announced, “ and we shall see how he shapes.”

“ Ashore ? ” gasped the captain. “ Have you gone off your head, sir ? Ashore on an island crowded with murderous man-eaters ? It’s lunacy, sir ; sheer lunacy ! ”

“ We will take the launch,” the doctor quietly decided. “ But we shall need a covering boat as well.”

“ What, and leave me alone on board without protection ? ” cried the captain in genuine alarm.

“ Not without protection,” the doctor reminded him. “ Mr. Bagley will remain on board to keep up communication with us. We shall take our portable wireless set, and can hurry back if there’s the least cause for alarm.”

“ It’s madness, rank madness and mutiny, sir,” declared the captain.

Nevertheless, Dr. Molesey had his way, and the two boats were equipped for their perilous adventure.

## CHAPTER VII

### HOW KOROKU GOT THE HEAD

IT is a usual and necessary precaution when a ship puts out a landing party on any of the Solomon Islands to send two boats ashore—one to land the men on the beach, the other to stand by and act as covering boat, in case of a sudden attack by treacherous natives.

Angus Tait, who was the only one of the crew of the *Albatross* who knew the Solomons intimately, insisted upon this precaution being taken.

“I allow it looks safe and peaceful just now,” he said when Dr. Molesey announced his determination to go ashore. “There’s not a native in sight. But it’s possible that there are hundreds of headhunters waiting in ambush for just such a chance as we’re giving them. We shall need the covering boat. She can be towed by the launch.”

So the whale-boat as well as the electric launch was lowered.

Mr. Pride took command of the launch, with Gabbitas to steer and to take charge of a Lewis gun and a box of explosives. Tait was in command of the whale-boat, and with him at the four oars were Squirrel, Sam Hendon and Chris

Wingrove. Mr. Knight took the steering oar, with the doctor and Koroku beside him in the stern-sheets and the retriever at their feet. Only four were to go ashore, taking a portable wireless set with them to secure communication with the schooner.

“From the moment we step ashore,” cautioned Dr. Molesey as they started landward in the wake of the launch, “we must keep close company and watch out for hostile natives. At sight of one, we must retreat to the boat and back to the schooner. I may as well warn you to be careful not to cut or scratch your skins. The one thing to guard against in the Solomon Islands, apart from hostile natives, is any sort of graze, cut, or insect bite, in which poisonous germs can lodge and set up what are called Solomon sores. Koroku, here, appears to be quite free from these abominable ulcers, but natives and whites alike are tortured by them.”

“Ay,” added Tait, “and I doubt we shall few of us escape, sir. Many’s the Solomon sore I’ve endured. It eats away skin and muscle with extraordinary speed. From a pinpoint ulcer on the first day it’s the size of a sixpence on the second, and at the end of a week a crown-piece wouldna cover it. The only way to escape them is to avoid the Solomon Islands altogether.”

“Plenty fella sore stop too much along Marster Drummond,” observed Koroku with a grave headshake. “He no walk, no lift’m fella arm

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for shoot fella bushman. He altogether cross along'm fella sore."

"Ugh!" shuddered the doctor in disgust, "and yet they made a meal of him, I'm told? How did you get possession of his head, Koroku?"

The young native explained that while the headhunters were at their cannibal feast in a palm grove behind the compound, he had crept out of his hiding-place to the grass hut in which he knew that the loot belonging to the Chief, Seto, was stored.

The hut was not guarded by men, but it was nevertheless protected by a taboo sign in imitation of a crocodile. Koroku had been very much afraid to defy the awful warning of this taboo. It was a prohibition which every Solomon Islander would respect. There is no law more strict than that of taboo. It represents the South Sea Islander's idea of honour and honesty, and it meant for Koroku that if he, or any other native, should dare so much as to touch anything in that hut an avenging spirit would be on his track and he would be devoured by a giant crocodile.

But Mr. Drummond had been a good friend, whose wish was more powerful than any taboo. Koroku well knew that Mr. Drummond's greatest dread had been that he might one day fall into the hands of the Malaita headhunters. And now this awful thing had happened, and what was to be done?

Koroku was intensely superstitious. He believed that his dead master would be "cross" with him if he allowed a certain white head to be added to the enemy's collection of trophies. So he wasted no time in reasoning over the problem. Even though the ghostly crocodile should get him, he resolved to snatch that head from the possession of the savages.

He crept up to the tabooed hut and looked in through a gap in its slim cane palings. A gleam of sunlight fell upon the ragged folds of the Union Jack, which had been Mr. Drummond's sacred totem. Beyond it was a gruesome stack of human heads. He had known most of them in life. They were the heads of his fellow-houseboys and of the village natives who had been massacred. All were black but the one that was on the top of the unsightly pile, and this was the head of a white man with a long brown beard. At sight of it Koroku boldly defied the taboo. With his two hands he wrenched the canes apart and forced his way within. He opened the Union Jack and used it as a wrapper.

Just as he was escaping, with the precious bundle under his arm, one of the cannibals crawled up and saw him. With the help of his knife Koroku overpowered him. But the man's cry of alarm had been heard. The savages interrupted their feast to give chase. But Koroku knew the ground better than they; he laid false scents, led his pursuers astray,

then doubled back and concealed himself in the loft of the boat-house. For three days he lay in hiding. And then the white man's schooner had come into the lagoon.

"Fella bushman he no catchee," he concluded. "Me fella me stop along fella white man close up, altogether safe, my word."

The launch slowed down on nearing the Commissioner's landing-place. Both boats then backed inward, the launch following instead of leading, until the keel of the whale-boat crunched into the broken coral.

The beach and the village were deserted. Not a native could be seen.

"It looks quite safe, sir," said Tait. "Whatever happens, we've time to fill up one of the water breakers. There's sure to be good water somewhere near the bungalow."

Koroku pointed up the slope of the beach to a narrow path that seemed to lead into the scrub beyond a group of pandanus palms.

"Water he stop close up," he said. "Bushman he no stop. He finish. He gone along fella home belong him long way big bit. You fella doctor you no fright along bushman?"

"No," the doctor answered, "I don't see any need to be afraid."

The retriever was the first to jump ashore. He leapt over the stern and plunged into deep water, gave himself a shake, and ran about the beach with delight at being once again on



solid ground, barking joyously as he circled round and round. Chris Wingrove and Koroku, carrying a water breaker in a sling between them, followed ; and then Dr. Molesey and Mr. Knight joined them, walking up the coral shingle in single file. Tait, Squirrel and Hendon remained behind in charge of the landing boat.

## CHAPTER VIII

“ TO THE BOATS ! TO THE BOATS ! ”

IT was Shot, not Koroku, who led the way to fresh water. The dog ran among the palms with his nose to the ground and his tail in the air, and when the others next saw him he was drinking from a wide stream of delicious cool water that rippled past the bungalow compound.

Here they filled the breaker and left it partly submerged to be kept cool until Tait and Squirrel should come up for it.

Mr. Knight opened up his wireless apparatus, and while he communicated with the schooner his three companions stood apart, the doctor lighting a cigarette.

“ You fella like'm fella coco-nut ? ” Koroku inquired, gazing up into the topmost heights of a tall palm.

“ Yes, rather, ” answered Wingrove, searching round to see if any had fallen. “ But there's none about. We can't get any down from the trees. ”

Koroku looked puzzled.

“ What name we no get'm ? ” he questioned.

“ Me fella me get'm close up. ”

He strode towards a particularly tall, straight

palm. Dr. Molesey estimated that the cluster of coco-nuts at the top was quite a hundred feet from the ground. But Koroku seized the trunk in both hands, bent himself at the waist so that the soles of his naked feet rested flatly against the stem, and then went up, hand over hand, foot over foot, never stopping in his ascent, never even pausing. No part of him touched the tree but only his hands and feet. He just walked up like a fly, a hundred feet and more into the air, until he was hidden in the crown of feathery leaves and clustering nuts.

Dr. Molesey and Wingrove stared at each other in amazement at the feat.

“What a stunt!” exclaimed the doctor in admiration. “And what lungs he must have! Ah! Look out for your head!”

A large ripe coco-nut fell with a thud at their feet. When he had cast six of them to the ground, Koroku reappeared among the rustling leaves and came down as easily as he had gone up, breathing heavily, it is true, but not otherwise showing that there had been any strain on his muscles and lungs.

He proceeded, indeed, to gather the nuts together as if unconscious that his gymnastics had been observed. Picking out one of the largest, he took his knife from his belt, skilfully stripped off the thick husk, bored holes in the end of the nut, and passed it to Dr. Molesey to take a drink of the milk.

“ You like’m walk along bymeby see fella house belong Marster Drummond ? ” he inquired.

“ By and by, yes, ” said the doctor. “ I want first to have a look round along this creek. It seems to me a likely place to find orchids among the mangrove trees higher up. ”

“ Yes, ” acknowledged Mr. Knight. “ But we’d better make sure there are no natives spying round before we take any risks. No use going any farther if we can find what we want near at hand. ”

They tried to make Koroku understand what they were searching for. Dr. Molesey described an orchid, but the young native only pursed his lips in perplexity and said :

“ You talk along’m fella butterfly—big butterfly alla same bird ? ”

“ No, no, ” laughed the doctor. “ We’re not after insects or birds. Our explorations are in search of hitherto undiscovered specimens of the odontoglossum. Twig ? ”

Koroku smiled.

“ You fella white man gammon along me altogether, ” he chuckled. “ Me no savee them fella book talk belong white man. Me alla same fella dog. No savee big talk. ”

“ Wait till we’re back aboard the schooner, sir, and then show him the coloured prints in your orchid books, ” Wingrove suggested.

As they wandered along the bank of the

stream they saw many beautiful flowers, but no orchids.

The retriever went nosing about, flushing gorgeous birds of paradise and giving chase to enormous rats. Once, he remained out of sight until all became anxious. The doctor whistled, Chris called, Mr. Knight went cautiously in search among the tree-ferns. Koroku sniffed the scented air, and then drew back in terror.

“What’s up, kid?” cried Mr. Knight, seeing him tremble. “Seen a ghost?”

“Me fella fright too much,” the boy faltered.

Then Shot’s insistent bark sounded a little distance in advance. The two men gripped their rifles, Wingrove drew his revolver. They crept forward, neglecting for once the precaution of never allowing a native South Sea Islander to be behind them, though Koroku, they knew, was not a danger to be feared. He followed close at their heels, for his own protection. Suddenly he let out a yell and seized Chris Wingrove’s arm in an iron grip.

“Taboo! Taboo!” he cried. “Me big fright along fella crocodile. You no let’m gobble me up!”

Dr. Molesey had drawn aside a thick curtain of creeper vines, with his rifle ready to fire, suspecting a lurking bushman. But instead of shooting, he called sharply:

“Shot! Come to heel!”

The retriever stood at the margin of the

creek barking into the wide-open jaws of an enormous crocodile.

“Don’t fire, Molesey,” cried Mr. Knight, as the dog obediently drew back from the bank. “Leave the brute alone. The captain will think we’re in trouble if he hears a shot. Let’s get back to the boat.”

“My word!” exclaimed Koroku when they had left the creek and the crocodile behind. “I plenty fright along that fella crocodile. Him gone eat’m me altogether too much, suppose white man he no close up.”

He seemed to believe that his white companions and their dog had saved him from the avenging taboo.

“But how did he know the crocodile was there before he saw it?” Wingrove wanted to know.

“Why, he smelt him from afar—a sickly, musky smell,” the doctor explained. “I noticed him sniffing. I believe that boy has as keen a nose as my retriever. He ought to be jolly useful to us later on. Look at him now! Just look at him! He’s like a monkey!”

Koroku had climbed another tree and was cutting at the stalk of a great bunch of golden ripe bananas. Mr. Knight in the meantime was at work with his wireless instrument. He was expected to open up communication with the schooner every half-hour, to let them know if all was well. Closing his apparatus, he said quietly and without turning:

“Molesey, we must hurry up. I’ve had a message from the schooner. Bagley reports that there are three war canoes in sight up the lagoon. They’re coming our way!”

He looked round then, saw that he was alone, and before he was on his feet there came the sharp report of a shot among the trees.

Dr. Molesey had seen what he took to be an orchid on a high branch of one of the mangroves. He strode forward to examine the flower, but before he reached the tree he found himself confronted by a savage—an unmistakable headhunter. The bushman’s right arm was flung up, aiming a long spear with a point bristling with shark’s teeth. Molesey’s rifle was slung over his back. He had no time to seize it. But in the instant of his terror, in the moment when the fearful spear was poised, there came a revolver shot from beyond the tree. The savage wheeled round and fell, and Chris Wingrove ran up, crying aloud:

“This way, doctor—quick!”

He led off to where Mr. Knight was picking up his apparatus. Koroku, with his bunch of bananas in his arms, appeared from among the bushes.

“To the boats! To the boats!” shouted Chris, and to Koroku he added: “Bushman close up!”

Koroku dropped his bananas and took to his heels, leading the way back towards the

beach, glancing over his shoulder every now and then to assure himself that he was being closely followed.

As they came to the stream they saw that the water breaker was no longer where they had left it. Tait and Squirrel had carried it down to the whale-boat, taking some of the coco-nuts with them. Here Koroku slackened his pace to let the others run past him, and now Dr. Molesey went on ahead.

At the edge of the grove as he skirted the compound he looked anxiously down to the lagoon. The two boats had not moved. The launch still lay off shore, and the whale-boat's stern was aground, with Angus Tait leaning against it smoking his pipe as he talked with Squirrel and Hendon lying lazily in the stern-sheets. They all three started up alert on hearing Dr. Molesey's whistle. Angus knocked the ashes from his pipe and strolled unconcernedly up the beach.

“Go back!” cried the doctor. “Get ready to push off. Look smart!”

It was easy seeing that there was some alarming cause for haste. Tait ran back, helped to fix the water breaker in its chocks amidships, and waved a signalling arm to the launch. Dr. Molesey, Mr. Knight and Wingrove tumbled on board. But Koroku was not with them.

“Where's the boy?” Angus Tait asked, beginning to shove off.



Koroku then ran out from behind the compound, his arms loaded with pineapples. He dropped one of them, but did not wait to pick it up. He flung the fruit into the boat and jumped in after it, obviously very much frightened.

“Washee! Washee!” he cried excitedly. “Bushman he walk about close up!”

“Full speed ahead!” Tait sang out to the launch.

The propeller had hardly begun to move and the tow-rope to tighten when a shrill war-cry was heard among the palm trees, wild, thrilling and awful. Black figures were seen moving stealthily to and fro in the bush; at first only in separate couples, and then in a dense crowd pressing forward with a bristle of uplifted spears.

“They’re searching for their missing chief,” declared Tait as he watched.

“We’ve had a jolly narrow squeak, eh?” said Mr. Knight, laying his gun across his knees. “If we’d hung around that ghastly crocodile a minute longer we should have been headed off and done for!”

“Yes; off-headed for a certainty,” added the doctor.

He took up his Winchester as the yelling crowd of savages broke cover and charged in a compact mass down the slope of the beach.

Like a great pack of ravenous wolves they dashed forward and ran splashing into the

lagoon, flinging their spears and shooting their poisoned arrows at the two boats, now barely beyond range.

“ My word ! ” ejaculated Koroku, laying a quick hand on Chris Wingrove’s knee. “ What name that fella dog he no come along ? What name he stop ? ”

“ The dog ? ” cried Wingrove, with new alarm. “ Good gracious ! We’ve left him behind ! Doctor ! Doctor ! We must go back for Shot ! ”

## CHAPTER IX

### A SEA SCOUT'S STRATEGY

IT was true that in their extreme haste to push off and escape the savages they had left the retriever behind them on shore. Shot had followed Koroku into the compound when he went in to fetch the armful of pineapples. Koroku, alarmed at discovering the newly-landed bushmen creeping up through the scrub beyond the palm trees, had not waited to see if the dog was with him. And now the boats had shoved off and the savages were gathering in a mass between the shore line and the compound, and how was the abandoned retriever to be rescued?

"Yes, of course we must turn back for him," Dr. Molesey decided. "We can't leave him to the mercy of that gang of cannibals. Stop the launch, Tait. Tell Mr. Pride to turn back."

To turn back now and confront that army of vicious headhunters ranged along the beach seemed to ask for death. But Angus Tait obeyed his order. He hauled at the tow-rope, drawing the whale-boat closer astern of the launch, while he called to Mr. Pride to starboard his helm.

The second mate, in command of the launch, saw that he was well beyond range of the arrows

that were raining between him and the shore. He supposed at the moment that Angus Tait was warning him not to run away but to show a bold front.

He put over his tiller and the launch swept round in a wide half-circle, continuing in a course parallel with the line of the shore. For a moment the two boats came within easy speaking distance apart and Dr. Molesey told Mr. Pride about the dog.

"I don't see how we're to get hold of him through a crowd like that," objected the officer. "And we can't ask him to swim out to us where there are sharks. Any idea whereabouts he is?"

"I can see him!" cried Wingrove. "He's over yonder beyond the stockade—near that boathouse at the water side."

The launch was moving in that direction, and the savages on shore followed in an angry mob towards where the dog stood on a high bank watching the boats and waiting for them to come nearer.

"Don't go any closer!" cautioned the doctor. "You're drawing the savages up to the dog. They'll club him to death."

Mr. Pride turned the launch and took a course backward along the shore, knowing that the savages would turn also. Just as the whale-boat was pulled round by the tow-line, Koroku rose to his feet, snatched off his red feather head-dress and dropped it on Chris Wingrove's knee.

Before Chris could realize what was happening Koroku had shot past him like an arrow and plunged head foremost into the lagoon. The launch went on at high speed, towing the boat in her wake. Chris, the doctor and Mr. Knight stood up, gripping the gunwale and staring at the place where Koroku had dived in.

"Man overboard!" shouted Mr. Knight.

"There he is!" cried Sam Hendon pointing many fathoms away from the spot they were watching.

Just for a moment Koroku's head appeared on the surface and went under again. Then, yet farther away, his arm came up, swinging over with a vigorous side-stroke as he took breath.

"My goodness, what a swimmer!" cried Sam. "See! He's swimming ashore to rescue the dog!"

Jim Gabbitas, in the launch, had seen Koroku dive in. Looking shoreward, he saw now that the savages had drawn off from the neighbourhood of the stockade where the swimmer would land. Mr. Pride slackened speed, and presently stopped the engine.

The natives crowded in a dense line along the shore.

"Let them have one of the rifle grenades, Gabbitas," Mr. Pride ordered. "The noise will startle them. Drop it in the open space at the rear of the crowd. Keep them from going near the dog."

Gabbitas slipped the long shank of a grenade

into the barrel of his rifle and fired. There was an alarming screech as the grenade soared up and curved downward to fall with an ear-splitting explosion on an open patch of shore where it would do no harm. But the noise and the scattering fragments of broken coral gave warning that worse might happen. Tait and Tom Squirrel had opened fire with their rifles, aiming at the lower limbs of the savages, laming many; but the second mate stopped them.

"I want to keep them where they are, along the water side," he explained.

"Mr. Pride," said Chris Wingrove, as the two boats again came together, "you've got to keep those savages from getting back to their war canoes. If they get to them before we rescue Koroku and the dog we shall not have a ghost of a chance. And when they've finished us off they'll capture the schooner."

"I've thought of that," returned Mr. Pride. "But I don't know where the canoes have been left. I haven't caught sight of 'em."

"Neither have I," said Chris. "But they're not far off. I'm pretty sure they're lying in the mouth of the creek, to the east of us. Keep the savages from going that way."

"All right," nodded Pride, and, turning to Gabbitas, he ordered him to watch, in case there should be a movement in that direction and then make a barrage of grenades to cut off the retreat.

Even as he spoke it seemed as if the savages had overheard him, for some on their left flank started off up the beach. Gabbitas fired a grenade in front of them, and they scattered back in a terrified stampede.

The engine in the launch was started anew. The craft drew a little nearer to the shore, but still kept beyond range of arrows. A few of the bolder savages took to the water, wading in up to their armpits.

"Look!" cried Sam Hendon, gazing fixedly along the lagoon beyond the stockade. "There's a canoe coming!"

"It's Koroku!" exclaimed Wingrove, looking in the same direction. "Yes, and he's got the dog! What's he stopping for? Oh, he's waiting for us to go to him, of course."

It was a small canoe. The dog was perched in the bow. Koroku sat astern with dripping paddle across his knees.

The launch plunged forward at full speed, past the landing-place and the high ground on which the bungalow was built, and momentarily out of sight of the savages on the lower level of the beach. Koroku paddled up to the two boats and drew alongside. The dog leapt into the stern-sheets of the whale-boat. Koroku was about to follow when Chris Wingrove checked him.

"No," he said. "You fella stop along canoe little bit."

He turned then to Mr Pride, having drawn the boat close to the launch.

"Listen here, quick, Mr. Pride," he began. "We're not out of danger yet. We shall not be safe while those three war canoes are about. But I'm going to settle them. I can do it easily, now that Koroku's here with another boat. It's got to be done somehow. If the savages get back to their canoes and cut us off from the schooner the whole expedition goes smash. That's their game, you can see. They'd planned to head us off."

Mr. Pride had set his engine going, and now the launch was speeding forward, as before, along the line of the shore, but with the whale-boat on her off side, the canoe on the off side of the boat, the three abreast.

"What's your idea?" the mate asked. "I don't understand."

"I'm going to cut out those war canoes," Chris explained. "Koroku will paddle me round when you drop us beyond that point to the east of us. Give me a few sticks of dynamite. Look! look! they're making for their canoes now!"

Gabbitas had seen a posse of the savages break off from the main body. He had a grenade in his rifle and now he fired it in advance of them. He fired four in succession at different points, forming a temporary barrage between the natives and their retreat.

Chris climbed over into Koroku's canoe. Dr. Molesey tried to stop him.



“You are not to go,” he said grimly. “It’s too risky.”

“It’s a sound idea,” interposed Mr. Pride. “And so long as we can keep the natives where they are it’s safe. Pass the dynamite over to him, Squirrel.”

Half a dozen sticks, with their detonator-fuses fixed ready, were handed over and laid delicately on the floor of the canoe.

“Drop us at the far side of the high ground,” Chris instructed. “Then come back to the front and keep the savages busy. When I’ve set the lighted fuses I’ll blow my whistle, and then you’ll come at full speed to pick us up.”

As the launch went ahead the canoe was hidden under her freeboard on the off side.

“How did you get hold of this canoe, Koroku?” Wingrove questioned while he waited.

“Him belong Marster Drummond,” Koroku answered. “Fella bushman him no find. Him no savee fella canoe stop in fella canoe house belong big fella marster. Me fella savee. Me find’m all right. Fella dog he no want’m come alonga me. He fright. Me say ‘Come along, Shot,’ then he come close up. He good fella dog altogether, my word.”

Abreast of the headland Gabbitas fired another grenade. Chris loosed his hold of the gunwale. The launch turned, and, still towing the boat, went back to engage the savages.



“ A second stick he threw farther aft. Then he dealt similarly with the next canoe, and afterwards with the third.”

*Sea Scout and Savage*

[Chapter X



## CHAPTER X

### WINGROVE'S ADVENTURE

“**N**OW paddle for all you're worth,” cried Wingrove. “You take fella me along-side'm fella war canoes stop along fella creek. You savee?”

Koroku was already paddling vigorously in the desired direction.

“Me fella savee altogether,” he signified. “You fella you want catchee fella war canoe. What name you no fright go along'm canoe? What name you no stop along fella boat?”

Wingrove tried to explain amid the deafening noise of grenades exploding one after another in the bush at the farther side of the headland that he was passing. His companions in the two boats were evidently fully occupied in keeping the bushmen within bounds. He reflected, now that he was without protection, that he had undertaken a piece of work which was far more perilous than he had anticipated. Supposing the savages were to leave the beach and get back to their canoes in advance of him, he could do nothing, whereas they, giving chase, would quickly overhaul him. He had the dynamite, it was true, and both he and Koroku were armed with repeating rifles and revolvers. Still,

there was danger—terrible, unspeakable danger.

“Quick! Quick!” he urged, although Koroku was working his paddle heroically and the canoe was rushing along with astonishing speed.

Suddenly, unexpectedly soon, they came to the opening of the creek, and there were the three great war canoes, close together and unoccupied. They had been paddled in from the lagoon at high speed and run aground. Their tall prows were far in among the mangrove roots, and their sterns down at such a slant that the gunwales were but a few inches above the water.

Koroku had shipped his paddle. The perspiration was streaming from his tattooed face and chest. Chris held up a cautioning finger. Koroku understood, and crouched, listening.

“Bushman he no come,” he said. “You want’m fella me catchee paddle belong war canoe? You savee bushman he no washee canoe suppose paddle he no stop.”

“That’s true,” acknowledged Chris. He had not thought of removing the paddles. But he had noticed that many of the savages on the beach were carrying their paddles with them, to use as clubs.

He told Koroku to back in between the two farther canoes, and, when this was done, he took from his pocket a petrol lighter, which he opened. Much to Koroku’s astonishment, he ignited the tiny wick with his thumb. He held the flaming little case in his left hand, while with his right he ranged the six dyna-

mite sticks in front of him between his knees. The fuses were long—almost too long, he thought; but he did not shorten them. He made sure that the detonators were all right, glanced round to see that everything was safe for his escape, then lighted the first fuse, and with careful aim threw the charge into the nearest canoe, far forward. It fell just where he wanted. A second stick he threw farther aft. Then he dealt similarly with the next canoe, and afterwards with the third. It seemed all very simple.

“Finish!” he cried. “We go back quick—quick! Savee?”

Koroku needed no urging, and, when they got to the mouth of the creek, Chris blew a long, shrill whistle.

As they turned into the lagoon an arrow splashed into the near water, and two or three black heads showed themselves peeping through the reeds at the top of the bank. Chris took up his rifle and fired over them. A yelling crowd of the headhunters then appeared among the tree-ferns, pulling at their bowstrings and poising their spears. But Koroku had paddled straight outward into the lagoon, and no weapon came within half a dozen yards of the two escaping adventurers.

“Boat he come along!” cried Koroku, and in the same moment the launch's whistle sounded. Chris answered it with a succession of whistle blasts in the Morse code, signifying “all serene,” and he had hardly finished when his first dyna-

mite charge exploded, followed at due intervals by four others. The noise was terrific. One of the charges was a dud. Possibly the fuse had not been properly lighted, but as there were five explosions it was clear that each of the war canoes had been completely disabled.

"You managed it beautifully, Chris," said Mr. Pride in commendation as the launch glided up. "Tumble in here, both of you. We'll scuttle that canoe presently, so that the savages can't nab it. Here's a rope to tow her with. Look smart. The skipper's in a fearful state. Mr. Bagley's in the wireless cabinet threatening all sorts of things if we don't leave the natives alone and hurry back to the ship. We had to stop firing grenades for a bit, so as to listen-in. Have you caused any casualties along there? We heard your rifle fire."

"I believe I shot a poll parrot," said Chris. "I aimed high. No, there were no casualties on either side."

"Then we can go back with a clear conscience," Dr. Molesey reflected. "Barring a few stretcher cases, there isn't a native of the whole gang who can't walk home."

"And they'll be obliged to walk it, too," added Chris. "For I'm pretty certain none of their three war canoes will ever carry them again."

"I'd no idea they were so close at hand," said Mr. Pride. "Why, if they'd come on a bit farther instead of hiding in the creek, they

could easily have got between us and the schooner while you fellows were ashore. We might have escaped in the launch ; but we couldn't have saved the *Albatross*."

"Mr. Bagley would have saved her, somehow," Wingrove declared with his usual confidence in the first officer. "Captain Croft would have hidden himself in the cable tier ; and, of course, the cook would have been no good. But Mr. Bagley would have peppered them with Mills' bombs."

"As it happens, I don't think we could have improved upon your own ruse, Chris," Mr. Pride continued. "To pepper three crowded war canoes with Mills' bombs would have meant awful slaughter. But you succeeded in completely disabling three of the enemy's battle-ships without the sacrifice of a single life, while at the same time you saved the *Albatross* and her ship's company from falling into the clutches of the most villainous set of cannibal savages on the face of the Pacific Ocean."

"They're certainly a villainous lot," added Chris. "What puzzles me is how they can continue to be such rotters living in such a beautiful island. It's like a land of dreams, Mr. Pride. You could never imagine such lovely scenery. But we didn't get any orchids. Never even saw one."

"And that means another expedition into the interior," Mr. Pride supposed. "Well, con-



sidering the risks in collecting them, there's good reason for orchids being expensive in the English markets. Anyhow, you saw a crocodile in its native haunts, and you've brought off some jolly good pineapples."

"Me fella me big fright along'm fella crocodile," Koroku volunteered, watching an immense shark that was making ineffectual grabs at the propeller. He did not seem to have any fear of the shark.

When they came alongside the schooner Tom Squirrel drove the point of a boathook through the casing of Mr. Drummond's canoe, and as the frail craft began to sink Chris seized its paddle to keep as a trophy. He argued that the lives of the ship's company and the safety of the schooner herself had depended wholly upon that precious piece of carved wood in the capable hands of Koroku.

Captain Croft and Mr. Bagley were greatly perturbed over the conduct of the landing party. They blamed Dr. Molesey for taking the dog, for going so far up the creek, and for not having returned instantly on receiving the wireless message warning him of the canoes. They blamed Mr. Pride for turning back for the dog and for permitting Chris Wingrove to go off alone on his dangerous adventure, as they blamed Chris for undertaking it.

"My dear Croft," protested Dr. Molesey during the discussion over dinner in the saloon,

"I beg you not to disturb yourself. We came to the Solomon Islands, knowing that there would be serious risks, and we were fully prepared to meet them. We ran heaps of risks this afternoon, but we came to no harm. We should have been reckless indeed if we had not taken a covering boat and depended upon getting away by rowing instead of with the help of a motor-launch; if we had gone ashore unarmed and without the wireless apparatus which called us back in good time. Wingrove's ruse was successful from beginning to end."

"He did jolly well," agreed Mr. Knight. "It was a ripping fine rag."

"And anyhow it was a fearfully exciting adventure," concluded Wingrove. "I shouldn't mind going through it again. It was the sort of adventure that any Sea Scout would enjoy."

"Don't be too greedy for adventure, Chris," the doctor cautioned him. "You're only at the beginning yet. You'll be having more adventure than you'll relish before this expedition comes to an end. I promise you that."

"You're not thinking of going ashore on this atrocious island again, I hope," said the captain.

"Oh, yes, I am," returned the doctor. "What's to hinder me? I'm planning to go ashore early to-morrow morning."

"In that case," said the captain, rising from the table, "all I can say is that you're stark, staring mad."

## CHAPTER XI

### THE DESERTER

“**W**HEW!” sighed Mr. Knight. “This deck-house is like a Turkish bath. I feel like taking off my skin and sitting in my bones! This tropical rain doesn’t make the air any cooler. Give us another drink of that coco-nut milk, Wingrove.”

Chris stood up from his typewriting and strode across the cabin to fetch the jug from a shelf near the open window. He glanced out through the cataract of rain that fell from the rim of the awning and caught sight of Koroku’s red feather head-dress a few inches away from him.

“What name you stop?” he demanded. “Come inside. Bimeby fella doctor he plenty talk along you.”

“Dear me, Chris,” objected Dr. Molesey, looking up from his microscope. “I wish you’d teach that boy to understand plain English.”

“Plain?” laughed Chris, filling the doctor’s tumbler. “Why, his talk couldn’t be much plainer. It’s the plainest lingo in the world, once you get the trick of it and know the value of the word ‘fella.’ No need to wrestle with grammar.”

Koroku hesitated to enter the doctor’s room

when the door curtain was opened to him ; but Wingrove beckoned him in and left him standing under the electric light to gather courage. The boy's dark eyes flashed in curious inquiry about the strange room with its comfortable chairs and rich hangings, its cupboards stocked with mysterious bottles and scientific instruments, its shelves of books and all its unfamiliar fittings.

In contrast with the three Europeans in their white evening clothes, he looked extremely ferocious with his woolly black hair and distorted ears and rain-wet, tattooed brown skin. He stroked the soft carpet nervously with his bare feet. Suddenly he fixed his astonished gaze upon his own reflection in Dr. Molesey's mirror. He started back.

"What name?" he cried excitedly. "Me no savee that fella black boy he stop in schooner belong white man! Me no savee that fella boy."

Wingrove invited him to go nearer and made him understand. Koroku prowled about the cabin examining the wonderful possessions of the white man. He was particularly interested in the gramophone. But Mr. Bagley was asleep in the adjoining cabin, and there was no music.

"I want him to have a look at one of the orchid books," said Dr. Molesey, rising from his table.

"Book belong white man he no good along fella me," Koroku objected. "Me no savee book talk."

When a beautiful coloured print of the tropical flowers was shown to him he lowered his nose and sniffed for the expected perfume, pursing his lips in disappointment.

Wingrove turned to another illustration.

“You savee what place this fella flower he walk about in fella island belong you?” he asked.

“Me savee altogether,” Koroku answered. “Fella flower he stop close up in tree belong Marster Drummond. You want’m fella flower. He no good for kai-kai.”

“We’re not intending to eat them,” Mr. Knight informed him. “Tell us where they grow.”

“Righto,” said Koroku, and Mr. Knight laughed at his use of the familiar phrase.

Notwithstanding the deluging torrents of rain, a strict watch was kept up on the schooner’s deck throughout the night, and occasionally the searchlight was flashed round the lagoon and upon the island. But there were no signs of hostile natives.

The rain had ceased in the early morning, and at six bells, when Chris Wingrove awoke and turned in his cot to look out through his cabin port-hole, the hot sun was shining amid the gorgeous verdure of the island. In the calm green water near to him a shark’s fin moved slowly. But for that shark, the lagoon was inviting for a swim. In the circumstances

he was forced to content himself with his usual salt-water splash in the canvas bath on deck, prepared for him by Sam Hendon.

"You might tell Koroku to come aft, Sam," Chris said, meeting Hendon near the companion.

"He's not on board," Sam explained. "Neither is his canoe. I expect he was fed up with civilization and wanted to run wild again. Anyhow, he's taken his hook. Tom Squirrel has the idea that he came aboard only to spy around, and that he's gone off to report to the headhunters. Gabbitas makes out that the canoe was loaded up with guns and ammunition. Your bath's ready, and there's a smell of fried bacon coming out of the galley."

"Slip along and tell the doctor about Koroku," said Chris. "He'll be no end vexed."

Dr. Molesey was genuinely annoyed at the young native's ingratitude in deserting the schooner. He had counted on Koroku as a useful guide in the hunt for orchids. Captain Croft objected to the doctor's proposal to send a search party on shore.

"I don't want any of your heathen savages aboard this ship," he declared. "No good can come of it. I said at the first that that boy would only cause mischief. And now you see I was right. He's taken stock of our condition, and he's slipped ashore to tell his fellow cannibals how to capture us."

Dr. Molesey was protesting against this opinion when Chris Wingrove, returning from his bath, waved his towel above his wet head and pointed overside to what looked like an immense market basket of flowers and fruit that was floating towards the schooner. It came swiftly nearer, propelled by a paddle, and above the heaped-up fruit and flowers the head and shoulders of Koroku appeared.

The canoe was paddled adroitly alongside and hauled up bodily by the davit tackle.

“War canoes them altogether finish!” Koroku cried as he leapt down at Wingrove’s side. “Fella bushman he no stop. He walk away home in bush belong him, plenty cross along’m white man. My word, he cry too much alongside fella Mary belong him!”

“Then the coast’s clear,” nodded Chris. “But what name you fella walk away all alone? Fella doctor he cross along you.”

Koroku looked penitent.

“Cross?” he repeated. “Me fella me go catchee flower belong fella book—catchee fella banana belong you.”

He turned and lifted a great bunch of bananas from his canoe and laid it at Wingrove’s feet. Then he brought forth an armful of glorious orchids, at sight of which Dr. Molesey threw up his arms in delighted astonishment. Their colours were dazzling, their forms wonderful, their delicious perfume was intoxicating. But the

doctor's joy was marred when he realized that every flower had been plucked by the stalk and that the precious roots had been left behind.

"These are no good," he moaned. "If he'd brought the roots instead of the blooms, the collection would have been worth hundreds of pounds. He ought to have asked for instructions—ignorant savage!"

"Never mind, old man," Mr. Knight consoled him. "There's sure to be more where these came from. I think it was jolly nice of him to go ashore all alone, just for the sake of giving pleasure. It was a bit of a risk, too, considering."

"He makes me frightfully jealous," Wingrove confessed. "I'd made up my mind to be the first to bring an orchid on board, and he's got in front of me!"

While the profusion of flowers and fruit was being examined, Mr. Bagley came out of the wireless cabinet and strode aft, looking, as always, exceeding well groomed in his white naval uniform.

"I've been in touch with the cruiser, sir," he announced to Dr. Molesey. "She has been delayed among the Santa Cruz Islands, and may not be here for another week. We're not to leave our present anchorage, unless in emergency."

"Thank you, Mr. Bagley," said the doctor, offering him a particularly large and ripe banana.



“In that case I decide to go ashore with the expedition. The savages have cleared off, and it's quite safe. We will take the motor-launch only, and as we shall be going up the creek, you might see that the cage is put over the propeller, in case of weeds. We shall want full camping equipment, provisions for a week, and shot-guns as well as rifles and explosives. And you won't forget to put in some attractive trade goods for the natives.”

He discussed further details with Mr. Bagley over breakfast, and then returned to his laboratory to gather his notebooks and the cases in which to store his specimens.

By ten o'clock in the forenoon the equipment had been inspected, checked, and stowed in the launch. The company comprised Dr. Molesey, Mr. Knight, Chris Wingrove, Sam Hendon, Koroku and the retriever. With Knight at the motor and Wingrove steering, they set off in the direction of the creek. And so they started on their voyage into the unknown land of the head-hunters, reckless of its mysteries and its hidden dangers.

## CHAPTER XII

### BORU-BORU

**A**T the mouth of the creek they came upon the wreckage of the three war canoes. Koroku had well said that they were "altogether finish." Very little remained to show that there had ever been any canoes. Everything was in fragments excepting the stout prows of hard timber. One of these was so beautifully carved and decorated that Dr. Molesey determined to secure it as an example of the native art of the Solomon Islands. And he had it hauled out of the water and propped high among the roots of one of the mangrove trees, together with some of the ornamental club paddles.

Here, near the mouth of the creek, Koroku indicated that the place where he had got the orchids was "close up," and he led Dr. Molesey and Wingrove in among the trees to the rear of the mangroves where the ground, although muddy from the last night's rain, was firm enough to be walked upon. He threaded his direction in among the mangrove roots that were like giant fingers going deep down into the hidden swamp beneath.

It was not necessary for him to point upward to the wide spreading boughs. Dr. Molesey

had realized from the first that this was an ideal place in which to look for orchids; and now he saw them, clinging like brilliant butterflies to the grey limbs of the trees high above his head.

“You see now, Chris,” he explained, “why they are called air plants. They don’t grow out of the trees, but just anchor themselves on the bark when they are seedlings, and there they cling as a seaweed clings to a rock, getting their nourishment from the atmosphere.”

“Yes, sir,” Wingrove nodded, “and now I suppose what we’ve got to do, instead of plucking the flowers and making a bunch of ’em as Koroku did, is to ring the roots round with a knife and take the circle of bark along with them, the same as—well, the same as a Red Indian takes a scalp, skin and hair together.”

Dr. Molesey chuckled at the aptness of the comparison.

“That’s it, exactly,” he said; “and we’ve to teach Koroku how to do it.”

Koroku had already begun to shin his way up one of the banyans. Wingrove followed him up to where the branches forked. He jockeyed himself along a stout bough towards a very beautiful orchid, brilliant of colour and fantastic of shape. Watched intently by Koroku, he took out his knife and cut a deep, diamond-shaped score round the root, loosened the bark, and lifted the root bodily.

“ Savvy ? ” he asked. “ The flower is wanted ; but the root’s the great thing.”

“ Root he altogether good,” Koroku signified. “ Bimeby plenty piccaninny flower belong root he come up. Flower he stop, he die close up. Me fella savvy too much.”

He was quickly astride of another bough, carving out an orchid of a different kind, working exactly as Wingrove had done. The two specimens were lowered down by a long string to Dr. Molesey, and while the boys continued to gather further specimens, he was kept busy with his fountain pen, his labels and notebooks, carefully classifying and cataloguing and making notes, so that afterwards, when the dried roots should be cultivated in England, the natural conditions of growth and atmosphere might be artificially repeated.

Koroku was never far away from Chris Wingrove. They were always in the same or adjoining trees. Once they were at work face to face on the same stout bough. Chris was lying forward cutting out a root that was almost beyond his reach and required him to lean over, holding on by his left hand to the upper surface of the branch. He was suddenly conscious of a curious tickling sensation in his fingers, and raising his head to discover the cause of it, he saw a giant centipede, fully a foot long, crawling over his hand and writhing as if to bury its venomous claw in the skin. Horrified at sight of the

repulsive creature, he let out a yell. In the same instant Koroku flung himself forward, and seized the abominable reptile as near as he was able by the nape of its neck where the poison glands were situated. He held the thing tightly between thumb and finger as the long body twisted and dashed itself against his wrist—twelve inches of squirming legs digging and scratching at him until he regained his lost balance and could fling the horror away.

Chris did not know until afterwards, when Dr. Molesey told him, that the poisonous bite of the Solomon Island centipede is deadly dangerous.

“You’ve had a lucky escape,” said the doctor. “I’m not sure that Koroku didn’t save your life, and I’m only astonished that he wasn’t himself bitten. Evidently he knew exactly how and where to grab the brute.”

Just before the centipede incident, Dr. Molesey had sounded his whistle. Its message was heard in the launch, and Sam Hendon duly arrived, guided by the retriever, and carrying an empty packing tray in which the rich harvest of labelled orchids was neatly arranged. Their mingled colours fascinated Sam.

“That one’s just like a swarm of butterflies!” he exclaimed, pointing to one.

“Yes,” the doctor acknowledged. “That’s a *Cypripedium*. One like it was sold in London last year for three hundred and sixty pounds.”

Koroku carried the loaded tray on his head down to the creek. There was no need to take this lot up the river. He thrust the precious tray in among the roots of a mangrove, where the dark shadows would protect the flowers from the scorching sun. Then he cut a tall cane and propped it in front of the treasures with a feather from his red head-dress stuck in a slit of the cane.

“Taboo!” he said meaningly. “Fella black boy he no touch. Bushman he no touch. Taboo belong fella me—no man he touch.”

“What about rats?” questioned Sam Hendon. “I saw one as big as a terrier as we came along. Won’t rats eat ’em? You can’t expect rats to understand your taboo.”

“You fella Sam, you no savvy,” Koroku retorted warmly. “You shut’m mouth belong you.”

While they were having dinner in the launch Koroku mysteriously disappeared.

“Where’s he off to?” Dr. Molesey wanted to know. “We ought to start now.”

“I believe he’s given us the slip, sir,” said Sam. “He knows we’re going up into the interior. And he’s sneaked that automatic pistol and heap of cartridges.”

Koroku’s absence was explained shortly afterwards when he reappeared with a heavy load of pineapples and bananas, which he dropped on the deck. As the motor was set going and the

launch began to chunk her way up the river, he crawled aft towards the cockpit and touched Dr. Molesey's arm, at the same time drawing something from the folds of his crimson waist scarf.

"Me fella me find fella book belong Marster Drummond," he announced, handing a bulging leather wallet to the doctor. He afterwards explained that he had found it in the scrub outside the Commissioner's compound, near to where the headhunters had held their cannibal feast.

Mr. Knight, who had been puzzling over an Admiralty chart of the Solomons, looked up as Koroku drew back towards his place at the prow.

"I say, Koroku," he called, "what name belong fella village close up along fella creek?"

"Him name Boru-Boru," Koroku answered. "Plenty fella black boy, plenty fella Mary, plenty piccaninny belong Boru-Boru."

Later, as they were speeding between muddy and unsavoury banks of mangrove swamp, Dr. Molesey lighted a cigarette and took up the Commissioner's pocket-book. It contained among other documents a private diary, written in a very small neat hand. On the first page that he glanced at he saw the name Boru-Boru. What he read was :

"The Boru-Boru villagers are still remarkably friendly. But I am anxious about them.

The beggars are all headhunters and I now know for a fact that for the past two years the whole village has been making a collection of treasure with which to buy a white man's head. They pool everything, and the fellow who captures the head will win the lot. It seems they haven't had a white man's head to call their own since Dick Masserene ventured up the creek without a gun."

Dr. Molesey closed the diary and thrust the wallet into his breast pocket. During the next hour he smoked more than his usual number of cigarettes, and his companions noticed that he remained extremely silent and thoughtful, taking very little interest in the surroundings and the beauty of the tropical vegetation.

"The scent of these stephanotis flowers is simply delicious," Chris Wingrove declared, plucking one as the launch passed within reach and holding the milky white bloom under Mr. Knight's sunburnt nose.

Mr. Knight inhaled the sweet perfume.

"Yes," he agreed, "and, if you ask me, their scent is very much needed along here to counteract the stink of the mangroves. I fail to see what mangroves are grown for. Their stink's strong enough to disable our engine. The timber's no good, and they're very ugly trees, considering."

"They make good camping-ground for orchids,"





Dr. Molesey reminded him, "and mangrove oysters are not bad. But it isn't the trees themselves that smell so offensively; it's the slimy ooze of the swamp, and the rotting vegetation. If you want to know what a real mangrove swamp is capable of in the way of smell, you should go to West Africa."

"I expect the crocodiles feed on the oysters," interposed Sam Hendon. "This river's simply infested with crocodiles. I wish I'd brought my camera to get a snapshot of 'em. Look at that baby one among the water-lilies! Isn't he a little pet?"

The launch sped fast against the sluggish current and fought excitedly up occasional rapids where the river narrowed and the overhanging trees shut out the fierce sunlight, the banks all sliding scenery of verdant jungle trailed with vines and brilliant masses of flowers. Butterflies and birds, strange and many-coloured, wheeled and darted about, and the hot still air was filled with the harsh cries of parrots and cockatoos. Here and there the mangroves gave place to great forest trees with buttressed roots. Some of these were half covered with pink and white and purple orchids; and again and again Dr. Molesey and the three boys climbed ashore to add to their harvest, although as yet no very rare specimens had been secured.

"We ought to have brought the whale-boat as a carrier," said Hendon.

“Plenty fella canoe stop along Boru-Boru,” Koroku volunteered.

He was questioned closely as to whether the natives were friendly, and he explained, much to the doctor’s relief, that they were peaceful salt-water islanders who used their canoes for fishing. The hostile bushmen never used this river. They were afraid of the crocodiles.

Late in the afternoon they skirted a plantation of coco-nut palms. The stream widened into a small lagoon, and from a clearing on the nearer shore a band of wild women and children scattered away like startled rabbits. Wingrove steered towards a stretch of level beach where two or three fishing canoes lay against a fallen forest tree.

“Careful—careful,” cautioned Dr. Molesey, feeling at his hip pocket. “I don’t altogether like this place. The very air breathes treachery. Look at that shed, Knight, under the hotoo tree. What’s that inside?”

He indicated a dilapidated thatched roof overgrown with creepers and supported on six posts. Beneath the roof he had seen a pyramid of human skulls.

“Some of those at the top look quite recent,” he reflected in an awed whisper.

“Yes, and smell so,” added Knight with a sniff of disgust.

The motor was going dead slow and stern

foremost ready to back in. Koroku stood up on the forward strip of deck with the retriever at his feet.

“What name you stop?” he questioned.  
“Village he close up.”

Dr. Molesey, Mr. Knight, and Hendon, seated under the awning, had laid their hands on their repeating rifles. They could hear the ominous beating of a drum. The slow tapping was coming nearer. Chris Wingrove leaned over and gave three honking blasts on the horn. The sound reverberated along the bight of the lagoon, and before it had died down into the silence there was a movement among the ferns, and through the curtain of greenery appeared a score or more of naked cannibals, armed to the eyebrows with every fighting device known to savage humanity, while their leader leapt to the end of the fallen tree and held his rifle pointed threateningly at the white faces under the boat's awning.

Mr. Knight had as instantly sprung to position, and the two—the white man and the savage—stood muzzle to muzzle. Around them all was absolutely silent, absolutely motionless, save for the shifting eyeballs of the watchers. But the eyeballs of the two with the guns never wavered.

## CHAPTER XIII

### ON DELICATE GROUND

**I**T was a tensely exciting moment when those two—the white representative of civilization and the black embodiment of savagery—stood facing each other with their levelled firearms, watched intently by their supporters on either side.

Mr. Knight hesitated to press his trigger, because he did not want to take human life and knew for a certainty that the firing of his gun would bring the whole gang of cannibals in a mad rush upon the launch. The Chief hesitated because he knew that if he should shoot there was not a chance of his escaping alive. It was a long half-minute that they stood thus, muzzle to muzzle. And then the spell was broken by a loud commanding shout from the bow of the launch.

“What name?” cried Koroku, covering the Chief with his automatic pistol. “You fella Amadu you drop fella gun belong you close up! My word! You hurt’m hair belong white man you altogether finish!”

The effect of his cry was almost magical. The Chief’s Snider fell rattling at his feet as he threw up his hands. The savages crowding behind him lowered their fearful weapons and

laid them submissively on the ground. Koroku then ran like a cat along the gunwale outside the awning stanchions and stood upright astride of the tiller, pointing a threatening finger at the barbarous crowd and haranguing them vehemently in their own strange tongue. They were cowed and subdued.

He glanced down at Chris Wingrove and signed towards the fallen tree, from which the Chief had stepped back.

“You fella marster you washee little bit alongside fella canoe,” he said quietly. “Me savvy fella Boru-Boru man he altogether sorry. Me cross along him. He no like’m fella big talk belong me, my word. He fright along fella me too much.”

Chris backed the launch gently shoreward and alongside the tree that served as a landing-stage. As she touched, Koroku handed his pistol to Dr. Molesey and stepped ashore. With his two empty hands raised palm outward he advanced towards the savages. They drew back from him, leaving their weapons on the ground. He strode up to the Chief, took his knife from him, and laid it beside his gun.

“Big fella white man he want’m talk along fella you,” he said, pointing to the launch.

Amadu went timidly forward, and Dr. Molesey stood up and handed to him several sticks of trade tobacco and a coco-nut cup full of coloured beads, at which the savage snatched

greedily. Mr. Knight added a present of half a dozen clay pipes, and Sam Hendon completed the donations with a mouth organ, illustrating its use by blowing from it the opening bar of "Knocked 'em in the Old Kent Road."

Koroku, wholly unarmed, conducted the savages back to their huts, talking volubly with the Chief as he went.

"Seems to me," said Sam Hendon, "that if it hadn't been for Koroku we should have found ourselves in queer street. There'd have been some casualties. If that ugly bloke with the nose-ring had fired, he wouldn't have had time to see the effects of his shot."

"We owe a lot to Koroku," added Mr. Knight. "I could almost feel the bullet between my eyes in anticipation when that brute was aiming at me. What are we going to do, Molesey?"

Dr. Molesey glanced through the palms at the sinking sun.

"I propose we make camp under one of those banyan trees," he answered. "We're as safe here, now, as anywhere else within reach, and I don't believe in running away. But we must be careful of these beggars. They're cannibals beyond a doubt. And it won't do to let them be too friendly. That's how the Austrian expedition came to grief. They made apparent friends with the natives up here, and even let them handle and grasp the significance of their firearms. The natives cunningly bided their

time until the white men grew careless and confident, and then massacred all but two or three, who escaped to the coast. It's no use any man saying he's safe in the Solomons. He isn't."

Wingrove and Hendon had pitched the bell tent, and Mr. Knight had opened up wireless communication with the schooner, when Koroku returned, followed by four black boys carrying presents of yams, sweet potatoes, fish and fresh eggs. He intimated that he had chosen the four boys to act as carriers for the expedition, and that there were two canoes at the doctor's service. The boys, he said, could be trusted. They had all four served their three years as labourers in the Fiji sugar plantations and were accustomed to the ways of white men.

Dr. Molesey inspected the four recruits. They didn't seem to him to be particularly trustful. They were, indeed, only less terrible-looking than the headhunters he had seen in the war canoes. One of them he recognized by the boar's tusks in his nose as having been of the lot who had so recently threatened the launch. Among this native's abundant neck ornaments was a small medicine bottle, still bearing a label on which was printed the name and address of a Brisbane druggist.

"I wonder how that came to be here?" mused the doctor, pointing to the phial. "It suggests that some Australians may have been paying them a visit."

On Koroku's recommendation he engaged the men and their canoes, and Koroku undertook to boss them, beginning at once by ordering them to clean out their canoes, so that the fella white man should not see how dirty they were.

It was a new experience for the members of the expedition to spend a night ashore in a comfortable camp. But the surroundings were weird and strange, and the near presence of the cannibal village was a constant anxiety. All through the hours of darkness Chris Wingrove's sleep was disturbed by the uneasy noises of the four natives in the canoes. They had heard from Koroku of what had happened to Mr. Drummond and his houseboys, and it was as if they could not rest even in their sleep for fear of the bushmen.

Then there were scorpions, centipedes, huge spiders and other crawly things in the coarse, damp grass outside the tent, and queer sounds in the distance and in the trees and from the river. At intervals Chris could hear the hoarse coughing of crocodiles, while nearer at hand the croaking of frogs, the chirping of cicadas and the rasping song of fever mosquitoes made a continuous chorus.

Shot was restless, too, growling deeply at every suspicious sound as he lay across the doorway.

At four o'clock in the morning, when he



looked at his watch by the light of his electric torch, Chris realized that it was time to communicate with the *Albatross*. Mr. Knight and the doctor were asleep.

Chris got up from under his mosquito curtain and crept up to the wireless instrument beyond the flap of the tent. Streaks of tropic lightning flashed over the vivid green of tree and bush, and played about the dark peaks of a far-off mountain. Something was moving down by the near bank of the creek, and in the next lightning flash he saw the shape of a huge crocodile crawling towards the tent.

He drew his revolver and fired two shots into the brute's head, one between its eyes, the other through the roof of its open jaws. The monster turned and made for the creek; but stopped half-way and lay still.

"My word!" came the voice of Koroku from the darkness behind the tent. "You fella marster kill'm crocodile close up! What name you no sleep in tent belong you? Me fella watch'm crocodile he no come."

It seemed that he had been doing voluntary sentry duty all the time, and had been aiming to shoot the crocodile if Chris had not come out.

Of course, the two shots alarmed Dr. Molesey and Mr. Knight, who ran out to see what had happened. And when Chris lay listening with the wireless 'phone over his ears the first words

he heard were a question from Mr. Bagley asking what on earth all that shooting was about.

There was nothing of importance to report on either side, but Mr. Bagley stated that before sundown a ketch had been sighted outside the barrier reef and was hove-to evidently intending to enter the lagoon at daybreak.

In the early morning Koroku put his head in at the door-flap and sang out, "Sun he come up," and he accompanied Wingrove and Hendon down to the creek and joined them in a swim, keeping always very close to Chris, as if with the idea of guarding him against possible danger.

When they returned to camp the dead crocodile had been cleared away, and the four natives stood around staring at Dr. Molesey and Mr. Knight over their toilet, marvelling at the white men's dexterous use of safety razors, combs and toothbrushes. Koroku drove the inquisitive black boys away, telling them to go and gather plenty fella coco-nut, plenty banana belong fella white marster, while he himself proceeded to collect the tent pegs and carry the equipment down to the launch.

By some means it had got to be known in the village that one of the white men was a medicine man, with the result that all the natives in the place hastened to discover their past and present ailments, and a miscellaneous crowd of

savages came to the camp after breakfast for medical treatment. Dr. Molesey received ample illustration of the nature of Solomon Island sores and septic ulcers. One savage was troubled with a festering nose, caused by his having thrust through the cartilage as a personal ornament a rusty patent key for opening corned beef tins. Another had a sore ear due to his having stopped it up with a glass bead that had gone in too far.

Koroku acted as interpreter for these invalids. Of a girl who had toothache, he said to the doctor, "Tooth belong this fella Mary hurt close up." Of a man who hobbled on one leg, he reported, "Crocodile catchee foot belong this fella boy," and of a youth who had a pain from eating over-ripe fruit, "belly belong him walk about too much." To a man whose arm had been taken by a shark, he said severely: "You fella stop. What name you suppose'm white fella marster he make new arm belong you? My word! You clear off, plenty quick."

Dr. Moseley did what he could; but he was not prepared to start a hospital, and he had not drugs enough to go round the whole village.

As soon as the breakfast things were washed and stowed away, and Sam had polished up and fed the engine, the two canoes were roped astern and the orchid hunters embarked, watched by a crowd of curious villagers. Dr. Molesey distributed some trade goods in the form of tobacco, red cloth, tin whistles and

toys. Already the natives had taken possession of the refuse of the camp. A girl had decorated her fuzzy head with an empty meat tin, a boy had shoved a chicken bone through his ear-lobe, and two piccaninnies were quarrelling over a dog biscuit.

The two canoes, loaded with fresh fruit, vegetables and other provisions, were towed behind, and their occupants did little but sit chewing betel-nut and watching the launch with her mysterious power of making speed without paddles.

The tropic sun was terribly hot, and even the awning shed heat that made the cockpit like an oven. Mr. Knight was more than once in danger of running aground in trying to keep within the shade of the overhanging trees. Before noon, however, the banks became high rocky cliffs, green with creepers, and there was more shade for the perspiring travellers. They were now among the foothills, and the mangrove swamps with their mosquitoes and sickening smell had been left behind. Amid the verdure of tall tree-ferns and feathery palms were the vivid red blossoms of coral trees, yellow and scarlet crotons, and hibiscus flowers like gold bells with ruby clappers inside. Birds, strange, many-coloured and beautiful stood at the water's edge and on projecting logs. Curious dwarf parrots and tiny humming birds wheeled and darted over the

sand-bars in chase of great mangrove gnats and gorgeous velvet butterflies.

As they went farther and farther up the creek, Koroku and the four natives in the canoes began to show a strange nervous restlessness. They spoke in muttered undertones of mystery in their own language. Koroku was especially excited.

"They're five against us four and the dog," said Sam Hendon. "And they're planning how they can do us in."

Chris Wingrove looked round sharply at Koroku in the nearest canoe behind him.

"What name," he cried, "you fella fright along bushman?"

"Me fright too much," Koroku answered awkwardly. "Me fella me stop. Go back."

The launch was going slowly through a bed of water-lilies. In advance of it the creek widened out and divided into two separate streams. Dr. Molesey was in doubt which would be the better to follow.

"Let's warp up and have lunch, Knight," he suggested. "This would be rather a good place to make our base. We could make camp in the glade here. It's a lovely spot." And Sam Hendon, who was steering, was ordered to turn alongside of a bank overgrown with beautiful flowers and bright green tree-ferns.

Koroku leapt ashore. So also did the four natives. They gathered in a group with their

heads together, talking in significant whispers, like a band of conspirators. Mr. Knight watched them suspiciously. He noticed that each of the boys was armed with a formidable cane-knife, and that Koroku was fingering his automatic pistol.

“Molesey,” he said, with his hand on his gun, “those blacks are hatching some plot against us. Look at 'em! We oughtn't to have trusted them. They're brute savages, you know—cannibal savages and headhunters.”

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE RIVER OF MYSTERY

**C**H<sup>R</sup>IS WINGROVE stood up under the awning, and then, with his revolver in hand, stepped ashore and strode cautiously towards the mysterious group. His companions in the launch watched him anxiously. They saw him go boldly up to the conspiring savages and press the cold muzzle of his gun against Koroku's bare, tattooed shoulder.

Koroku betrayed no alarm, but began to talk excitedly, pointing first to the distant mountains and then to various parts of the creek. The four Boru-Boru boys clustered tightly round him, their eyes flashing in their sinister black faces. Chris nodded once or twice in seeming understanding, and then Dr. Molesey was appalled to see him turn his back upon the five and return slowly to the launch. In that moment of his turning any one of the savages could have buried his knife between Wingrove's exposed shoulders. But had one of them so much as moved, Mr. Knight's Winchester was ready.

"It isn't a conspiracy, sir," Chris reported to the doctor, stepping on board. "It's more like a mutiny, or a strike. They've all five

of them made up their minds to go back in the canoes and leave us here in the lurch. But it depends on which branch of the creek you mean to take."

"The one to the east," Dr. Molesey answered decisively. "We should find lots of rare specimens growing about those moist cliffs. It's an ideal place for our purpose."

"That settles it, sir," said Chris, helping himself to some food. "They'll go back. You won't get one of them to go a fathom's distance into that stream. The whole place is taboo to them. No Solomon Islander has been known to enter it for generations past. No white man has ever so much as put his nose into it. It's haunted. That's why. It's full of evil spirits. Anybody who looks at the shadows in the water will be turned into a ghost. They call it the River of Death."

"So what's to be done?" questioned Mr. Knight, breaking the shell of a hard-boiled egg.

"Of course," resumed Wingrove, "we're here to get orchids. We've come all the way from England to get 'em, and we're not going to turn back because of a silly superstition."

"After what you've told us," observed Sam, "I shouldn't care to go up that river alone. You may depend there's some deep reason for the natives being afraid of it—something more than ordinary superstition. No, I wouldn't go up it alone."



“Neither would I,” said Chris. “But we’re neither of us expected to go alone. There’s no use in all of us going, though, since all that’s wanted just now is to find out if there are any orchids.”

“Of course,” rejoined Sam, “I shouldn’t be a bit afraid if I’d a chum with me. If you’d come with me, Chris, I’m game.”

“Yes, of course I’ll go with you, Sam,” Wingrove volunteered. “We could take one of the canoes, have a look round, and come back here to the launch before dark.”

While the two men lay smoking after lunch, Chris and Sam chose the larger of the two canoes and prepared for their adventure, taking guns, ropes, trays and a good supply of food in case of need. They even added a few rockets to fire off as signals. The four natives were asleep under a tree-fern, and Koroku sat near them with arms folded across his knees, looking extremely sulky. Presently he stood up and slowly approached the canoe, watching the two white boys.

“Me fella me no savvy white man little bit,” he began reflectively. “I no gammon along you. Me say me no go along fella creek. Me too much fright. Suppose you fella go, you no come back. You finish altogether close up. What name you no got fright alla same fright belong me?”

“Why am I not afraid, the same as you

are ? ” Chris asked, looking up at him blankly. “ Simply because I see nothing to be afraid of. Bushman he no stop along creek ? ”

“ No. Bushman him fright altogether too much. ”

“ All right, Koroku, ” Wingrove nodded. “ You stop. I go. ”

Koroku drew a deep breath and looked with a fiercely savage frown into Wingrove’s steady eyes.

“ Marster Chris, ” he said resolutely. “ Suppose you fella white boy go along’m creek, I no stop. I go alonga you close up, my word. ”

Wingrove turned a surprised glance upon Sam Hendon.

“ D’you hear, Sam ? ” he questioned. “ Do you understand ? He’s trembling all over. He’s got cold feet. He’s in a blue funk—an indigo blue funk—and yet he’s offering to come with us ! ”

“ He needn’t, ” returned Sam. “ We can go without him. ”

Koroku slid down the bank and got his feet on the gunwale of the canoe.

“ You fella Sam, you shut’m mouth belong you ! ” he cried angrily. “ Me talk along Marster Chris. He too much friend belong me. ”

“ All right, Koroku, ” said Chris coaxingly. “ Sam he gammon along you. Jump in and take one of the paddles. Sam will take the other. ”

Koroku seized the stroke paddle and jabbed the blade with such energy that the canoe swung out into the stream with a violent jerk.

“My word!” he said with defiant emphasis.

Sam dropped into even stroke with him, and they paddled strongly against the current, turning round the point of high cliff which hid them from the launch.

“That’s what I call real pluck,” remarked Mr. Knight in admiration of Koroku. “You could see that he was positively shivering with fear. If he wasn’t black he’d have been white with terror. And yet he’s gone with our two boys!”

“Pluck,” said the doctor, “is the impulse which forces you to do the thing that you don’t want to do. I am rather glad that Koroku has gone. But I shall be gladder still when I see them all three back here, out of that river of death.”

Wingrove and Hendon were too well mannered to refer even between themselves to Koroku’s superstitious fears. To them the river was no more perilous than any other tropical stream might be, and they quickly ceased to think of it as haunted in their admiration of its beautiful woodland glades and brilliant banks that cast their coloured reflections in the glassy surface.

When they had paddled two or three miles in the hot sunlight the beauty was changed

to the ugliness of a dismal mangrove swamp backed by dense forest; and here there was reason to be afraid of the big crocodiles that wallowed in the malarial mud or floated like logs in mid-stream. But soon they came into a deep gorge, where the current narrowed between high volcanic cliffs sprinkled thickly with orchids more rare and dazzling than any that they had seen in the lower reaches of the creek.

"This is the shop for the doctor!" cried Wingrove in delight at the discovery. "Now, we'll just get a few of those as samples and cut back. We've only just time to reach camp before sundown. Oh, just look at that lot along the ledge up there! We must have some of those!"

"Yes, but they're too high up," said Sam, surveying the steep precipice. "We've no ladders, and there's no foothold on those rocks anywhere near the ledge. And see how the cliff caves in!"

"We might climb down from the top," Chris suggested. "What about the rope?"

Koroku was quick to understand, and he volunteered to climb and secure the coveted specimens. The ledge was some thirty-five feet up the sheer wall of cliff, and only accessible from above. But it could be reached by means of the rope swung down from one of the overhanging trees.

Leaving his pistol and head-dress in the

canoe, Koroku carried the coil of rope over his shoulder, climbed up by an easy way, and disappeared over the top. Then a double line of rope came down, almost touching the ledge.

Sam had paddled to the opposite side of the stream, and the acacia tree round which the bight of the rope was bent could be seen at the extreme edge of the precipice.

“I shouldn’t have chosen that tree,” observed Chris. “The roots haven’t a firm hold.”

But as he spoke, Koroku lowered himself downward like a nimble spider. He had difficulty in reaching the ledge, which caved inward; but when he began to crawl along to the orchids and had let the rope swing loose a shower of earth and stones came down from above. There was an ominous crunching sound high up, and the whole tree with its roots, the rope and a great cataract of loose earth came crashing down into the gorge, falling athwart the stream.

Koroku had not been touched by the falling tree. Sam saw him on the ledge and knew that he was safe. But the falling of the heavy tree across the stream had brought about a new situation.

“Look!” cried Sam in consternation when the disturbance had subsided. “We’re shut in! We can’t get the canoe past that tree! We’re imprisoned!”

Chris was looking up at Koroku, wondering

how he was to be rescued from his perilous perch. He was on his knees on the narrow ledge, staring downward. Seeing that his companions were safe, he took out his knife and calmly secured three or four of the orchids, which he threw cleverly down into the canoe. Then, clutching at the rocky wall behind him, he stood up and realized that the rope was gone and his escape cut off.

What could he do? With his back to the cliff he could not even attempt to climb upward; there was no room for him to turn. And if he should work his way inch by inch to one side or the other there was still the same peril.

“Let’s get the rope and lower it down to him,” Sam proposed.

But the rope was tangled among the branches of the fallen tree and it would occupy them a long time to recover it, even if recovery was possible. And then it would have to be taken up the cliff to the spot where the ground was broken and crumbling.

Koroku seemed not at all disturbed by the peril of his situation. He stood with back against the rock and his hands at his sides as he looked down into the deep pool thirty feet below him. His only escape was by jumping. Very calmly he slipped his knife into his belt, spread out his arms, took a deep breath, and without a moment’s hesitation leapt forward, flashing down straight as an arrow into the depths.

He was out of sight for a long time. Sam and Chris looked from side to side anxiously searching. Then he came unexpectedly to the surface under the stern of the canoe. Seizing the gunwale, he pulled himself up, swinging himself over and showing his white teeth in a laugh as he carefully avoided treading on the orchids.

Seated on his haunches, he pointed westward beyond the obstructing tree which now formed an impassable barrier across the stream.

“My word!” he ejaculated. “Sun he go down. Tree he stop close up. Fella doctor he fright too much along white boy belong him.”

The slanting rays of the lowering sun shone upon his wet brown skin. Chris Wingrove leaned forward, staring at his woolly hair, at his finger nails, his knees, and at the dripping folds of his scarlet waist cloth. All about him he was speckled with tiny glistening yellow particles.

“Why,” exclaimed Chris in astonishment, “it’s gold! You’ve brought it up on you from the bottom! You’re covered with it. This river bed must be paved with gold dust!”

## CHAPTER XV

### THE DOG THAT WAS NOT ASLEEP

**W**HEN Dr. Molesey agreed to Koroku's selection of the four Boru-Boru men as carriers, and was inspecting them and their kits, he inquired their names. They were not easy names to remember or to call aloud. Mr. Knight, hearing them, objected to learning a new language.

"Let's number them," he suggested, "or else call them by the names of the months—March, April, May and June." And the doctor agreed.

May was the villainous-looking savage who wore the medicine bottle as a neck ornament. He constituted himself the boss over the three other months, and showed a disposition to include Koroku under his rule.

"Fella Koroku he too much friend along fella white boy," he complained. "Me knock seven bells outa him one time, suppose he come back."

He had watched the canoe as it was paddled away into the haunted east river, and now he sat upon the bank under the tree-ferns looking with wicked, sinister eyes at the launch. He had realized that the two white men were now alone and apparently unprotected except for the hateful black dog and the firearms which were always kept out of sight. May did not know that, apart from



their many revolvers and rifles, the two men could on an instant's alarm put their hands upon explosive grenades, bombs, and sticks of dynamite. Because they did not seem to be watching, he believed that they were unconscious of any danger. He waited very quietly, pretending to be asleep. But he touched the shoulder of June, who lay beside him smoking a clay pipe.

"What name?" questioned June.

May answered by turning his eyes upon the launch, warped against the bank. Mr. Knight lay on his back under the awning with half-closed eyes watching the fluttering wings of a twelve-inch velvety butterfly among the orchids suspended from the canvas above his head. His left arm was crooked about the neck of the retriever stretched lazily at his side. His right hand was under him, as a cushion to protect his hip from the pressure of his revolver. Dr. Molesey sat in the cockpit smoking a cigarette while he made notes of his specimens.

June understood the meaning of his companion's glance.

"What name?" he repeated.

"You savvy?" murmured May. "Fella dog he sleep close up. Big fella marster belong him he dream altogether. Fella doctor he no turn'm eye belong him. He keep'm eye along book belong him. Everything plenty quiet. We fella black boy, we no sleep. All right. Bimeby, suppose fella dog he no walk about, you fella

you finish'm dog altogether. Binu he finish big fella marster. Me finish'm fella doctor. Finish 'em altogether, my word. Two fella white man head we take close up. Two fella white man we cook-and-eat. Plenty kai-kai belong black boy. We take'm esteem-boat. Plenty musket he stop, plenty tobacco, plenty everything, my word. We take'm along canoe, washee like fun. Sun he go down we long way too much."

June screwed up his tattooed face in viciously eager anticipation.

"All right," he agreed. "Me catchee black fella dog. He die along him plenty quick."

April tested the edge of his long-bladed cane-knife.

"Me catch'm white fella big marster sleep along fella dog," he hummed. "Fella white head he plenty good belong fella me."

Their voices were like the humming of the insects in the hibiscus bush behind them, and their movements were so secret and cunning as they seized their knives that they might have aroused no alarm had it not been that from his seat in the cockpit Dr. Molesey could look into the highly-burnished plate of the engine box and see there a clear miniature reflection of the group of savages under the tree-fern. Meditating upon a name for a very rare orchid, he raised his eyes now and saw the moving picture of the four cannibals crawling towards him.

"*Cave!*" he exclaimed, laying down his foun-

tain pen and taking up his loaded revolver, but remaining with his eyes fixed upon the reflection.

Mr. Knight's left hand closed upon one of the dog's ears, as his right closed on his gun. Raising his head an inch, he looked beyond the lip of the awning and saw the four headhunters creeping stealthily through the long grass, the fierce sunlight glinting on their awful knives.

He felt a low growl rumbling in Shot's throat. Giving the dog's ear a sharp pinch, he cried sharply :

“ At 'em, Shot ! At 'em ! ”

Shot leapt to his feet and bounded upon the bank, his eyes glaring angrily and his heckles rising as he ran forward to meet the half-hidden blacks. He had always hated natives, and now, for once, he was not called back.

Knight had sat up, the doctor had wheeled round, and in the same instant they each fired a warning bullet over the woolly heads and swaying grass.

Shot had not barked. He streaked in a flash up to the foremost savage and leapt at the man's weapon arm, seizing it by the wrist. There was a piercing yell from the four savages as they saw the dreaded dog in their midst. It was May whom Shot had seized and was holding in the fierce worrying grip of his powerful jaws as Mr. Knight and Dr. Molesey ran up behind their levelled revolvers. March, June and April had taken to their heels, dropping their knives as they fled.

Knight kicked aside May's wicked-looking

knife, which seemed made for the very purpose of slicing off a man's head.

"That'll do, Shot," he commanded, drawing the dog away. "Fetch 'em! Go fetch 'em!"

Shot bounded off with nose to the trail, but quickly returned with one of the abandoned knives carried skilfully between his teeth. In the same way he retrieved the other two knives; but their owners had vanished.

"After them, then!" cried the doctor, waving his revolver in the direction taken by the fugitives.

Knight touched the fallen savage with the toe of his boot.

"What name you walk along here?" he demanded, pointing the muzzle of his gun between the man's craven eyes. "I bang'm head belong you pretty quick, you concentrated essence of iniquitous barbarism. Get up on feet belong you. I don't shoot men on the ground. Up you get!"

May staggered to his knees and flung up his trembling, tattooed hands imploring the white master's mercy. Knight was on the point of bashing his fist into the ugly face with its unsightly nose-ring and skewered nostrils; but he knew that he had already conquered; he saw that the whining cannibal's right arm was torn into ragged strips by Shot's grinders, and he restrained his anger.

He turned to Dr. Molesey as the savage stood up.

"I suppose that torn arm'll need your skill now," he said. "I'm jolly sorry Shot didn't get a grip of his throat instead. But if his arm had

been free the beggar would have used his knife on your splendid dog."

"Chivvy him down to the launch, and I'll see to the bite," nodded the doctor, gathering the impounded knives. "Shot's teeth are clean, which is more than I can say of his victim's."

He was bandaging May's arm when the retriever returned, driving June, April, and March in front of him like sheep. He had rounded them up from their hiding-place and was himself unharmed, for the three savages were without weapons.

"You fella black boys, you take'm canoe belong you and go catchee fish for kai-kai belong white man," Mr. Knight commanded. "Bimeby fella war-ship belong great king, he come close up along island belong you. Suppose you no good, you go aboard war-ship altogether. You go prison belong white man. Savvee?"

He was careful to see that there were no hidden weapons or food in the canoe, and while the four were out fishing he occupied himself in opening up wireless telephone communication with the *Albatross*. He was a long time in getting through, and his conversation with Mr. Bagley seemed to be interesting.

"Everything all right on board?" the doctor asked when Knight, having finished, returned into the launch.

"Yes, so far as the schooner's concerned," Knight answered, lighting a cigarette. "But

they're quite excited down there in the lagoon. That Australian ketch has come in—the *Sea Anemone*. She's out of Brisbane. Was here a month ago and has been across to Port Moresby. She has come back now to pick up some Queenslanders that she left ashore with the Commissioner. The idea now is that these men—there were six of 'em, all whites—have been killed and eaten by the same lot of cannibals who did for poor Drummond.”

“Good gracious!” exclaimed the doctor, aghast at this possibility. “Six of them? Six white men? But Koroku never told us that there were any other whites than George Drummond in that massacre!”

“No,” acknowledged Knight. “And now he isn't here we can't ask him. Bagley wants to know the instant the boys come in.”

“They're due back now,” the doctor reflected, looking west at the declining sun. “I hope nothing's detaining them. What in Jericho were six Australians left on Malaita for? Did Bagley tell you?”

“Oh yes, they were diggers. They landed with the purpose of going up into the interior prospecting for gold. The ketch went to Port Moresby to get extra mining materials.”

“Gold in the Solomons!” exclaimed Molesey. “I never heard of such a thing. There's plenty in New Guinea, of course; but not here.”

They discussed the six Australians in the light

of what they knew of the fate of the Resident Commissioner. They had heard very few particulars of the head-hunting raid on the station, but the fact that seven white men had been living there together seemed in itself to offer an unusual inducement to the cannibals to add to their collection of heads. The thing which perplexed Dr. Molesey was that Koroku had made no mention of the presence of any other white man than his master. There was therefore no proof that the Australians had been at the station at the time of the massacre.

But when the four natives came ashore with three decent-sized fish that they had caught, the sight of May's medicine bottle with its Brisbane label, gave evidence that some Australians had certainly been on the island very recently. Mr. Knight questioned the savage concerning his neck ornament : but May scowled and turned away.

Tea was made ; the sun went lower and lower towards its setting, and still Chris Wingrove and his canoe companions did not come back.

“ It was foolish to let them go,” deplored Dr. Molesey. “ They may have ventured ashore and got bushed. And in spite of what Koroku told us, there may be headhunters in hundreds up there—up that river of death ! Good glory, I wish they'd come back ! ”

After tea, the doctor made an exploration of George Drummond's diary, which Koroku had found behind the compound. He was in search

of some mention of the *Sea Anemone*, and he found what he sought :

“ I have sent Koroku with three of the house-boys to Gavutu,” Drummond had written, “ and already I miss my faithful watch-dog. But with good weather he ought to be back inside of a week.”

Further on in his diary he had made the entry :

“ An Australian ketch, the *Sea Anemone*, came into the lagoon to-day, leaving six of her company with me. It is a real joy to have talk with white men once again. But I am sorry for their own sakes that they have landed on Malaita in search of gold. That there is gold on the island I have no doubt, and fifty years hence, when there are no man-eating head-hunters about, it may be discovered in paying quantities. But to seek for it now is sheer madness, and I am persuading these good fellows to be my guests until their ship returns from New Guinea.”

Dr. Molesey was deeply interested in these entries. But his discovery was overwhelmed by his increasing anxiety over the mysterious absence of Wingrove.

The tropic sun sank quickly ; darkness fell over the land ; the lanterns in launch and tent were lighted, and the four black boys were curled up for sleep in their canoe, with Shot on guard between it and the launch. Molesey and Knight stood outside the tent, very silent, very appre-



hensive, listening to catch some sound that might tell them that the missing boys were returning in their canoe.

Suddenly Molesey clutched his companion's arm. Far off beyond the foothills and the black darkness of the intervening forest a rocket shot upward into the night sky, burst with a shower of fire-balls and sent forth a faintly-heard explosion. The retriever barked. A second and a third rocket went up.

"Three!" muttered the doctor, after an interval of watching. "Three close together. That means 'our camp is here,' and that the three boys are together. They're in difficulty, but not in immediate danger. But, I say, they're a fearful long way off. They won't be back in camp to-night. Get to your telephone, old man, and report. Don't alarm them. Tell Mr. Bagley what I've just found in Drummond's diary."

What Knight reported was that the six Australians had certainly not been massacred with the Commissioner, but that they had gone up the Rachel river in their whale-boat prospecting for gold. They had called at the village of Boru-Boru, and, as the Commissioner was then still alive and active, they had come to no harm. One of Mr. Drummond's houseboys, named Charlie, was with them as runner and guide. Charlie had not returned to Su'u when Drummond was killed. It was to be presumed, therefore, that the six Australians were still in the bush.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE TERRORS OF A TROPIC NIGHT

**T**HE acacia tree with its spreading branches and cumbrous roots had fallen so completely across the narrow stream that it formed an impassable barrier. There was no obvious means of getting the canoe past or over it, and at either side there was no beach, but only the steep cliff.

Chris Wingrove expended a lot of precious time and exercised all his scoutcraft in trying to devise a plan for clearing away the obstruction. He saw that the tree could not possibly be moved by the heavy root. The upper branches could perhaps have been cut away if he had brought a saw or an axe; but knives were useless. Had the launch been at hand, with her powerful engine, the tree could have been hauled aside for the canoe to pass, but the canoe was too frail for towing work, even if the current were in her favour. The worst difficulty, however, was the quickly approaching darkness.

“I’m afraid we must give it up,” Chris deplored as the sun dropped out of sight. “We must make camp up here for the night.”

“Me fright too much along’m dark,” Koroku complained. “Plenty fella goblin he come close up, plenty fella giant, plenty lion. Plenty fella

ghost he walk about altogether. Me got'm big fright, my word."

"What troubles me," said Wingrove, "is Dr. Molesey. He'll be no end anxious. He's always arguing about our keeping all together, and now he'll think we're done for, and he'll blame himself for letting us come out on this wild-goose adventure. He and Mr. Knight are alone, too, with those four fearful Boru-Boru boys—double distilled cannibals!"

"Couldn't one of us climb ashore and run back to camp by land?" Sam Hendon suggested.

"What, across pathless foothills and through endless mangrove swamps?" objected Chris. "You might as well try to swim it and run the gauntlet of the crocodiles!"

"Crocodile he walk about too much along'm night," Koroku observed tremblingly. He was beginning to exhibit more and more nervous fear as the darkness deepened.

"No," Wingrove decided. "We'll paddle up stream a bit and make camp in the forest. And we'll send up a rocket on the chance of the doctor seeing it."

The tropic twilight was very short, and they had not paddled many strokes when black darkness fell upon them. Koroku's paddling betrayed his terror. It was Sam's steady work that guided the canoe and kept her in mid-stream.

"What time's moonrise?" he wondered.

"Not till midnight," Wingrove told him,

fumbling in his haversack at the stern. "Fortunately, I brought my electric torch with a new battery."

He was about to switch on the light, but hesitated, fixing his gaze upon the cliff at a strange point of blue luminance.

"Belay there!" he ordered. "Ship your paddles. What's that shining thing?"

Koroku clutched his dripping paddle across his knees and gave a gasp of consternation as he glanced for a moment over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of the ghostly blue radiance. There were two patches of light that glistened against the cliff like the gigantic eyes of some supernatural monster. Even Sam Hendon drew back startled at the uncanny sight. Chris Wingrove, however, had looked with more discernment at the glittering fairylike sheen, and he had guessed at its source.

"Don't be frightened, you silly chickens!" he cried with a curious, excited laugh. "Can't you see what it is?"

He touched the switch of his torch and directed the electric beam towards the cliff. In the midst of the circle of his light was displayed a pair of brilliantly beautiful orchids, each about five inches in diameter and in colour a glorious deep violet, merging into lilac and pure sparkling white.

"A fairly innocent monster, isn't it, Sam?" he smiled. "They're orchids, see! And wonderfully fine ones. We've discovered a treasure."

My grandfather'd give a hundred pounds for one of those roots. It's worth our coming all the way from England to secure such specimens. Dr. Molesey'll say so when he sees them. But we'll wait till daylight to collect them."

He directed the torch beam to and fro to identify the spot, and further marked its bearings by dropping a banana skin on a jutting piece of rock.

"Go ahead," he ordered. "I can see a stretch of level bank a bit farther up, where we can make camp."

The creek widened some distance beyond, its bank on the left side opening into a dark mysterious glade of huge forest trees. It was from here that Chris sent up his three rockets in quick succession, firing them in the mid-current where there was a clear starry sky overhead.

Koroku was again alarmed. He had been in the cable tier when the rockets were fired in the *Albatross*. It was the hissing sparks that frightened him. He enjoyed seeing the high-up burst and the falling globes of coloured light.

"Why three?" Sam Hendon inquired. "And why all at once? You should have taken time between."

"Not at all," Chris explained. "I fired one for each of us, and all together to show that we're not separated. You may bet that the doctor's watching and that he'll understand the signal. He'll fret at finding we're so far away. But you

wait till to-morrow when he sees those luminous orchids ! ”

The canoe was run ashore and Koroku stepped out to haul her up the slope, but stood irresolute, peering into the forest darkness, trembling with dread apprehension.

“ What’s up ? ” asked Sam. “ You taken ill ? ”

“ Me fright big bit,” Koroku answered, holding up a finger and listening. “ Me fella me no savvy. Ear belong me he sing out. Me too much fright.”

A weird, mysterious sound had caught his alert hearing, filling him with a new terror. Wingrove and Hendon heard it, too—a far-off plaintive moan that seemed to come from the depths of the forest.

“ Is it human ? ” Chris wondered. “ It’s like the roar of a busy City.”

“ If it were not in the Solomon Islands,” said Sam, “ I’d say it was the shouting on a football field when a goal is scored. Or—wait a bit—no, it’s more like an Atlantic liner letting off steam.”

Koroku’s fears increased when Wingrove shut off his light. He tried to tell his companions that what they heard was the wailing of lost spirits suffering eternal torture. It filled the night air ; it seemed to come from nowhere, and yet everywhere. In his terror he refused to stay on land.

All three went back into the canoe. They paddled yet higher up the haunted creek, and the farther they went the more sonorous the roar

became. Then suddenly the perplexing mystery was explained. Turning a bend of the now turbulent creek, the adventurers were faced by a high waterfall, gleaming white and green in the light from the electric torch. Here the whole river tumbled over a great wall of rock in a mighty, roaring cataract, cutting off all further progress, and the canoe was now hemmed in, imprisoned between the cataract and the fallen acacia tree, and there was no refuge but the forest glade which had just been left.

The canoe was again beached and a bivouac was made in the shelter of a banyan tree, where a fire was lighted and tea brewed. Sam Hendon argued that there was no need to keep a watch where there could be no danger; but Chris Wingrove pointed out that it was a regular camp rule. They were in an unexplored country where no human being had ever been before, and there was no knowing what might happen. He decided that they should take spells of two hours each.

He himself took the first watch in the black darkness. Hendon took the second, and when Koroku's turn came the half moon was shining, and there was less darkness to feed his fears, although the banyan tree was like a giant cavern which no moonbeams could penetrate.

"Moon he come up," Koroku said cheerfully. "Fright belong me he no stop. Me altogether brave alla same white boy, my word."

Chris Wingrove did not forget Angus Tait's warning against trusting any Solomon Islander or giving one the shadow of a chance of treachery. But Koroku could gain no advantage from foul play, and, besides—well, Wingrove trusted him in spite of his being a Solomon Island savage.

Wingrove slept heavily. But he awoke on the instant when he felt a hand tapping on his chest.

"What name?" he cried, clutching his revolver.

"Bushman he walk about!" panted Koroku in an agitated whisper. "Plenty fella bushman walk about close up. No gammon."

Chris and Sam were on their feet immediately, fingering their guns. They stood listening. Above the muffled roar of the waterfall they heard distinct movements in the surrounding bush—movements not of night birds or scattering rats or creeping centipedes, but the unmistakable sounds of a slow, cautious tread upon the ground, of the cracking of dry twigs, and the swish of leaves as if hands were pressing aside the tropic foliage. Chris felt his heart thumping against his ribs. He hardly dared to breathe. Nevertheless he took courage to stride forward in the direction of the alarming sounds.

No longer were they the sounds of firmly treading feet, but the long-drawn dragging of knees and elbows in the grass. Koroku was close behind, with Sam in the rear. Wingrove switched on the light of his torch and the bright



beam shot forth like a searchlight through the feathery fronds of a tree-fern.

Two of the fronds were held apart by a pair of black hands, a long knife gleamed ready to strike. Between the two hands appeared the appalling tattooed face of a vicious-looking savage. And the rolling wide-open eyes did not blink when the muzzle of the white boy's revolver advanced towards them.

## CHAPTER XVII

### A MESSAGE FROM THE BUSH

**V**ERY slowly the hand that held the knife was lowered. A fixed stare of amazement took the place of the threatening glower of ferocity in the black face showing among the feathery green fronds.

Chris Wingrove deflected his aim, and for an instant flashed the light of his torch aside to discover how many others of the dreaded head-hunting bushmen might be creeping up to the attack. When again he directed the electric beam upon the tree-fern in front of him, the head and hands of the intruder had disappeared and there was no sound or movement to tell him in which way the savage had gone.

Koroku seized Wingrove's weapon arm with a trembling grasp.

"Ghost!" he panted in an awed whisper. "He fella ghost for true. He no fella bushman ghost. Me savvy him ghost belong dead house-boy look about for fella head belong him."

"Houseboy?" repeated Sam Hendon. "What d'you mean, Koroku? I noticed he wasn't wearin' a nose-ring. His teeth were white, too, same as your own. He didn't look half as terrible as the cannibals we saw in the war canoes,

and he was quite an innocent rabbit compared with the Boru-Boru boys. But he can't be a ghost, 'Roku. Ghosts don't carry knives, or walk about noisily, or take cover behind fern-trees. Besides, he had his head on his shoulders. He couldn't be searching for it."

"Me no gammon along you," Koroku insisted. "Me savvy that fella ghost big bit. He dead fella houseboy belong Marster Drummond."

"If you know him—ghost or alive—you may as well sing out his name," interposed Wingrove, swaying his light to and fro. "P'raps he'll answer. What name belong him what time he live? Sing out! Sing out'm name belong him!"

Koroku submissively raised an open hand to his cheek and called aloud in his shrill, penetrating voice:

"Cha'lie! Cha'lie! What name you dead fella boy walk about?"

The words were thrown back one by one distinctly from the echoing cliffs, and their repetition filled Koroku with new terror. Then followed a long, eerie silence. Chris Wingrove swept his light from side to side into the tangled masses of flowering shrubs and twisted ropes of lianas creepers that stretched from bough to bough like interminable snakes. He saw a tremulous movement among the vivid green and russet red foliage, and again he levelled his revolver.

"What name?" he demanded.



“ He wore only a dirty white lava-lava about his loins, a string of coloured beads round his thin arms, and anklets of cowrie shells. His knife had been thrust into his belt and his empty hands were held out in appeal.”



In quick response, the curtain of creepers opened and in the light from the torch the tall, thin figure of a native took shape, standing black against the yet blacker background of the forest.

He wore only a dirty white lava-lava about his loins, a string of coloured beads round his thin arms, and anklets of cowrie shells. His knife had been thrust into his belt and his empty hands were held out in appeal.

“Koroku!” he exclaimed in wonder. “What name you walk about along here? What name these two white fella boys? Marster Drummond he no walk about along ’m you?”

In spite of this sensible speech, Koroku did not appear to believe that it was a living, breathing man who was questioning him.

“What name you no sing out?” he was asked. “You lost ’m fella tongue belong you? What name Marster Drummond he no here? He gone sick?”

“He dead, Cha’lie,” Koroku answered. “He altogether dead. Plenty fella bushman belong Poonga-Poonga he walk about. Big fella marster he finish close up. Bushman he kill ’m, he eat ’m, he take ’m head.”

“What?” cried the new-comer in horrified astonishment. He looked to Chris Wingrove for an explanation.

“It is quite true,” Chris told him. “The cannibals got him.”

Charlie clapped his hands over his face. He

moaned in grief, and presently the tears began to trickle slowly between his black fingers. His whole body swayed unsteadily.

“You had better come down to our camp,” Wingrove invited. “You look worn and ill, and there’s blood about you. Come!”

“Thank you, marster,” Charlie stammered in unexpectedly clear English. “I very tired, very hungry. I run long way too much. I pretty near finish altogether.”

Sam Hendon went in advance and put the billy can of tea to warm on the fire and got ready some food.

When Charlie seated himself on a cushion of dry ferns that was prepared for him, it was seen that there was a great open wound across his left shoulder and his arm and side were covered with congealed blood.

“White man’s tea plenty good,” he murmured, taking a drink.

“How do you happen to be here in this haunted forest in the middle of the night?” Sam Hendon inquired. “We thought you were a band of man-eating headhunters.”

Charlie took the sandwich of cabin biscuits and bully beef that was handed to him.

“When I see fella rockets go up, sir,” he answered, “when I smell the smoke of the fire, I savvy’m white man he close up. White man he good fella too much. I no fright alonga white man.”

“Go on eating, Charlie, while I see to your wounded shoulder,” said Wingrove. “Hold the light, Koroku.”

He carefully bathed the wound with warm water, into which he had dropped an antiseptic tabloid. Koroku was by this time convinced that their visitor was not a ghost. He had supposed that Charlie had been among the house-boys who were massacred with their master. But Charlie explained to him that he had been away from Su'u for many days. He had gone while Koroku was absent, on a canoe voyage taking dispatches across to the trading station at Gavutu. They had not seen each other for weeks.

“Tell us how you came into the forest?” Wingrove asked as he pinned a bandage.

“Koroku he savvy nothing,” responded Charlie. “He stop in canoe belong him. He no savvy ship he come in lagoon. Plenty white man belong Queensland come in ship. They come ashore. Ship he go away. White man belong Queensland he make plenty talk along'm gold. He tell'm Marster Drummond he walk about in bush get plenty fella gold altogether. You savvy talk belong me?”

“Yes,” Chris nodded. He exchanged a glance of understanding with Sam. “Yes, we savvy.”

“Some fellows seem to have guessed there was gold in the Solomons, anyway,” said Sam, “or they wouldn't have talked of prospecting for it



in the wild interior. But of course they didn't go, did they, Charlie?"

Charlie, having finished his meal, looked about him and sniffed curiously.

"Me no smell'm tobacco," he said. "Koroku he no smoke. You fella white boy you no smoke?"

"No, but I can offer you a cigarette," said Sam, diving a hand into his pocket and producing a caseful.

As the wounded native smoked he returned to Sam's question.

"Six fella white man he go up in bush," he said. "I go along'm white man in whale-boat. Whale-boat he stop in creek. Sun he come up you find'm whale-boat close up. White man he take plenty kai-kai, plenty swag, plenty gun belong him. Me carry plenty swag on head belong me, my word. Plenty Su'u boy he carry swag. White marster he no savvy no fella boy he carry cartridge belong gun. Cartridge he stop in box belong boat."

"Guns without a reserve of cartridges!" cried Wingrove. "And they were going up into the bush among the headhunters! Whatever happened? You don't mean to say——"

Charlie stared at the glowing end of his cigarette and drew a deep breath.

"Bushman he catchee white man," he resumed. "Plenty gun white man shoot. Me fella Charlie me shoot five, six fella bushman close up. One

fella white man he stop along fella me. He catchee spear in foot. He no walk. Me fella me carry that fella white man long way big bit. Bimeby me hide'm that white man in tree, give'm food, give'm water. Me say you stop close up. Me go fetch'm other white friend belong you."

"Yes?" urged Wingrove. "You left him in safe hiding and then ran back to pick up any other survivors. Well?"

"No good," Charlie went on. "Five fella white man he finish altogether. Bushman eat'm, take'm head. Five white man head he take. White man in tree he tell'm me run back home belong Marster Drummond, fetch plenty boy, plenty gun. He strong man, that fella white man; plenty brave, my word! He no savvy walk away and leave five white man head alonga fella bushman, you bet. You give'm fella me 'nother cigarette?"

"Take 'em all," said Sam, passing the open case. "You ought to have been white to do what you've done."

"Jolly plucky to go back on the off chance of saving another," reflected Wingrove. "And now, to be practical, what's to be done? There's a wounded white man up in the bush, waiting for help. Help must go to him, and quick, too, if he's to be saved."

"That tree across the creek's a nuisance," said Sam. "How in thunder are we going to get the canoe past it in the dark? We're imprisoned.

Pity we didn't bring along a pocket wireless telephone! Pity that cruiser hasn't turned up. She belongs to the Australian navy, and these gold-diggers were Australians. It must have been one of them that left that Brisbane medicine bottle at Boru-Boru as they pulled up the river."

"The tree in the creek is the thing we've to think of," mused Chris Wingrove. "I don't see how we're to do anything before daylight. Seems to me we'd better sleep on it. Charlie here's nearly asleep already."

Koroku stood up and tightened his belt.

"What name you no sleep?" Chris asked him.

"Cha'lie he no fit all same fella me," Koroku answered. "He sleep. I no want'm sleep. I run plenty quick tell'm fella doctor white man he bushed. Sun he come up I long way close up along boat belong fella doctor. What name I no go?"

"Because we want you to help with the canoe," Wingrove told him. "Because we must all keep together and not get monkeying about to find a way through impassable mangrove swamps swarming with giant crocodiles. Just you get to sleep. It's my watch on deck."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### “BIG FOOL” AND “PLENTY SENSE”

**T**HE Solomon Islands are generally credited with having the wettest climate on earth, and Wingrove had reason to be thankful that no deluge of tropic rain was added to the discomforts of that night in the haunted forest up the east Rachel river. But although there was dry ground about the camp, yet there was certainly a rainstorm up among the mountains, for when he found his way down to the creek he saw that the current had risen, and the louder roar of the neighbouring waterfall told him that the river was in spate.

He stepped into the swaying canoe. From its farther end he looked up into the clouded sky. The moon was hidden, but he assured himself that there were no overhanging tree branches above him. He looked at his wrist-watch by the light of his torch and saw that it was close upon four o'clock.

“Just about time for Mr. Knight to be using the telephone,” he reflected. “He'll be awake. In case our rockets were not seen, I'll send up another lot, to let them know we're safe. I wonder if they'll understand if I fire four instead of three—one for Charlie? It would worry the doctor trying to guess what the fourth one means.

And yet we're certainly four, and I've got to be truthful, however much he may be perplexed."

Four rockets were accordingly sent up, and although Chris did not know it at the time, yet Dr. Molesey was acute enough to reason that a fourth person had by some strange chance been added to the party up the haunted creek.

Chris had used his petrol lighter for the rockets, and the tiny flame had been enough for him to see by. He blew it out and looked around him in the darkness. While he knelt in the bottom of the canoe, watching the water rippling past, there came to his nostrils a strong, sickening smell of musk and decay. He sniffed suspiciously.

"Crocodiles!" he exclaimed, snatching at his electric torch. He swept its piercing radiance across the creek and from side to side in search; but there was no sign of crocodiles, although from far down the stream he caught the grisly sound of their peculiar bellowing cough.

On the near side of the creek, however, he saw something which held his gaze. In a cleft of the high bank and well concealed by the overhanging foliage was the unmistakable shape of a steering rudder, upright in its place against the stern-post of a white-painted whale-boat. And on the covering board, beyond the rudder, he distinguished part of the letters of a vessel's name.

He got out of the canoe and crawled along the bank, pushing his way through the thickly interlacing creepers with some difficulty, until he came

within a high part of the main cliff which formed a roofless cave.

There he stood in astonishment. The rocky wall was overgrown with moss and bird-nest ferns, and speckled all over this vivid green was a dazzling display of the most marvellously beautiful orchids of brilliant gold and bronze, deep purple, glowing crimson, luminous violet and snow-white. They were of different shape from any that he had seen before, either growing or figured in books, and he knew at once that he had made a discovery that would rejoice Dr. Molesey's heart.

From the precious orchids he turned to the whale-boat. Charlie had said, “You find'm whale-boat close up,” and this was obviously the boat to which he had referred, lying hidden here in a stream which it was supposed no human being had ever entered. It was the Australian gold-seekers' boat.

The name of the ship from which they had landed—the *Sea Anemone*, of Brisbane—was painted on her white planks.

She was warped to the cliff in seaman's fashion by two stout painters, bow and stern, to prevent the current from carrying her away. Fore and aft across the thwarts three pairs of sweeps and a couple of boathooks were neatly stowed, and there was a rope neatly coiled on the grating in the stern-sheets. A water breaker stood in its chocks amidships.

The bilge was half a fathom deep in rain-water, and under one of the forward thwarts was the

unopened box of Winchester ammunition which the gold-seekers had left behind, either by forgetfulness or with the impression that the cartridges in their bandoliers would serve their purpose sufficiently.

Wingrove could only vaguely imagine how astonished he would have been to find a boat in such a place had he not heard from Charlie of the Australians. But there was now no mystery. The men had landed here and gone off with their train of carriers into the unknown bush, and it was a curious reflection that in venturing farther inland in search of imaginary gold-reefs, they were not only risking their lives but passing beyond a place where gold was plentiful!

The whale-boat was of no use to him. It was too heavy to be managed by a crew of three boys and a wounded native. Selecting a few of the orchids, he took their roots and carried them with him to the canoe.

While he was packing them, he heard the sound as of two very far-distant pistol shots. He looked southward and westward, and saw two long thin threads of light streaming against the darkness of the sky. They quickly disappeared, but he knew that they were rockets sent up from the launch in answer to his own similar signal.

Before the first faint gleam of dawn filtered in among the forest trees Wingrove and Hendon were preparing to break camp.

“Sun he come up!” cried Chris, and Koroku

and Charlie awoke to find the fire still alight and tea made.

Over breakfast Wingrove was very silent.

“It’s clearly useless for us to think of going up into the bush to rescue that white man,” he said at last. “We’re not fit to undertake a journey so dangerous, and we haven’t enough food, anyway. Besides, we must get back to the launch and save the doctor any further worry. But how we’re to get past that fallen tree is a problem. We can’t get the canoe under it; we can’t lift it over. We can’t move the tree aside. And yet if we don’t get past somehow, we’re as good as lost.”

“Perhaps the launch will come up and rescue us,” suggested Sam. “Dr. Molesey knows where we are.”

“She hasn’t enough petrol to bring her up this far and then all the way back to the lagoon,” Wingrove pointed out. “And besides, we got ourselves into this mess, and we ought to get out of it without help. Let us paddle down and see what can be done.”

There was no need for them to visit the Australians’ whale-boat. Even Charlie was satisfied with a glance at it as they passed, and indeed his sole interest in it was that it had formed a landmark for him by which to find his bearings. He had intended to travel on foot all the way to Su’u. But now he left himself in the hands of the two white boys, trusting to them with dog-like confidence.



The current was in the canoe's favour and the sun was hardly above the tree-tops when the place which Wingrove had marked with the banana skin was reached.

"We may as well collar those luminous orchids," he determined. "I believe they're better than any others we've got so far."

The flowers were of a different colour by daylight, more deeply violet; but they still possessed their uncommon glittering sheen in their jewelled white crowns. Without much trouble Chris succeeded in lifting them by their roots from the surface of the rock, together with some of the same order that were not yet full grown.

Beyond this cliff there was a stretch of mangrove swamp, with ugly grey trees growing out of the slimy mud and only here and there a sago palm or a clump of huge marsh ferns. Suddenly a flood of warm sickly scent filled the air, and there came a chorus of hoarse droning cries.

"Crocodile he close up," announced Koroku. "My word, that fella he plenty big!"

A huge, horrible grey head with cold eyes rose like a phantom from the slime, opening a gulf of white-toothed jaw. The swamp was thickly populated with such creatures, but although they inspired instinctive loathing, they caused no fear, and Sam and Koroku were paddling swiftly.

But it was more alarming when Wingrove, kneeling at the bow looking out for the fallen tree, saw two of the monsters swimming in front of him.

They were swimming with the current, away from the mangroves, and the banks of slime and mud had already given place to high cliffs up which the hideous reptiles could not climb. Directly in advance of the two crocodiles Chris saw the fallen acacia tree.

“Belay paddling!” he ordered. “Those two fearful brutes in front will turn when they come to the tree. We must hold back.”

“Plenty more crocodile he stop,” cried Koroku, glancing apprehensively astern.

Sam Hendon took up his Winchester rifle. Two smaller crocodiles were swimming up in the near wake. Chris Wingrove also seized his gun. The two reptiles in front of him were enormous and truly terrifying, and, if they should turn, there was little enough space for the canoe to pass between them. There was danger on every side. And how was it possible even to approach the obstructing tree when such monsters were crowding round?

It seemed to Wingrove that his only course was to turn back, and he was about to give the order when something rasped violently against the bottom of the canoe. The long snout of a gigantic crocodile rose above the surface, and the great cavern of its jaws opened and coughed in his face. In an instant Chris levelled his rifle and fired two well-aimed bullets into the roof of the brute’s mouth. The canoe rocked perilously, but was soon steadied.

“These two chaps astern are after us!” cried Hendon. He waited for a moment, taking aim between the eyes of the one on his right, while Koroku, close behind him, aimed to the left. Both guns were fired at the same time, and a third shot came from Sam’s revolver in the hand of Charlie.

There was a great commotion in the water as the wounded monsters struggled and lashed about with their legs and tails. The biggest of the three turned over with his feet in the air and his head bumping at the canoe.

“Paddle to the bank!” cried Wingrove. “They’ll capsize us!”

Koroku was very quick to obey. He got the canoe broadside to the cliff in precisely the same spot that it had occupied when he had jumped from the ledge of the opposite cliff on the previous evening.

The three crocodiles seemed to be dead. But what of the two huge ones that had been swimming in advance?

“That big fella crocodile he big fool,” said Charlie, pointing to the root end of the fallen tree. “Other fella he got’m plenty sense belong him.”

Koroku exclaimed “My word!” and lapsed into silence as he watched. But Chris Wingrove and Sam Hendon could hardly contain their boyish excitement as they looked at what was happening in front of them.

The two enormous crocodiles had not turned

back. They had possibly gone down this stream every morning of their lives in the many years that must have passed since they were born, and apparently they did not intend to be balked by an insignificant tree that had fallen across their path.

But their methods of getting past the obstruction were different. The one whom Charlie had called “big fool” chose the submarine passage. He made a dive under the tree near its roots, and now he had got it across his neck, where it weighed him down, and as he struggled to free himself, pushed forward by the current with the knobs of his gnarled spine against the trunk, he was lifting the tree by inches, only to let it drop with all its weight upon his neck and again and again submerge him.

“Plenty sense,” on the other hand, preferred the overland route. He climbed over the open branches, crunching them under his ponderous weight and pressing the growth of boughs beneath the surface. But he, too, was balked. By some strange mishap, he got his arms and neck entangled in Chris Wingrove’s abandoned climbing rope, and now, swimming free of the branches, he was hauling and tugging at the tangled rope and bodily pulling the whole tree round. The current helped him, it caught up the dislodged tree, and very soon the bewildered occupants of the canoe saw in front of them an open passage which enabled them to get through and paddle down in safety to their friends in the waiting launch.

## CHAPTER XIX

### KOROKU'S WARNING

“YOU need hardly ask me which is the best of the lot,” said Dr. Molesey. “It’s this one. It’s simply glorious !”

He was kneeling on the river bank under a young mahogany tree where the whole of Wingrove’s collection of orchids was spread out in orderly array, and he indicated the violet and white specimens which had so alarmed Koroku by their blue luminance in the darkness of the haunted creek.

“It’s simply glorious, Chris,” he repeated. “And I’ve already fixed on a name for it.”

“Some jaw-breaking classical name, as usual, I suppose,” smiled Chris.

“Well, perhaps so,” nodded the doctor. “But it deserves it. Nobody has ever seen one like it. It’s a lamellia ; it’s luminous, and you were its discoverer. I intend therefore to label it *Lamellia lucens Wingrovia*.”

“Not a bad definition, sir,” acknowledged Chris. “And you’d better call that other one the *Odontoglossum Korokuum*. Koroku nearly lost his life in bagging it when he made his great dive into the river of gold. And talking of gold reminds me I must get on to the telephone and report.”

He strode to the place where Mr. Knight had installed his wireless set.

"Hello!" he called, when he got a connection. "That you, Mr. Bagley?"

To his surprise he received an answer in a strange voice.

"I'm wireless operator in His Majesty's cruiser *Paramatta*, anchored in Su'u Lagoon," said the unknown voice. "What ship are you? Where are you bound for?"

"I'm not a ship," Chris answered, "we're a party of orchid seekers up the Rachel river. Seems you've jammed me. I want the schooner yacht *Albatross*. If you're in Su'u Lagoon, she's anchored near you."

There was silence for a long interval. Then came another voice:

"Hello. That you, doctor?"

"No! It's Chris Wingrove. Good morning, Mr. Bagley. All well aboard? What? Yes, I came back this morning. We got held up by a timber fall. Spent the night in a forest. What's the name of that Australian ketch, sir?"

"The *Sea Anemone*, of Brisbane. She's anchored alongside us. The cruiser's in the lagoon as well. We're quite a big flotilla, my word. Commander Robson, of the *Paramatta*, has just come aboard us for breakfast and to hold a council of war with our old man and the skipper of the ketch. Why do you want her name?"

"Well," Chris responded, "we found her whale-

boat up the creek. And a black boy with a nasty gash in his shoulder blew into our camp in the forest and told an awful tale about six white men—Australians—who went into the bush prospecting for gold. Charlie—that's the black boy, Mr. Drummond's gangboss—was with these diggers, and about a dozen native carriers, and they all got bushed."

"Go ahead," urged Mr. Bagley. "Got bushed, you say—lost?"

"Yes, six of 'em. And worse than lost. They've been dropped on by the headhunters. Five were killed and eaten and their heads carried off. The sixth—a man named Hine, or Pine—was wounded by a spear in the foot, and the boy Charlie of Su'u rescued him—carried him over his wounded shoulder and hid him in the scrub. He's there now, alive, waiting for help."

"The name is Pine—Captain Oscar Pine," Mr. Bagley corrected. "He was the leader of the prospectors."

"How do you know?" Chris asked. "Did the people in the ketch know he was up in the bush?"

"Yes. They're here now, gasping for news. I must tell them at once. The Commissioner was dead against the expedition. There's no gold in the Solomons, you know. Captain Pine is alive, you say?"

"Yes. What's to be done?"

"Hold on a bit, till I go below and find out."

Wingrove remained listening-in for a full half-hour, when again Mr. Bagley spoke.

"It's all settled," he reported. "Commander Robson is on the job. The cruiser is going round to Poonga-Poonga to punish the man-eaters for their cannibal raid on the Commissioner's station; and there's to be a relief expedition into the bush to rescue Captain Pine and get back the heads of those five Queenslanders. I am to take command of the relief expedition. Tait and Squirrel will come, with a midshipman and half a dozen blue-jackets from the cruiser, and the mate and super-cargo of the ketch, with a squad of their kanakas. We shall need your boy Charlie as guide, of course; and young Kockatoo may be useful. Were those your rockets we saw last night?"

"Yes. Private signals," Chris answered. "Bring some petrol with you, the doctor's medicine chest, my camera, some cigarettes, and trade tobacco, and——"

"All right," Bagley interrupted. "Make out a full list and dictate it to me at six bells. So long."

Dr. Molesey was dressing Charlie's shoulder when Wingrove returned to him. The wound was quickly becoming a typical Solomon Island ulcer.

"My word," Koroku was saying, "arm belong you fella Cha'lie he niff plenty strong! Mangrove swamp he plenty sweet alongside arm belong you."

"You hold'm tongue belong you," retorted Charlie, wincing under the attentions of the doctor. "You go look'm eye along Boru-Boru boy. Him



make plenty mischief. Me fella me no like'm Boru-Boru boy," he added to the doctor.

Mr. Knight was within the tent, busy with his water-colours, painting photographic records of orchids. This was a part of his recognized duty. He continued working while Wingrove reported all that he had heard by telephone.

"Mr. Bagley wants a list of the special stores we need," Chris concluded, feeling in his pocket. He remembered now that he had left his indelible pencil in the canoe, and he went down to look for it.

Koroku had already gone in the same direction. The four Boru-Boru boys had assembled in a group on the landing-place. One of them—the one nicknamed May—looked round as Koroku approached.

"You find fella knifee belong fella me?" he inquired.

"Knife?" repeated Koroku. "Knife he no belong Boru-Boru boy. He belong white man altogether. What name you want fella knife?"

"You lend'm fella me knife belong you?" May asked.

"No," Koroku answered decisively. "White fella doctor he no want'm you touch fella knife. He cross along you."

"Yah!" snarled May, showing his betel-blackened teeth. "You fella you altogether too much friend belong white man. What name you no walk along'm fella black boy? Me bang'm head belong you. Me knock seven bells outa you close up!"

"Ga!" retorted Koroku. "You shut'm ugly face belong you. You no savvy white man."

"Me fella me savvy white man he plenty good for cook along fire. He plenty good for kai-kai," rejoined the confessed cannibal. "Bimeby you savvy he heap good suppose you fella walk about alonga fella me. White man take'm kniffee belong me. Me take'm head belong white man."

Koroku shot a quick glance into the native's painted face.

"Suppose you look'm eye along white man one little bit," he declared fiercely, "me kill you altogether dead like'm rat."

This threat was greeted with a Solomon Island laugh of derision. May turned his leering glance upon his three companions as if asking for their support. Koroku, scenting mischief, moved his hand to his automatic pistol; but there was no time for him to draw the weapon.

With a fiendish snarl May leapt at him, to be met midway by Koroku's fist full in the face. The savage wheeled under the unexpected sledgehammer blow and fell on his back. But he was up again like a cat. In the moment of the fall, Koroku drew his pistol and stood with it at arm's length, ranging his aim from one to another of the three islanders in front of him. The fourth—April—slipped behind him and adroitly snatched the knife from Koroku's belt.

Koroku felt the hand at his back. He jumped round, getting all four covered with his levelled

gun. They drew close together, and the knife was cleverly juggled from hand to hand behind their backs.

It was now that Chris Wingrove strolled down to search for his pencil.

“What name you fella boy, eh?” he cried, seeing Koroku’s pistol. “What name?”

The four Boru-Boru boys spread themselves fanwise to form a circle around Wingrove. None spoke. March, who held the knife, was sliding round inch by inch to work to the rear of the white boy. But Chris Wingrove remembered the rule of never allowing a Solomon Islander to get to the back of him, and he half turned to keep the sneaking black figure in sight, while Koroku took a step nearer to him.

Koroku had not known in whose hand his stolen knife was held. But he saw March edging cunningly nearer and nearer. He himself sidled closer to Wingrove. Suddenly, almost violently, he elbowed Chris aside and took up a protective position behind him, back to back. Chris, looking round sharply, saw Koroku drop his pistol and leap like an infuriated tiger upon March, seizing him by the throat in the iron grip of his strong right hand.

Instinctively, Wingrove drew apart and stood with all the savages in full view. He fingered his revolver.

Koroku still gripped March by the throat with his right hand, and by his wrist with his left. The two were wrestling together, swaying and writhing

in each other's clutches like a pair of wild animals that fought to kill, while the knife was held aloft as an impending dagger in the hand that Koroku had seized. They were fighting furiously for possession of that knife. While they struggled for mastery, one of the onlooking savages suddenly darted forward and reached a bandaged arm for the pistol which Koroku had dropped on the grass.

Wingrove was after him in an instant. Giving the stooping cannibal a smart kick which sent him sprawling, he planted one foot on the pistol and the other on May's body, covering him with his own gun as he called aloud :

“ Shot ? Shot ? ”

The retriever came bounding towards him from beyond the hidden tent and intervening bushes. At sight of the dog the two disengaged natives ran for the refuge of their grass-built shelter in the banyan tree. Chris removed his foot from May's writhing body, seized the fallen pistol, and backed away to Koroku's side. There he turned and was thrusting the muzzle of his gun between the combatants' faces when with a new effort Koroku gave a heavy lunge forward, loosened his double grip of wrist and throat, threw out a bent leg, and sent his antagonist rolling on the ground.

Shot then dashed in and caught the black arm above the fist that still held the knife in its rigid fingers.

“ Back ! Shot, get back ! ” cried Wingrove.  
“ Leave it ! That'll do ! ”

Koroku snatched at his knife and returned it to his belt.

“My word!” he muttered defiantly as the two defeated savages got up and moved off, March rubbing his strained neck, and May deploring a broken nose-ring and trying to stay the flow of blood from a cut lip. “My word!”

“You fella Koroku you go make’m big talk along Boru-Boru boys,” Chris advised, handing him his automatic pistol. “You tell’m them big fella war-ship belong great white king he stop along Su’u Lagoon. Bimeby, before sun he go down, plenty white man he stop close up along camp belong white fella doctor. Savvy? And see here, Koroku,” he added, “you keep’m hand plenty close up alongside’m piccaninny gun belong you.”

Koroku followed him a few steps and said quietly and thoughtfully :

“Marster Chris, me big friend along you. Me alla same brother belong you. Skin belong me he black. Fella heart belong me he no black. He little bit white.” He paused and then went on: “You fella you look’m eye along Boru-Boru boy all time. He bad man altogether. He want catchee head belong you, my word! He want catchee your head too much.”

“All right, Koroku,” Chris nodded, “I’ll keep a good look-out, if that’s what you mean.”

He whistled for Shot as he strode away. After all, he decided, it would be easy enough to borrow a pencil from Mr. Knight.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE FIRST FATALITY

**S**HORTLY before sundown the usual bank of clouds gathered about the jagged peaks of the mountains, and Dr. Molesey began to prepare for a wet night by loosening the tent cords, raising the ground board and seeing that a good deep trench was cut.

The four Boru-Boru boys had already built themselves a thatched platform high up under the matted canopy of the banyan tree; it was like a crow's-nest among the lower branches. Koroku and Charlie were provided with blankets, oilskins and a canvas sheet to contrive a sheltered sleeping place in a canoe hauled up near the tent, where they could keep watch. The launch was closed in under its rain-proof tarpaulins.

"We must count on Mr. Bagley bringing a second tent," the doctor said to Chris Wingrove. "But you're a Scout, and I've no doubt you'll make everything snug."

"Rather a large order, finding accommodation for so many," reflected Chris. "We shall be thirty, all told. And there's the difficulty of dividing the sheep and the goats. But we shall be better off than Captain Pine, all alone up there in the bush, wounded and hungry, and thinking all

the time of what has happened to his chums. I wonder if any of them escaped! Charlie has no real proof that they were all taken by the headhunters, you know. One or more may have escaped."

"That's one thing that we've got to discover," mused the doctor. "We must be absolutely certain that they haven't been captured alive and kept as prisoners. And we can only make sure by going right into the midst of the headhunters. What's up? Did you hear something?"

"I thought I heard a sort of distant whistle," said Chris. "Shot seems to have heard it, too. But if it's Mr. Bagley in the whale-boat, he's still a long way off. There it is again! Louder this time, a motor-boat's siren, and not far away!"

The sun had not yet set nor the rain begun when the expedition arrived, a formidable flotilla. It was led by a strong little motor dinghy, which acted as tug, drawing behind in procession two whale-boats and three canoes.

The dinghy was from the Australian ketch, whose mate and supercargo were in charge of the engine. Towed behind her was the large whale-boat from the *Albatross*, flying the white ensign over her stern, with Mr. Bagley and a midshipman in the stern-sheets and six bluejackets seated forward. Next came a smaller whale-boat with Angus Tait and Tom Squirrel; and then three Solomon Island canoes, one with stores, one loaded with half a dozen black boys from Boru-Boru, and

the third with eight stalwart kanakas from the ketch. Thus each of the three vessels in the lagoon had contributed towards the expedition.

Most of the stores were left in the boats, well protected from the rain. Two bell tents were put up by the bluejackets for themselves and the other white men, while Angus Tait and Squirrel found accommodation for the black boys, carefully separating the sea-going kanakas from the Solomon Islanders.

Mr. Bagley and the midshipman, Sidney Grafton, shared Dr. Molesey's tent, with Mr. Knight and Chris Wingrove. Their conversation over dinner took the form of loud shouting, for the roar of the tropic rain and the crashing of thunder made ordinary speech impossible. Chris Wingrove and young Grafton, however, were able to carry on an interesting talk and to make each other's acquaintance by their skilful use of the deaf and dumb alphabet.

Apart from the discomfort caused by the deluging rain, the night was passed without event. A two-hour watch was kept by well-armed bluejackets in their sou'-westers and oilskins. There was plenty of hot tea and cocoa going, and an abundance of tobacco was burnt by the wakeful black boys. Shot, who had an objection to Solomon Island rain, slept the whole night through at the foot of the tent pole, which was the driest place in the camp.

At sunrise the rain had ceased, and all hands



were busy preparing breakfast, hanging out wet clothing, cleaning and oiling up engines, and packing the camp equipment. The passage up the east creek would not occupy many hours, and Mr. Bagley had no great difficulty in the work of distributing his forces. As he now had the launch as well as the motor dinghy for towing, it was easy to make up two squadrons in line ahead formation, the launch towing her own whale-boat and two canoes, and the dinghy taking an equal number of smaller craft.

Dr. Molesey had anticipated that there would be trouble with the Boru-Boru boys ; and, indeed, as soon as they learned that they were expected to go into the tabooed east river with all its mysterious phantoms and hidden dangers, they showed a decided disposition to go off on strike. The doctor suggested that Koroku should talk them over ; but Chris Wingrove, remembering the recent fight for the knife, volunteered to be the spokesman.

He began by making sympathetic inquiries about May's bitten arm and cut lip, and then explained the purpose of the expedition. May, speaking for his fellow-tribesmen, at first resolutely refused to move. They were all going back to Boru-Boru, he declared. Then Chris offered good payment in tobacco and trade goods. He was rather surprised at the sudden change in May's attitude. May spoke to his mates in their own language, and many sinister and secret

glances were exchanged. Yes, for the sake of the tobacco, and because so many brave fella white men were there to protect them, they would go.

“ You fella white boy you been gone along’m creek,” May pointed out. “ Two white boy one fella black boy Koroku you washee along creek. Come back altogether safe. What name we fella Boru-Boru boy have’m fright ? ”

Afterwards, when they were embarking, and again when they were landing, whenever Wingrove came beside May, it was to discover in him a strange desire to please and to offer help. Chris began to think a lot of his power over the savage mind ; and while the launch was making her way up the no longer mysterious creek he argued with Mr. Bagley and the doctor that Solomon Islanders could quite well be trusted if you only treated them like reasonable human beings and were kind to them.

“ Bosh ! ” exclaimed Mr. Knight. “ I wouldn’t trust any one of them to give me a cup of water. Shot, here, is worth a whole island full of ’em. They’re a lot of treacherous, cruel, cannibal brutes. That’s what they are.”

“ I’d trust Koroku with my life,” Chris declared firmly. “ And I think I’d trust Su’u Charlie. They’re both Solomon Island savages.”

On the way up the stream Chris had been taking snapshots of crocodiles, birds and scenery ; and later, when the boats and canoes were all securely harboured in the orchid cave and the marching

party was being made up, he went into the darkness of a hollow tree, there to manipulate his Kodak films for further operations. He had not been there many moments when he became aware that a group of the Boru-Boru carriers had gathered near. One of them was speaking in a subdued falsetto voice which Chris recognized.

“Plenty fella white man he walk about close up,” May was saying. “He go make’m big war along fella bushman, you savvy. Bushman he big friend belong Boru-Boru boy altogether. He kai-kai alle same brother along fella me. What name? He no savvy white man he come. He sleep. He no look’m eye along bush. Bimeby, white man he come creep along close up, shoot’m plenty gun, my word. Bushman he altogether finish. Fella white man he walk about plenty proud. He no lose’m head. No fear!”

Thus far it was clear to Chris Wingrove that the Boru-Boru boys were on the side of the cannibal headhunters. He listened further, and the cunning scheme unfolded was this: that the expedition was to be prevented from reaching the bush village. The white men and kanakas were too many and too well armed for the Boru-Boru boys alone to attack them and take their heads. But help could be got, and a great cannibal feast enjoyed, by sending on a secret messenger to bring out a limited party of the headhunters to wait in ambush and join in a general massacre.

There was going to be treachery !

At the command to fall in, the black carriers took up their head loads and the procession started. The officers and Dr. Molesey took the lead, with Charlie of Su'u as guide. Then followed the six bluejackets with their guns and side-arms, Squirrel and Hendon carrying the parts of a Lewis gun, the natives coming after with ammunition boxes and stores, and Wingrove, Koroku and the retriever bringing up the rear. Mr. Knight and Angus Tait were detached to keep the file in close marching order.

The first few miles were through the dense pathless forest, and it was past noon when the leaders emerged upon open scrub. Once, while Mr. Knight halted to urge the carriers forward, he saw May's white-bandaged arm pointing to some known landmark among the foothills.

"I'm pretty sure some of those river boys have been up here before," Knight remarked later to Mr. Bagley. "We must be careful."

Shortly afterwards, Koroku, in advance of Wingrove and the led dog, stopped abruptly and, drawing aside a clump of spear-grass, uncovered a case of trade tobacco.

"Me savvy that fella pack he belong Boru-Boru boy," he said. And, looking beyond it, he saw that the grass was trodden down. "Him run plenty quick !"

Chris bent over and took the chain from the retriever's collar.

“ Seek him, Shot ! ” he ordered. “ After him, then.”

Shot lowered his muzzle to the scent and went off in pursuit. Chris hurried forward to Mr. Bagley.

“ One of the Boru-Boru boys has given us the slip, sir,” he reported. “ I believe he has cut on in front to warn the headhunters and fetch a gang of them out to attack us from ambush. They’ve planned it all. I sent the dog after him. Hello ! There he is ! There’s Shot ! ”

The dog had followed the trail and come out on a narrow, clearly-marked bush path, crossing the line of march. He ran off to the right. Scarcely had he disappeared when there came a piercing yell of pain. Mr. Bagley and Chris drew their revolvers and went forward cautiously. Shot came back with his tail between his legs. Mr. Bagley still went on, but stopped suddenly in unmistakable alarm.

“ Look ! ” he said to Chris. “ Look ! ”

He pointed into the long grass where the escaped carrier lay dead, with the barbed point of an arrow sticking out from between his tattooed shoulders.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE DOCTOR'S FORCED MARCH

MR. BAGLEY glanced round searchingly, expecting to catch sight of the savage who had shot the fatal arrow; but there was no sign, no rustle, no movement, although it was clear to him that the victim had been attacked at close quarters.

"See!" he exclaimed. "The arrow has gone right through him—through his heart! It must have happened hardly more than a minute ago."

"It's the Boru-Boru boy that we called March," Wingrove told him. "The one who tried to kill me with Koroku's knife. The dog must have caught up to him. See, those are Shot's teethmarks on his leg. But that arrow—it's poisoned, I suppose—it never was fired by hand. It's far too big, sir. And there are no bushmen anywhere near."

He drew back the curtain of tall grass at the side of the narrow trail.

"Gracious!" he cried. "Look at this cross-bow contrivance, sir! It's a trap. See how cunningly it's been set, so that the touch of a foot would make it go off! The fellow must have sprung it when he was running away from the dog."

“Yes and like enough there are more of the same kind,” assented Mr. Bagley. “We must steer clear of these bush paths. Come, let’s get back. And you’d better not mention this in the hearing of the blacks. Let them suppose their messenger has gone on ahead. I’m glad you sent the dog after him.”

The marching file had halted for a rest, and water was being rationed when Mr. Bagley returned with Chris and the retriever.

“I’m thinking it’s time we served out cartridges, sir,” Angus Tait suggested. “We’d be in a bonnie mess if the cannibals attacked us and all our carriers with empty guns.”

“Let the Kanakas fill up their magazines,” Mr. Bagley ordered. “But I don’t want those Boru-Boru boys to carry loaded guns. I don’t trust them. They’re a lot of traitors.”

Koroku offered Wingrove a pannikin of coconut milk.

“You catchee fella boy?” he asked quietly. “What name fella dog he come back along you?”

Chris did not answer until he had emptied the cup.

“Shot got on his tracks,” he said.

Koroku opened wide eyes and glanced at the retriever.

“My word!” he muttered in surprise. “Shot he eat’m fella boy altogether? He plenty full up. He no want’m more fella bistick.”

## THE DOCTOR'S FORCED MARCH 179

“Fall in, there!” commanded Angus Tait.

He marshalled the file as before, only that now he told off two of the bluejackets to walk on either flank of the river boys. In pretence of examining the Kanakas' rifles, he loaded them up. None of these Kanakas were Solomon Islanders. One was a full-blooded Maori named Te Puna, one an Australian native tracker called Jakki, others were from Fiji and Samoa, and all could be trusted.

There was no trouble with the Boru-Boru boys during the further march through the open grass land. They all seemed, indeed, to be particularly anxious to please and to push on with their heavy loads. But their obedience was in itself suspicious. Secretly, they were anticipating the moment when the headhunters would come to their help in the intended massacre.

None of them could count, but each had in his mind a rough estimate of the number of white men and Kanakas who would soon provide the material for the biggest of cannibal feasts. As a matter of fact, there were sixteen whites and eight Kanakas—twenty-four possible victims, not including Koroku and Charlie of Su'u, whose heads might be added to the coveted collection of trophies. It was an enormous temptation for any cannibal headhunters.

Their plan was laid. For had not Kapu of Boru-Boru gone on in front to fetch out a



band of the bushmen? No hint or suspicion had come to them that Kapu's dead body was already being devoured by multitudes of Solomon Island flies, where it lay beside the fatal man-trap. So they toiled along gladly in the stifling heat.

The scrub thickened as they proceeded, and beyond one of the higher foothills a dense forest was reached. A halt was called at the side of a narrow creek, and it was here that the first signs of the missing gold-seekers were discovered in the handle of a broken pickaxe, the remains of a washing tray, and a pile of washed gravel. Charlie pointed out where the Australians had made camp. He did not know if any gold had been found. The diggers had moved yet farther inland to a more promising drift.

"How far?" Mr. Bagley asked him.

"Long way big bit," Charlie answered, indicating the forest. "Bimeby sun he go down. Me fella me no look'm eye belong me in dark."

"He blazed his trail in the forest, sir," Wingrove explained. "He thinks we'd better make camp here until daylight. He isn't sure of his way in the dark."

"The most important thing is to find Captain Pine," said Mr. Bagley. "Every moment is of value to a wounded man dying of hunger. But we're bound to stick to the carriers."

"If there were time before sundown," said

Dr. Molesey, "I would take Charlie and go on in advance with my medicine case."

Mr. Bagley reflected upon this proposal.

"It would certainly be quicker," he acknowledged, "and, of course, the bushmen don't know that we're on the march. But I can't allow you to break off from us and go scouting on your own. You'd have to take a body-guard. If we could only let Pine know that we're coming to his relief it would be something."

"He'd maybe hear or see a rocket, sir," suggested Angus Tait. "That's if he's still alive."

A tent was pitched, a fire was lighted, and food cooked. Dr. Molesey dressed Charlie's shoulder, and Mr. Knight got into wireless touch with the cruiser, now out of the lagoon on her way to Poonga-Poonga. After sunset rockets were sent up.

The expedition had been divided into two watches, one under Frank Miles, the mate of the *Sea Anemone*, and the other under Sidney Grafton, the midshipman. Armed guards were on duty throughout the night, even though the deluging rain made it improbable that there could be either an escape or a surprise attack.

Chris Wingrove was more than usually disturbed that night by the ravenous mosquitoes and by the stinging irritation of thorns in his skin. He had switched on his electric light

to search for some vaseline when, amid the roar of the rain on the tent cover, he heard hurried footsteps. The tent flap was drawn open and Mr. Grafton thrust in his head, spilling a cataract of rain-water from the rim of his sou'-wester.

"I say, Wingrove," he called agitatedly, "how many of those Boru-Boru boys ought we to have?"

"Nine," Chris told him. "Why?"

"Well, there's only eight now," said Grafton. "One must have done a bunk and taken his gun with him. There's one of the Kanakas missing as well—that big Maori, Te Puna."

"Te Puna?" cried Wingrove. "But he'd never run away. If he's not in camp he must have given chase to the other fellow. Don't wait, I shall be out in half a tick."

He flung on his oilskins and bent to meet the drenching rain. Just beyond the entrance his light flashed upon Koroku, who, as always, slept as near to the white men as possible.

"What name?" Chris challenged him.

"You fella Chris you go back along bed belong you," Koroku responded. "Me fella me go look'm eye along Boru-Boru boys. You take'm sleep."

Chris returned to his blanket, and after half an hour he heard Koroku speaking to him through the wet canvas.

"Te Puna he stop close up," he reported.

## THE DOCTOR'S FORCED MARCH 183

"He no catchee fella Gogoomi. Plenty dark, plenty rain, my word!"

Gogoomi was the river boy whom Mr. Knight had nicknamed April. He had evidently escaped in order to guide the bushmen to this new camp.

"Listen here, doctor," said Mr. Bagley in the darkness of the tent. "I'm going to accept your offer to make a forced march to find Captain Pine. It can be done if you start with the first gleam of daylight. He will need your skill as much as he needs food. Charlie will guide you. His shoulder is awfully bad, I know. But he's the only living person who knows the bearings of that tree, and the sooner someone else knows the better."

"I'm afraid there is poison in Charlie's wound," said the doctor. "It gets worse and worse. It's something more than a Solomon Island ulcer."

"Angus Tait and Ned Pickup will go with you, and a couple of the Kanakas as stretcher-bearers," Mr. Bagley pursued; "and I fancy Chris Wingrove will be safer with you, out of the way of these cannibals, especially if he has young Kockatoo to look after him. That makes a party of seven."

"Take a few Mills' bombs with you, Molesey," Mr. Knight recommended.

"And if you find your man alive," added Mr. Bagley, "bring him here on the stretcher without delay. Or else send a runner back to pilot us to you."

It was Chris Wingrove who suggested that the two stretcher-bearers should be Te Puna and Jakki. He had already discovered that they were both astonishingly good scouts and skilled trackers. Furthermore, they were both devoted to Ned Pickup, the supercargo of the *Sea Anemone*.

A start was made even before the first rosy glow of sunrise touched the jagged peaks of Mount Kolorat. Each one went out separately and secretly into the forest, to be rounded up by Te Puna. But their absence was not for long unnoticed.

"What name?" questioned one of the Boru-Boru boys of their boss. "Fella doctor he walk away. Two fella white man one fella white boy he go. Koroku he go, Cha'lie he go. Two fella Kanaka one black dog he go. Plenty fella gun he take. Me fella me think he go catchee fella Gogoomi."

"Yah!" snarled May. "White man he altogether big fella fool. He no catchee fella Gogoomi. No fear. Gogoomi he run long way too much. He savee fella bush alla same fella bushman, my word. Fella Mary belong him she bush Mary. He big friend belong bushman."

May was puzzled none the less to understand why the white men should separate in this mysterious way. He began to scent mischief. But he was not going to be cheated, "no fear."

## THE DOCTOR'S FORCED MARCH 185

He decided to send Mgava out as a spy on the trail of the doctor. Mgava's nickname was June, and hardly had the relief party started on their forced march when June was on their trail like a bloodhound.

The march through the dense forest was extremely difficult. It was up the wooded side of a steep mountain, tangled with ropes of rattan vine armed with lacerating thorns. Great trunks of fallen trees had to be climbed, and in places there were swamps of decayed vegetable ooze and malarial mud overgrown with hard, saw-edged leaves and swarming with leeches. The netted tree-tops shut out the sun and sky and the still air was hot as a furnace, reeking with the sickening smell of rotteness.

Towards noon the Maori began to be unusually watchful. Wingrove often saw him pause and look backward. Once, instead of pausing, he hurried on and disappeared into the tangled bush. Wingrove turned to speak to Koroku, and was astonished to find that Koroku also had disappeared.

As neither came back, Chris reported their absence to Dr. Molesey, and a halt was called, the doctor taking this opportunity to examine Charlie's shoulder and adjust a new sling for his swollen arm. Te Puna then appeared from a wholly unexpected direction. Chris went up to him, leading the dog.

"What's wrong, Te Puna?" he questioned.

Te Puna then gave proof of his scoutcraft by explaining that ever since they had entered the forest he had been aware that they were following on the tracks of Gogoomi, who had escaped during the rainstorm, and that Gogoomi was finding his way by means of the blazed trail left days before by Charlie of Su'u.

Te Puna had lost the tracks for a time, and, believing that Gogoomi had been overpassed, he dropped behind in search of signs. He wiped out the footprints on a patch of soft ground and took cover. On going back to the soft patch of ground, he discovered fresh footmarks. But they were not the footprints of Gogoomi. He was perplexed.

"Queer!" reflected Wingrove. "That would seem to mean that while Gogoomi is still in front of us, someone else is dogging us from the rear. Where's Koroku? Are you sure they were not Koroku's footprints that you found?"

Te Puna was positive. He knew Koroku's firm footprints too well to make a mistake. He could not explain Koroku's absence. But he offered to go and find him if Chris, with the dog, would accompany him.

He led the way back for some distance. Then he stood perfectly still, listening. Presently he made off in a new direction. Again he stopped and stood against a curtain of creeper vines, peering through. He signed to Wingrove as he drew an armful of the creepers aside. Shot

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growled. Chris stood beside the tall New Zealander, who pointed into an open glade.

Half a dozen yards away from them was Koroku, hunched up on his knees, looking along the sights of his automatic pistol levelled in front of him. Beyond him the leaves of a croton bush trembled. A woolly head appeared, and a black face, with a big nose-ring round the mouth, looked out. Koroku fired two quick shots, and the tattooed body and outstretched arms of Mgava plunged forward.

“Finish!” nodded Koroku, rising to his feet. He showed no surprise at seeing Te Puna and Chris Wingrove standing near him. “He fella Boru-Boru boy,” he explained. “Me fella me stop’m little game altogether.”

“Yes,” reflected Chris. “It’s the chap we called June. He must have escaped from Mr. Bagley’s camp and has been tracking us ever since.”



## CHAPTER XXII

### THE BANYAN TREE

**K**OROKU'S two shots had of course been heard by Dr. Molesey, who was already alarmed at the unexplained absence of three of his party. But when Chris returned and informed him that a Boru-Boru spy had been discovered following on the trail, the march was resumed with a new confidence.

There remained, however, the disturbing fact that Gogoomi was in the forest not far away from them, making his way forward with the help of the blazed trail which would lead him to Captain Pine's hiding-place.

"We must hurry on," Dr. Molesey determined. "It's a race now between us and that cannibal savage."

The one impediment in the way of haste was the condition of Charlie of Su'u, upon whom everything depended. He was suffering tortures from his wounded shoulder. The poison in his blood was affecting his brain.

"Fella head belong me walk about too much," he complained.

Angus Tait urged that he should be carried on the stretcher, but Dr. Molesey, who had injected morphia to allay the pain, was afraid

that in a recumbent position Charlie would fall asleep. It was even better for himself that he should walk and scatter the poison.

Jakki remained always at Charlie's side, supporting him and helping him over obstacles, and it was Jakki whose eyes were most busy in finding the blazed tree-trunks and broken twigs which gave them their direction.

When at length they waded across a narrow rivulet Charlie came to a stop and his whole body crumpled up. He fixed his dim eyes on a broken branch above his head for a long time and then turned them aside, pointing with his free hand.

"What name?" asked Koroku, kneeling beside him.

"Tree he close up," Charlie answered. "Short way little bit. Me fella me finish altogether. Me no good. You fella Koroku you find'm tree belong white fella marster."

Te Puna had already gone aside in the direction which Charlie was indicating. Koroku and Chris Wingrove followed him on this new trail into the dense jungle. Crawling on hands and knees through the black slime or climbing through closely-matted overgrowth high above the ground, they came at last in sight of an immense banyan tree with hundreds of rooted tentacles, each in itself as stout as an ordinary tree. In this expansive maze it was difficult to believe that anyone could be found. Te Puna himself was puzzled.

No sound could be heard, not a leaf moved in the oppressive stillness. But suddenly Te Puna stooped to a bare piece of ground, went on, then stooped again and waited, listening. He gripped his rifle and ran towards the central trunk of the banyan. Wingrove was close at his heels, but Koroku passed them at racing speed, running unhesitatingly in a straight direction. He seemed to trip over some hidden root, for suddenly he was down on his knees, crawling forward without his gun.

Te Puna now went circling round searchingly, but Wingrove ran on and threw himself down beside Koroku. They both crept forward together until, coming level with the main stem, Koroku leapt to his feet with a loud, startling yell.

What Wingrove saw was Gogoomi swinging aloft his rifle as a club to bring it crashing down on the head of a white man lying helpless at his feet. With a panther spring into the air, Koroku leapt upon the cannibal's shoulders. The uplifted club dropped to the ground, and Koroku was flung violently upon his back.

Gogoomi ran off, swerved as he caught sight of Te Puna, and so escaped the bullet fired from the Maori's ill-aimed gun. Te Puna made after him, and they both disappeared into the jungle.

Wingrove stared in amazement at the white man lying at full length on the ground, with his hands clasped as a pillow behind his neck,

his upturned, bearded face and closed eyes inflamed and swollen with mosquito bites. He was asleep and unconscious of his narrow escape.

"You're Captain Pine," said Chris, touching him, and looking into his slowly opening eyes. "We're here to help you. Charlie of Su'u brought us. Here, take a drink from this flask. It's cherry brandy. There's food coming along, and there's a doctor with us. We knew your foot was wounded. How is it?"

"Bad—awfully bad," Pine answered. "Your doctor will have the job of cutting it off. You're English, aren't you? I heard rockets last night. I've expected you. Charlie's a hero. Where is he? I want to thank him before I drink."

Chris turned to Koroku, kneeling at his side.

"Bring the doctor, quick!" he ordered. "Bring Charlie. Bring'm all close up. Savee?"

It was while Chris was alone with the rescued gold-seeker that the Maori came back. The speed of his return suggested that he had put an end to Gogoomi's attempt to join the bush cannibals. But a bullet wound is not necessarily fatal.

\* \* \* \* \*

Early on the next forenoon, when Mr. Bagley was beginning to get anxious for news of the doctor, Sam Hendon rushed into the tent.

"One of Dr. Molesey's boys has just come in, sir," he announced. "It's the Australian tracker, Jakki."

Jakki had found his way back through the forest with a written message from Dr. Molesey. It read as follows :

“ We have found Captain Pine. I think I can save his foot. But he positively refuses to budge from here until we have found his lost chums. He declares that one at least is alive, waiting for help. So please come along with all the camp outfit as quickly as possible. Jakki will guide you. We are in great danger. Make haste. Don't let any more of those Boru-Boru boys escape. They are in league with the headhunters and are up to serious mischief.”

Dr. Molesey's words, “ We are in great danger,” had been written with meaning. He had not anticipated being detained in the bush after finding Captain Pine, or of spending a night in the forest darkness without shelter or protection. He had travelled light, provided only for a short absence from camp and a quick return. But now he found himself attending upon two helpless invalids and exposed to the possibility of a surprise attack with insufficient means of defence and no way of escape.

At first he had urged Captain Pine to let himself be carried on the stretcher. But Pine said, “ No ! Charlie needs the stretcher more than I do. Take him back to your camp and

leave me here until you can come back and look for my chums. I can wait, now that I know help is coming."

Of course Dr. Molesey would not agree to this. So he sent Jakki with the message. Fortunately there was no rain that night and no scarcity of food. But it happened just before sunset that Chris Wingrove and the Maori took the retriever into the forest to make sure that Te Puna's bullets had been fatal. He had fired two shots at the escaping Gogoomi and had seen him fall, but Wingrove was not satisfied that the savage had been more than wounded. And, indeed, when the place was reached, a red stain on the grass was the only sign. The trail was followed up for a mile or so, and the dead body of Gogoomi was found. *It was headless.*

This was the alarming circumstance. If the head had been taken, it was a sure sign that the bush cannibals were near.

Throughout the whole of the night and all the next day Dr. Molesey and his little company remained in constant fear, with every gun loaded, and towards evening, when they were counting the hours which must go by before Mr. Bagley and his followers might be expected, the dreaded crisis came.

First there was a suspicious rustling movement among the surrounding bushes. The retriever barked. Every one seized his gun. And

then from every side the cannibal headhunters appeared with their painted faces and barbaric nose-rings and fearful, death-dealing weapons, closing in inch by inch to the attack.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### A DESPERATE FIGHT

**C**HRS WINGROVE stared at the slowly approaching savages. For an instant he doubted that they were the headhunting bushmen. He had caught sight of the one who was slightly in advance. Something about him was familiar. He came stealthily forward carrying a rifle clubwise over his shoulder. There was a bandage of white cloth bound neatly round his right arm. His nostrils were decorated with two boar's tusks, and among the many barbaric ornaments hung round his neck there was a small medicine bottle.

As he came yet nearer Chris recognized him as the Boru-Boru boy nicknamed May, who had been left behind in camp with Mr. Bagley. Behind him came others of the Boru-Boru carriers.

"They've escaped! They've given Mr. Bagley the slip, sir!" Chris told the doctor in agitation. "And they've brought the bushmen to help them, as they meant to do all along. We're done for, doctor! We're done for!"

He rammed a grenade into the barrel of his rifle. But Koroku pushed in front of him with a rifle at his hip. Without seeming to take



aim, Koroku fired. The phial on May's tattooed chest flew into fragments. May flung up his arms, gave a piercing yell as he stumbled forward and then fell in a heap, clutching at the place where the bullet had entered.

This shot was the opening of a long, slow battle. It did not stop the cautiously creeping savages. They took no notice of their fallen leader.

Wingrove aimed high and fired off his grenade. It clattered among the closely-growing banyan trunks, rebounded and dropped, bursting with a terrific explosion. The savages then scattered in panic, falling over one another in confusion. The retriever bounded after them, snapping fiercely at their bare legs and filling them with renewed alarm. One of them swung round and struck at the dog with his battle-club, and Shot limped back yelping to his friends.

The savages quickly disappeared among the tangled undergrowth and seemed to have abandoned their attempt. But they rallied and swept round in a dense crowd, and instead of closing in upon their intended victims from all sides, gathered in a compact group of about a hundred strong and advanced for an attack in mass.

"Steady, boys!" commanded Captain Pine, lying along the ground with his rifle levelled in front of him. "They've none of 'em got guns. But watch out for their spears and arrows. Keep close together and see that none crawl

up on our rear. Don't waste a shot. We're short of ammunition. Wait till you see the whites of their eyes. Then give it them hot."

The stout main stem of the tree was behind him, and what there was of camp equipment had been packed together as a protecting barricade with spaces between the boxes for loopholes. Angus Tait was at one corner and Dr. Molesey at the other. Captain Pine lay in the centre, with Wingrove and Ned Pickup at either side of him. Charlie of Su'u, Koroku and the Maori were behind them, with the dog.

Had the headhunters kept to their original encircling formation and attacked from various points they might soon have taken the little citadel on either flank or from the rear; but they chose to make a frontal attack. This was to the advantage of the defenders, who could thus concentrate their attention in one direction.

The bushmen advanced very slowly, foot by foot, gripping their clubs and spears and holding their arrows fixed in their bowstrings. The crowded stems of the banyan tree interfered with the possibility of their shooting their arrows at long range, and they seemed to be so certain of final success that they were in no haste to expose themselves to the white man's gunfire. They were clever at taking cover behind the tree-trunks.

"They won't spare a mother's son of us, mind you," Captain Pine gave warning, fingering his trigger. "Remember they're man-eaters.

Remember what they're up to. If we don't get the better of them there's no escape. These are the same lot that killed my chums, and I have no pity for them. Give them another grenade, Wingrove, while they're all together there—before they rush in."

"I can't, sir," Chris told him. "We only brought that one."

Dr. Molesey was very silent. He was realizing that this expedition was on the brink of a terrible disaster. He wanted to open fire into the black crowd. Some of the savages, he saw, were now climbing the tree trunks with their long bows slung over their backs. He understood their intention. They meant to jockey their way towards the main stem and fire their arrows from aloft.

Angus Tait understood also. He had taken out a rocket and was fixing it in position at low elevation.

"Let 'em have it, Angus—quick!" Wingrove urged.

Tait had lashed half a dozen crackers to the shank of the rocket, and now with his petrol-lighter he quickly lighted all the fuses.

The rocket was well directed to escape the nearer intervening branches. It gushed forth with its hissing trail of sparks and lodged wriggling like a fiery monster in a tree-top over the heads of the bushmen, where it exploded with a loud bang, dropping its fire-balls and spluttering crackers into their midst.

Captain Pine was at first annoyed at this use of harmless fireworks; but when he saw their astonishing effect he laughed aloud.

The headhunters yelled in desperate terror as they ran away from the leaping rip-rapping crackers, and for some minutes afterwards there was not one of them to be seen.

“That’s all we have,” Tait regretted. “But we’ve some Mills’ bombs here.”

“Keep them for the very last,” advised Dr. Molesey. “We don’t want wholesale slaughter if we can avoid it.”

Charlie of Su’u, who was almost too ill to move, had been alarmed by the rocket. He got up on his feet and went round to the rear of the great tree to be out of danger. The Maori went after him to bring him back; but too late. With a shrill cry of pain, Charlie fell into Te Puna’s arms with an arrow piercing his throat and another sticking upright in his wounded and swollen shoulder.

Te Puna laid him on his back and was levelling his rifle when a volley of arrows flashed out from among the bushes. Most of them rattled harmlessly against the trees, but one buried its barbed point in the flesh of the Maori’s right arm.

Yet Te Puna pressed his trigger and the report of his gun brought Koroku running to his side. At the same moment the savages showed their barbarous painted faces amid the nearer verdure. Koroku opened fire upon them with steady,

unerring aim, and before he drew back to refill his magazine he was joined by Ned Pickup and Angus Tait. All three of them continued until their belts were empty of cartridges.

Chris Wingrove, too, had come to their side; but seeing Te Puna's wound, he took him to Dr. Molesey and returned for Charlie. But Charlie was already beyond the doctor's skill.

"Stay here, Chris," Molesey ordered. "We shall need you here if any of the brutes crawl up from the other quarter."

He had hardly spoken when Angus Tait staggered round to him, struggling to pull an arrow from his side.

"This is all my fault," deplored Captain Pine, trying with difficulty to turn and rise without hurting his foot. "You'd better have left me to my fate. Give me a lift, Wingrove. I must get round there to the fighting."

Wingrove helped him to the more exposed side of the tree-trunk, and when the doctor had given first aid to the engineer and the Maori, he, too, took up his gun, and the battle was continued.

Nearer and nearer the savages pressed. They had now seen the faces of five whites and they were counting upon securing the five coveted heads. Many were wounded, but they were creeping through the cover of the bushes, trying to get within easy distance for hurling their awful spears and using their fearful battle-clubs at close quarters.

Their quivers were apparently empty. The tree-trunk was like a pincushion, bristling with their wasted arrows. More than once, obeying some secret signal, they drew back from the gunfire and again rallied at a safe distance and prepared to approach from a new direction.

Each time they grew bolder and more desperately eager. Once, when they came near enough, one of them flung his heavy club towards the tree, aiming at Dr. Molesey. It fell with a thud at Chris Wingrove's feet, and Chris noticed as it lay there that the rough knob at the end of the carved and inlaid staff was of solid gold, spiked with crocodile's teeth.

"Our rifle cartridges are at an end, sir," Angus Tait reported. "We should have brought more of them."

"Revolvers at close quarters," commanded Captain Pine, now losing hope. "And be ready with your bombs, Tait. The brutes mean to rush us this time. There'll be no stopping them."

Angus was badly hurt, but still able to move about and give help where it was needed, while his companions continued to defend their perilous position. They were crouched round the base of the tree, and now that their rifle ammunition was dwindling they had drawn their revolvers.

Tait opened a small packing-case and took out a couple of Mills' bombs. He handed them cautiously to Dr. Molesey.

"I've never thrown one of these things, sir,"



he explained ; “ but you were in the war. You’d better look to them yourself.”

“ All right, Tait,” the doctor nodded, laying them between his knees.

He was in no haste to use such terribly destructive weapons. But he knew what it meant for himself and his companions when the cannibals should come nearer. There could be no escape from a horrible, unspeakable fate if the defence should fail.

He did not fear death ; it was what would happen afterwards that he dreaded. Already it seemed to him as he looked among the trees and saw the savages gathering together that their number had increased rather than lessened. Many had been killed, but they were still an overwhelming crowd and their wild looks and threatening actions were appalling.

There was no mistaking their gruesome intention. He had even seen one of them hacking the head from the body of a Boru-Boru boy. But it was white men’s heads that they wanted.

At the moment when Tait brought the two bombs, the cannibals had drawn back. They had gathered in close company, and were now obviously preparing to make a determined and desperate attack. Discarding their now useless bows, they gripped their battle-clubs, their spears and knives, and stood shoulder to shoulder in a broken half circle ready to charge forward.

Dr. Molesey stood up with one of the bombs in

his right hand and his left forefinger poised ready to pull out the pin. He waited for the proper moment, calculating exactly how he should throw and where the explosion would occur. It would be where the ground sloped downward and at the moment when the savages were running over it.

The revolvers were silent while the blacks remained in the protection of the trees and bushes. He could see them bending forward as if waiting for an expected signal for the headlong rush. Then with a thrilling, blood-curdling war cry they started.

“Now!” commanded Captain Pine.

Dr. Molesey’s finger went to the key pin. But in that instant Chris Wingrove put out his hand and gripped the doctor’s left wrist, drawing it back.

“Wait!” he cried. “Look!”

From their near right flank there burst forth the rattle of rifle fire. The war-cry of the savages was suddenly changed to a yell of fear. Their onward charge swerved abruptly aside. Many leapt into the air or wheeled round howling and fell at full length to the ground.

Almost before Dr. Molesey could understand what was happening or why Chris Wingrove had prevented him from throwing the bomb, his messenger, Jakki, flashed into sight, leading Mr. Bagley and young Grafton, Sam Hendon, and Tom Squirrel; and from different points half a



dozen bluejackets and as many Kanakas ran forward as they fired their rifles into the midst of the escaping headhunters.

Squirrel and Hendon flung a Lewis gun together ; but before their belt of cartridges was fixed, Mr. Bagley's whistle sounded the cease fire, and suddenly there was silence, broken only by the cries of the wounded. In among the forest trees the yells of the retreating savages became less and less distinct.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE EXECUTION KNIFE

“**W**HAT are your casualties, doctor?” Mr. Bagley inquired as he took Dr. Molesey’s hand.

“Much less than they would have been if you hadn’t turned up at that most opportune moment, my dear Bagley,” returned Molesey. “We were at the last gasp. Another instant and we should have been done for. Tait is wounded, so is the Maori, and poor Charlie is dead. Captain Pine and the rest of us are all right. How did those Boru-Boru boys manage to give you the slip?”

“Why, they simply took to their heels,” Bagley explained. “We couldn’t very well shoot them down. Grafton, here, made sure they were running back home. Have they been here?”

“It was they that brought the bushmen.” Wingrove told him. “They did just what they intended to do from the first, only their plan didn’t come off, thanks to you.”

“Follow them up, sir. Follow them up!” Captain Pine recommended. “Their village isn’t far. You’ve time to get there and back before sundown, and you might find some of my chums.”

“If I thought any of your chums were alive, Captain, I’d go at once,” said Mr. Bagley. “But

all things considered, I think it would be safer to wait for daylight. We've left all our baggage and camp equipment behind in the forest. We must go back for it, now that we know you're all safe."

Koroku went up to him.

"Me fella me go along find'm village belong bushman," he volunteered.

"Yes, Bagley; let Koroku go," said Dr. Molesey. "He's an excellent scout. He'll find the village and lead us to it in the morning."

Koroku appeared to be very proud of the doctor's confidence in him. He loaded up his pistol, took a few extra cartridges and waited only for an opportunity to speak to Chris Wingrove.

"You fella Chris, you stop along camp close up," he said. "You tak'm big care altogether. Bimeby I come back." He looked straight into Wingrove's eyes and added questioningly, "You shake'm fella hand belong me?"

"Yes, of course, Koroku," Chris smiled, thrusting out his hand.

Mr. Bagley watched Koroku go off on his perilous quest.

"Young Kockatoo seems to take quite a protective interest in you, Chris," he remarked. But Chris simply nodded.

Sidney Grafton was in command of the blue-jackets and the carriers who went back into the forest to bring up the camp equipment. Everything excepting arms and ammunition had been

left behind when the first distant sounds of fighting had been heard.

Mr. Bagley, guided by the Australian tracker, had hurried his party forward at top speed to the relief, with the result that they arrived just in time to prevent an awful massacre.

But now that the fighting was over, food and tents were needed, and Dr. Molesey could do little without his medicine chest. Grafton did not delay. He came back safely with the loads at the time of sunset. A comfortable camp was thereupon made under the banyan tree, and Captain Pine was at last assured of medical attention.

When he had been washed and shaved and properly bandaged he looked very different from the forlorn creature who had been found on the previous evening lying wounded and wretched in the forest solitude. His face was still disfigured with mosquito bites and his injured foot was terribly swollen and painful. But he was nevertheless cheerful, especially after a good meal and a smoke.

In conversation round the camp fire he revealed that he was English, and that with his chum, Crofton Smith, he had gone out to Queensland to start farming. But someone told him that there was gold in the Solomon Islands, and instead of buying land he had got up this expedition.

“The whole concern has been a failure from the start,” he admitted. “We found no gold. I

don't believe there's any to be found. But we came farther and farther inland in search of it. These bushmen were quite friendly at first, and I never credited the yarns about their being cannibals and headhunters, although George Drummond, and afterwards Charlie, warned us against them time after time. I must have shown them too clearly that I trusted them. I allowed them to come about our camps, I engaged them as labourers and carriers, and they were as mild as milk. And then at last, when we least expected it, they stole our rifles and turned on us."

"And you alone escaped—you and Charlie?" questioned Mr. Bagley.

Captain Pine shook his head in doubt.

"That's what I want to find out" he said. "Jack Harding was killed outright; so was Phil Baker. I saw them fall and tried to rescue them. Charlie told me that Tom Whalley couldn't have got away; he was surrounded and had no gun. But young Jack Longrigg and my special chum Crofton Smith had the same chance of escape that I had before I got the spear in my foot. Neither was hurt when I saw them last and Crofton still had a couple of cartridges in his revolver. I'm almost certain he got clear and that he's safe somewhere. That's why I sent Charlie for help."

"Charlie was a hero," observed Dr. Molesey.

"Yes, that he was," agreed Pine; "he carried me here over his wounded shoulder and then went back to search for Jack and Crofton, and there

was no sign of them. It looked as if they'd escaped by running. But Crofton Smith would still hang about in the forest. Neither of us would go off and abandon the other if there was half a chance of saving him."

"If he is alive and anywhere in the forest," said Mr. Bagley, "he must have heard the gunfire. That grenade would be heard all over the island. But, of course, like yourself, he may be wounded and unable to move. If it takes us a month, we must find some sign of him—of both of them."

"It's easy to guess what was done with the others," resumed Pine. "They've been cooked and eaten, without a doubt. You won't see a trace of them unless you find their heads in the devil-devil house."

"Even that will be something," Mr. Bagley reflected. "But if we find the head of a single white man, the whole place shall be burnt to the ground. I shall leave nothing standing."

Koroku had not returned. Chris Wingrove was curiously anxious concerning him. Remembering the man-trap, he began to fear for the young native's safety. Unless he was seriously injured, Koroku was good enough scout to find his way back. The only other probability was that he had lost his way in the darkness. Hoping that this was the simple cause of his delay Chris waited patiently for daylight. But when dawn came and still Koroku did not come back, Mr. Bagley decided to start for the bush village without him.

He left Mr. Grafton in charge of the camp, with Sam Hendon to look after the three invalids—Captain Pine, Angus Tait, and the Maori. Dr. Molesey accompanied the searchers in case there should be any casualties. Every one was well armed and the Lewis gun and a good supply of explosives and fireworks were taken; but there were no heavy loads to carry.

Jakki, the Australian tracker, led the way. He had already proved his great skill as a pathfinder, and he was not long in picking up Koroku's tracks. They led him in the north-westerly direction taken by the retreating cannibals, and he followed them very carefully, always on the outlook for hidden snares.

Once he came to a halt and poked with his gun into the creepers and discovered a wicked-looking spear so cunningly fixed that its poisoned point would surely have scratched the shoulder of anyone less cautious than himself. There were spikes hidden in the grass, but Jakki always found them and gave warning. Shot sometimes ran in front of him and once came near to springing a bow-and-arrow trap.

The trail was always upwards, and at length the marching file entered into a narrow path worn deep as a sap-trench by the feet of generations of savages.

Suddenly Jakki stopped and drew back, pointing excitedly in front of him. An arrow dropped at his feet. From the end of the trench half a

dozen bushmen appeared running forward across a wide clearing. But at this moment the blue-jackets were at the front of the file and they opened fire with their Enfields. The savages scattered back to give the alarm in their village.

It was at the far side of the clearing, a collection of grass-thatched huts both large and small, with plantations of yam, coco-nut and sago palms beyond.

Mr. Bagley extended his forces in skirmishing order.

“Make for the big hut,” he commanded, starting off at a run.

Chris Wingrove and Ned Pickup were at his heels, followed closely by the dog. The devil-devil house was distinguished from the surrounding thatched huts by its greater size and horned roof and the many totem poles and kingposts and monstrous carved figures with which it was decorated.

A crowd of yelling savages ran out from it and disappeared into the coco-nut plantation. But there was still a dense group of painted cannibals dancing round in a circle and beating drums. Mr. Bagley fired a few random shots over their heads and turned to rally his supporters. As he paused, Chris Wingrove ran on with the dog. His rifle was slung over his back, but he had his revolver in hand and a spare one in his belt. He ran swiftly and fired a couple of shots in the air. The drumming ceased, the circle of dancers broke in con-



fusion. But he saw one very tall savage with a long knife upraised to strike at something. The something was a human victim suspended by the feet from a tree, screaming and wriggling.

Chris took aim now, and the savage with the execution knife fell in a heap, while the rest of the bushmen disappeared, chased by the bluejackets and Kanakas.

Mr. Bagley leapt forward, snatched the execution knife from the ground, and, reaching up, cut the rope above the captive's fettered ankles. The released victim fell with a groan into Chris Wingrove's arms. Chris turned him on his back and looked down into his face.

"Koroku!" he cried. "*Koroku!*"

## CHAPTER XXV

### IN THE DEVIL-DEVIL HOUSE

**K**OROKU'S eyes opened slowly. Lying on his back, he stared half-consciously at the fibre rope dangling from the tree above his head. He seemed to be waking out of a terrible nightmare. His whole body was trembling, drops of perspiration trickled across his tattooed face. As the retriever sniffed at his near cheek, he raised himself on an elbow.

"What name?" he muttered in amazement. "Fella bushman he no take'm head belong me. What name he walk away? That fella dog he no bush dog. Me savvy he dog belong fella doctor!"

He sat up and saw Chris Wingrove bending over him loosening the cords that bound his ankles together. Mr. Bagley, too, knelt near him unscrewing the silver stopper of his pocket flask.

"Drink," said Mr. Bagley, holding the flask to his lips.

"Me savvy altogether now," Koroku went on when he had swallowed some of the liquid. "You fella Chris, you savvy plenty what name me no come back along camp. You cross alonga me?"

"Cross?" repeated Chris. "Not I. I'm jolly glad we were in time to cut you down. Are you hurt?"

Koroku shook his head.

"Fella foot belong me he sleep," he answered. "Me no feel'm. He all same dead."

Dr. Molesey had come up. He quickly understood what had happened, and he began at once to rub Koroku's feet and ankles to restore the circulation. The sinews were strained, but no bones were broken.

The sound of rifle-shooting came from among the huts, mingled with screams and cries of alarm. Mr. Bagley sounded the "cease fire" on his whistle and presently Mr. Knight appeared from a grove of sago trees leading the bluejackets and Kanakas forward to the front of the ravi-house.

"I hope you've only been frightening them, Knight," said Bagley. "There must be no needless bloodshed. But I want the village cleared. Break off in couples and search the huts. We must find what we can of the missing white men—alive or dead. Bring away everything you can lay hands on in the shape of evidence, if it's only a button."

Koroku was soon able to get to his feet and limp about. His automatic pistol and knife had been taken away from him by his captors.

"Your head would have been off in another moment, if Wingrove hadn't been handy with his gun," Mr. Bagley told him. "How did you get caught?"

Koroku explained that on the previous evening

while scouting round the village for signs of the lost white men, he had been discovered and chased. He had hidden from his pursuers in a paw-paw tree. Knowing that he could not find his way back to camp in the darkness, he stopped in the tree until early dawn. Then he stole very cautiously into the sleeping village and searched for the missing Australians, encouraged by having come upon the imprint of a white man's boot.

In his search he discovered what he called the devil-devil house with its lofty gabled front. He looked about him in wonder and fear. The house seemed to run backward a very long distance. The nearer part beyond the platform and king-posts was decorated with every kind of horror. Human skulls hung in strings between the supporting pillars of the house. The monstrous jaws of crocodiles grinned at him from every corner. Wooden figures carved in hideous human shape filled him with terror. He shuddered at the gruesome things; but he steeled himself to continue his search.

Creeping forward, he dared to enter the long, vaulted chamber of mystery. In the dim light, he stumbled against a small altar on which he saw a drinking cup made of a skull and filled to the brim with blood. Beyond it was a heavy curtain of brown fibre with patterns made up of skeleton feet and hands. When he drew the curtain aside and peered within the semi-darkness, he was

alarmed at seeing the figure of a gaunt old man crouched before a smoky fire.

In the thick of the smoke a round object hung suspended and the old man was making it revolve slowly in the reek. Once as he watched, Koroku saw the thing plainly enough to distinguish a pair of closed eyes, an open mouth and an ivory white forehead under tightly-drawn brown hair.

On the impulse of the moment he leapt upon the old man and flung him aside. But in the same instant a great crowd of the cannibal bushmen streamed in from two directions and Koroku was quickly surrounded and seized. They carried him out to the open air and bound him with ropes to one of the kingposts. There they left him under guard for a long time while they went back into the ravi-house to go through some barbaric ceremony.

Afterwards they hung him by the ankles to a tree to be executed, dancing round him and beating their drums and prolonging his torture. He had fainted before Mr. Bagley cut the rope and liberated him.

Standing up now, he turned to Dr. Molesey.

"White man he altogether finish," he announced. "You walk alonga me close up in fella devil-devil house. My word, you see how bushman he take fella head belong white man."

Dr. Molesey was the first to enter the terrible place. Mr. Bagley, Ned Pickup, and Chris Wingrove followed with Koroku and the dog,

enduring as best they could the sickening smell of rotteness and death.

The fire had burned out and the ashes were scattered over the floor of withered palm sheaths. But the head that had been hanging to dry in the smoke was still there, swaying slowly to and fro. Ned Pickup saw it, looked at it closely, and started back in horrified recognition.

"This is one of ours, sir," he told Dr. Molesey in an awed whisper. "This is Jack Harding. I know him by his teeth, his nose, his hair."

"There are two others here," said Mr. Bagley, standing in front of a long slab of stone supported on posts of carved black wood. "Have a look at them, Pickup."

Koroku turned them round for examination. He was less squeamish than were his white companions. Pickup looked at them carefully.

"That is Phil Baker," he declared, pointing to one. "The next to it is Tom Whalley."

"Me fella savvy this fella head belong Gogoomi," added Koroku. "Me shoot'm Gogoomi alongside camp."

"That is three accounted for," said Dr. Molesey. "We will give them a decent burial. As the other two are not here, we may hope that they escaped. But we must make sure."

They searched in every corner and behind every grass screen. They found the heads of many blacks in various stages of decay, and the more they searched the more assured they became that

young Jack Longrigg and Crofton Smith were still alive.

Chris Wingrove was soon sickened by the grim sights that confronted him at every turn, and by the overpowering smell. He tried to make his way to the open air by going yet farther down the cavernous ravi-house in the hope of finding a back exit. Koroku limped painfully after him and called him back; but he went on into the mysterious darkness until his way was barred by a heavy curtain of reeds. He scrambled at it and found an opening. It led him into a long, dim passage, but the air was less stifling and he hurried on towards a gleam of daylight, caring for nothing if only he could get a breath of fresh, cool air. He staggered with faintness. The earth floor was slippery and he fell in a heap, dropping his revolver.

As he struggled to his knees he saw many black figures crossing the shaft of daylight, dragging something along. He heard a faint low moan. Then there came a spurt of revolver shots from beside him and Koroku tottered past him, firing again and again.

The bushmen dropped their burden and ran out yelling. Two of them rolled over and a third was crippled with a bullet in his thigh, but able to crawl away. Koroku did not follow them but turned and dropped on his knees.

"Chris!" he called aloud. "Look'm eye along here! He fella white man. He no dead. My word, he fella white man for true!"

The fresher air had restored Wingrove's senses. He went forward and saw that Koroku was kneeling beside a man who lay with his bare white back upturned and his hands and feet tightly bound with ropes which Koroku was trying vainly to loosen.

"You got'm knife belong you?" Koroku asked.

Chris was cutting the cords when Mr. Bagley, Dr. Molesey, and Ned Pickup, having heard the revolver shots, ran in from the long dark passage, followed by the dog. They paid no heed to the two bushmen, but drew the unconscious white man out into the open air, where the doctor at once proceeded to apply restoratives.

Koroku handed Wingrove his revolver. He had picked it up and used it when Chris fell.

"Do you know him, Pickup?" Mr. Bagley asked as the man was turned over on his back and his bearded face could be seen.

"Yes, sir," Pickup answered. "He is Mr. Crofton Smith."

"The cannibals were in here trying to take him away with them," Wingrove explained. "Koroku stopped them. If he hadn't followed me, I should have been captured. I wanted a breath of fresh air. I couldn't stand that stench any longer."

Mr. Bagley took out his whistle, but he had not put it to his lips when from the middle of the village a maroon was fired and several rockets



went up. Screams and shouts of terror were heard from beyond the sago plantation as the natives fled into the bush, and presently all was silent.

In response to Mr Bagley's summons Mr. Knight and his fellow-searchers appeared. One of the bluejackets was carrying a bundle in front of him.

"We've found all that's left of young Jack Longrigg," Mr. Knight reported, indicating the bundle. "It was in one of the club-houses, back of the village. Jakki identified it. But there's no sign of any of the others."

"Crofton Smith is here—alive," Bagley informed him, "and we've found the heads of his three chums. We've accounted for all now, and done all that's possible. When we've gathered the evidence decently together I'm going to set the village on fire. That's what Commander Robson ordered me to do if we should find proof of any head-hunting."

"Proof?" repeated Knight. "Why, from all appearance head-hunting is the only thing the brutes think of—that and man-eating."

"We shall need a stretcher here, Knight," Dr. Molesey interrupted. "He's unconscious from a blow on the head. But I think he'll come round all right."

Koroku and the Kanakas had the unpleasant task of collecting what Mr. Bagley called the evidence. Molesey and Knight claimed some

curiosities in the shape of kingposts, spears and calabashes, and Ned Pickup appropriated a war club with a gold knob ; but Mr. Bagley objected to any looting. His purpose was to destroy all the implements and signs of cruelty and horror, and it was he himself who set the ravi-house in flames.

The bushmen and their families had deserted their village in a terrified stampede, but there were still some pigs and fowls to be driven out before the huts could be set on fire by the blue-jackets.

While this was being done sounds of heavy gunfire were heard from the eastward and columns of smoke were seen rising over the mountains.

“ I expect that’s the cruiser at work storming the other hotbed at Poonga-Poonga,” Mr. Bagley conjectured. “ It seems hard on the natives ; but, of course, cannibalism and head-hunting can’t be allowed under British rule, and force is the only remedy.”

## CHAPTER XXVI

### SIDNEY GRAFTON'S OPPORTUNITY

SAM HENDON had cleaned up the camp and put a kettle of water on the fire, and having no other pressing duties had wandered off on an exploring expedition into the neighbouring bush. The engineer looked to Te Puna for an explanation of the boy's absence. The Maori was seated smoking a clay pipe with his back against a tree-trunk and his wounded arm held in a sling in front of him.

"Me hear'm," he answered languidly. "Sam be close up all right."

The deep boom of a far-away heavy gun sounded through the forest silence. Cockatoos and parrots took flight from their resting-places in the trees.

"What's that?" cried Captain Pine. "A gun? It's not from the direction of the village."

"No," said Grafton in a tone of disgust. "It's from the *Paramatta* along the coast. She's storming the other cannibal stronghold at Poonga-Poonga. And, you see, I'm out of the fighting again. It's always my bad luck."

They were still listening to the far-distant sounds when Sam Hendon returned, carrying a

heavy trayful of orchids which he had been industriously collecting.

"They're beauties, aren't they, Angus?" he said admiringly. "The doctor'll open his eyes when he sees them. Ah, Captain Pine, perhaps you don't know it, but these orchid roots are more precious than all the gold that you didn't find."

"Yon's a bonnie butterfly you're wearing in your hat, Sam," remarked Tait.

"Yes," said Sam. "It's about the biggest I've seen. And how do you think I nabbed him? He wasn't feeding on honey—nothing so clean. I caught him browsing on the dead body of one of the cannibals who had lost his head. Fancy the brutes going off with the head of one of their own tribe!"

Sam took off his decorated hat and, removing the gorgeous butterfly, offered it to Sidney Grafton as a souvenir. Grafton was so much interested in the insect that he did not observe Te Puna rising to his feet and going stealthily into the bush, creeping among the trees as if in search of some wild animal. It was the Maori alone who had heard the suspicious sounds.

Hendon began to prepare the camp dinner. He lifted the lid of a packing-case to take out a new tin of condensed milk.

"Mr. Bagley might have taken these fireworks," he said, pulling out a cardboard box. "They're only Fifth-of-November squibs, but the way the savages yelled when Chris Wingrove threw one

alight into their war canoe was enough to make a crocodile laugh, wasn't it, Angus ? ”

The dinner was ready when Te Puna came back sniffing expectantly at the mingled aroma of hot coffee and fried bacon.

“ Plenty white man he come along bimeby, sir,” he reported to Mr. Grafton. “ Me hear'm walk about.”

“ Coming back already ? ” said Captain Pine in surprise, sitting up on his cushioned stretcher. “ They can't have searched the village. They must have been beaten off ! They're retreating.”

Sidney Grafton stood up, leaving his dish of coffee and plate of food on the ground.

“ Listen ! ” he said, after a long interval of silence. “ I can hear them now. They're coming back by a different way.”

Te Puna, instead of eating, began to collect the scattered firearms, looking at each rifle and revolver to see that it was loaded.

“ Do you reckon on giving them a royal salute, Te Puna ? ” asked Captain Pine.

The Maori shook his head and stared fixedly into the forest.

“ What name fella white men no laugh ? ” he questioned. “ He no talk. He walk about all same fella bushman ! ”

After many minutes of suspense there was a rustling movement in the tall reeds and bushes. Sam Hendon turned round expecting to see Mr. Bagley and Dr. Molesey emerge in their white

tropical uniforms. But instead a lot of tattooed black faces and shoulders appeared.

"It's the bushmen!" he cried in alarm. "Look out! Look out! Get your guns—quick!"

Sidney Grafton stepped forward, slipped a Service revolver into Captain Pine's fist and stood over him with his Lee-Enfield at his hip. Angus Tate drew his two revolvers nearer to him and gripped them. He was not able to stand up.

"Steady!" commanded Grafton. "Don't shoot till I give the word. Stand back, Te Puna. Keep together all."

Sam Hendon had a repeating rifle within reach, but he leaned over and pulled the box of squibs towards him.

"I'm going to give 'em some fireworks, Mr. Grafton," he said, picking one out of the box.

"Wait a bit," ordered the midshipman. "But get your match ready."

Captain Pine looked up at him sharply.

"Why wait?" he demanded. "Don't you see they're brute savages—scores of 'em? Let fly at them—or allow me to. They'll massacre us!"

"But we can't fire on women and children," said Grafton, lowering his rifle to the ground and drawing his revolver.

As he spoke a crowd of black figures scrambled into view among the tangled verdure. Three young boys broke away from the straggling procession, ran towards the white tents with excited

cries, but stopped abruptly on seeing the men with the guns. A youth with a wicked-looking club over his shoulder ran after them and herded them back to where the women had halted.

"There are men at the rear, look!" Angus Tait cautioned. "Ay, and they're making this way. They're from the village."

"Yes," nodded Grafton. "Refugees. I can smell wood smoke. Their village has been set on fire. They're searching for a new camping-place."

Sam Hendon had lighted his petrol wick and was standing with the box of fireworks between his feet. He held two squibs in his right hand, ready to light and throw.

Suddenly half a dozen terrifying savages broke cover and crept forward with their long spears poised threateningly above their woolly heads and painted faces.

"Now, Sam!" Grafton ordered sharply, holding his revolver ready.

Sam threw the two lighted crackers to right and to left and picked out two more. There was a hissing splutter of sparks, and then the squibs leapt about with loud startling explosions that filled the bushmen with terror and drove them back. The women and children screamed and hid themselves behind the trees.

When the first two squibs exhausted themselves the cannibals again appeared, but from different directions. Sam now worked quickly, flinging his lighted crackers in their way and

holding them at bay in sheer terror. The same manoeuvre was repeated, and the savages became more and more bold when they began to realize that there was more noise than danger.

Angus Tait helped by lighting the crackers for Sam to throw. He found a couple of rockets in the box and several sticks of dynamite. He fixed the rockets together in front of him at a low angle, and when at length the bushmen gathered in a crowd to make a combined attack he fired one off into their midst, and they scattered back and disappeared, yelling in fear.

"They'll come back, though," said Tait. "Watch out!"

His warning was needed. Te Puna, ranging like a faithful watch-dog round the tents and the stout tree-trunk that was the centre of the camp, fired a couple of shots and ran round to Grafton's side, and turned facing a band of the savages who had crept round to the rear.

Sidney Grafton now saw that weapons more serious than fireworks were wanted. A spear plunged its point deep into the ground between his feet, an arrow hummed over his head.

"Fire!" he commanded, aiming a shot at the savage who had thrown the spear. "Let 'em have it."

Captain Pine was lying flat along his stretcher, with his revolver supported on his left wrist. He fired at the savage who was levelling a second arrow, and his bullet shattered the hand that was



bending the bow. Tait had altered the aim of his rocket and now he lighted the fuse. The firework gushed forth with an alarming stream of sparks, rattling among the tree branches and dropping its glowing balls of fire as it exploded with a loud bang over the heads of the scattering blacks.

Sam Hendon ran forward to the left and flung a couple of lighted squibs to stop a rushing crowd of women and boys who had seen an opening by which they might approach and lay thievish hands on the piles of camp stores between them and the tents. As he turned back the shaft of a spear caught him on the shins and he fell.

Sidney Grafton saw him tumble and, thinking he was badly wounded, ran up to him to carry or drag him out of further danger. He was stooping when some three or four of the headhunters dashed up and fell upon him with their clubs and knives. They were all mixed up in a close hand-to-hand tussle.

Neither Captain Pine nor Angus Tait could move, and they were afraid to shoot into the crowd lest they should injure the white boys. But Te Puna ran out and joined in the struggle, firing his revolver with his left hand whenever he could get aim at a black head or body.

Sam Hendon wriggled himself out of the dense writhing scrum. He was not hurt, but he had left his gun behind and had only his empty hands, yet he used them to good purpose, pulling Grafton out and helping him to his feet.

Together they retreated to their two companions. All four of them then clustered in close company, each facing a different direction. The big Maori's wounded arm had been hurt and he had lost his gun, but none of the bushmen followed him when he returned to his station beside Captain Pine.

All around the camp the savages lingered, and every now and then a boy or a girl would creep round to the stores and steal off with a can of meat, a roll of cloth or a pot or pan. There was no stopping them. The men and women seemed to understand that the white men would not open fire upon children.

But Sam Hendon still had some squibs in reserve, and during a lull while his companions watched for a new attack, he went round the back of the tree and fired them off one by one whenever the savages gave signs of coming nearer.

"Your arm's bleeding, sir," said Angus Tait. "Are you badly hurt?"

"Oh, it's a mere scratch," Grafton answered. "Te Puna finished off the brute that was jabbing me with a knife."

He fired over the heads of a group of cannibals gathering for a rush. They drew back. There was a new commotion among the women at their rear. Screams of alarm were heard. Black figures were seen running about in confusion. There was shouting and a beating of drums.

Suddenly Sidney Grafton realized that there

was not a living savage in sight. He strode out to make the circuit of the camp, but came to an abrupt halt and stood listening, with his revolver moving from side to side.

There was a movement among the bushes in front of him. He heard the quick tread of many feet. Then, lowering his weapon, he leapt forward.

“This way!” he cried.

Chris Wingrove, Jakki and Koroku ran past him, and then Mr. Knight and Dr. Molesey, with Shot at his heels. They were followed by four blue-jackets who tramped along with fixed bayonets.

“Bear to your right and head off the savages,” Grafton commanded. “Get back the stores they’ve stolen.”

Mr. Bagley had gone back to the stretcher-bearers, but he soon appeared at Grafton’s side.

“What’s up?” he questioned. “Been attacked? I see you’re wounded.”

“Yes,” nodded Grafton. “A few of the bushmen with their women and kids came along. They’ve been trying to loot our stores. But they must have heard you coming, for they’ve scattered. I’m awfully glad to see you safely back. Had many casualties? No? Excuse me, I’m going off to recapture those stores.”

“Hold hard,” said Bagley. “You’d much better go off to the doctor and get him to see to that cut on your arm. Come along with me.”

## CHAPTER XXVII

### OUT OF GEAR

**T**HE stores that had been pilfered were, after all, of very little account. They were mostly trade goods which would have been given in any case to the natives. Nothing of importance had been taken. Sidney Grafton himself was the only one of the defenders of the camp who had been injured, and Dr. Molesey had dressed and bandaged his wound before the stretcher-bearers and the last of the carriers straggled in.

Mr. Crofton Smith had by this time regained consciousness and was able to recognize Captain Pine. The two chums spoke very little, but lay side by side with their hands clasped.

“It’s the same thing all the world over,” said Captain Pine. “White man to the rescue of white man. We should have been done for if it hadn’t been for these good fellows from the ships. I’m glad Mr. Bagley’s giving a decent burial to what remains of our chums. And their initials are to be carved on the tree here. That’s thoughtful.”

The camp was abandoned when this work was done, and while daylight lasted the white men and their black attendants marched southward through the forest, slowly enough to give Dr. Molesey a

chance of gathering more orchids, helped by Chris Wingrove and Sam Hendon. Koroku's ankles were still weak, and where the way was difficult he was carried pick-a-back by one or other of the Kanakas.

In the evening a bivouac was made on the site of the gold-seekers' old camp. Here Mr. Knight got into wireless communication with the cruiser, reporting the results of the search expedition. The cruiser, he was told, was now on her way back to Su'u Lagoon after having burnt the cannibal village of Poonga-Poonga.

On the following afternoon the expedition arrived at the creek, where the sheltered boats were found just as they had been left, excepting that the engines of the launch and dinghy were rusting. While these were being cleaned Dr. Molesey added to his collection of rare orchids and had them all neatly packed and covered in the small whale-boat.

It was not until the next morning that the flotilla started on the return trip down the river. A short halt was made at Boru-Boru to return the two canoes with a present of tobacco and trade goods. The chief, Amadu, was indignant with the white men for not having brought back the boys he had lent to them. But Koroku, who acted as interpreter, told him what he thought of their treachery.

"My word!" he shouted. "You got'm big cheek belong you altogether! Me savvy you

want'm body belong dead black boys. You plenty hungry, eh ? ”

The passage down the main creek was in the fierce heat of midday, with the sun directly overhead. White men and black alike panted for breath. It was too hot to smoke, too hot even to keep away the buzzing swarms of mangrove flies and mosquitoes.

The air outside the awnings was perfectly still and the water glassy calm. But through the netted mangroves there came the deep prolonged roar of surf breaking on the barrier reef. A curious yellow light was in the sky. Chris Wingrove, seated in the cockpit of the launch, saw Mr. Bagley staring wide-eyed at the barometer.

“That instrument's out of gear, sir,” said Chris. “It marked twenty-nine ten a few minutes ago. Now it's twenty-nine flat.”

“Instrument's all right,” the chief officer assured him. “It's the weather that's out of gear. Look at the sky! Listen to the surf rolling in. There's not a breath of air stirring, yet the sea's rising. I could understand if there was a wind.”

Koroku, seated at the prow, turned round.

“Bimeby big wind he come—big fella rain he come too much,” he said. “Schooner he no good. Bimeby he finish altogether. Me fella me savvy you stop alongside house belong Marster Drummond. House he plenty strong, plenty big; he stop.”

"That's all true, Mr. Bagley," added Captain Pine. "The boy knows what's coming, and the Commissioner's bungalow's a safer refuge than any ship in the lagoon."

"Possibly," nodded Mr. Bagley. "But my place is aboard the *Albatross*, and that's our destination."

"You no got'm time, marster," ventured Koroku. "Fella storm make'm big hurry, my word."

"I think Koroku is right, Bagley," said Dr. Molesey. "Let's run for the bungalow."

They were already near the embayment where the war canoes had been beached, and a light breeze began to fan their hot faces as they came in sight of the lagoon with its fringe of barrier reef where the ocean rollers were breaking in high clouds of foam. The sky had become dark, the sun was blotted out, the brooding air seemed filled with something uncanny.

Mr. Knight ran the launch aground among the mangroves, and the dinghy and whale-boats were pushed in beside her. The bluejackets leapt ashore and began to lift out the stretchers and the three invalids. There was a rushing screech in the tree-tops.

"Quick! Quick!" cried Koroku. But his voice was not heard in the hideous roar of the wind and rain as the hurricane broke upon them.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### GEORGE DRUMMOND'S DUG-OUT

**I**T was Mr. Bagley and Dr. Molesey's first purpose to get their invalid companions into shelter. Sidney Grafton and Te Puna could walk, in spite of their wounds ; but Oscar Pine, Crofton Smith and Angus Tait had to be carried, and this was an almost impossible task in the fierce wind that was already tearing great trees from their foundations, and the deluging rain that was like a roaring torrent.

The stretcher-bearers could not stand upright ; they had to crawl on their knees, dragging their cumbrous loads slowly inch by inch along the flooded ground over jutting rocks and tree roots and through a morass of tangled vegetation and slimy mud.

Between the vivid lightning flashes all was impenetrable darkness. In the howling of the wind and the terrific crashing of thunder, no voice could be heard, and among the desperate struggling humans, Koroku was the only one who knew his way to the refuge of the bungalow.

He wormed his difficult passage through the swamp by the side of the seamen who acted as stretcher-bearers, guiding them by touch. Behind them Mr. Knight and Chris Wingrove



dragged the frightened retriever. Pickup, Squirrel and Hendon followed with the Kanakas.

Beyond the belt of mangroves they came among the coco-nut palms that swayed and tossed like slender feathers in the blast, shooting their fruit like cannon-balls. The air was filled with flying leaves and broken twigs.

It seemed like hours before Koroku came exhausted to the compound and found the stockade lying in a confused wreck. He saw the bungalow standing black against the splash of white waves that swept shoreward from the lagoon.

There was not a moment's lull in the fierce overwhelming hurricane, but he braced himself with his head lowered and struggled forward to find an entrance on the lee side where there was a doorway in the solid masonry.

It took him many desperate minutes to force a way within for the stretchers. The place could hardly be called a shelter, for the rain was driving in through the joints of the iron roof and by every gap in swaying timbers and broken windows, and the concrete floor was flooded inches deep.

Not until he believed that his charges were all inside did Mr. Bagley enter. With the help of his electric lamp he twice counted the company huddled in a saturated crowd against the main inside wall. One was missing, and amid the deafening clamour of surf and thunder and rain Chris Wingrove failed to make him understand that the absent one was Koroku. Chris moved to go out

in search of him, but the doctor pulled him back.

The storm increased in violence. The whole bungalow trembled on its foundations. A sheet of the corrugated iron roof tore loose and flew away like a kite, the seaward side of the veranda was carried away in whirling fragments, and the window beneath it was burst in by a volume of seawater from the lagoon, mixed with coral shingle. The mate of the Australian ketch was flung back by the inpouring flood.

He had crept to the window to see if the ships were still at their anchors—the *Paramatta*, the *Albatross*, and the *Sea Anemone*—but nothing could be seen of them through the dense mist of rain and spray that was like a solid wall outside.

Mr. Bagley, having assured himself that nothing could be done in the bungalow while the raging hurricane lasted, had also turned his attention to the lagoon. Before quitting the launch he had put on his oilskins and sou'wester, as all the others had done, and now with the rain and spray beating upon him in a fury that made breathing difficult, he stood against the wrecked window peering out and searching for some sign of the schooner, hoping against hope that Captain Croft and Pride had been wise enough to pay out more cable.

He knew that some of the seamen and marines from the cruiser had been put on board to protect her in case of an attack from hostile natives, he

knew that the vessel herself was strongly built, but he was also aware that her safety in such a terrific storm depended wholly upon good seamanship and the strength of her anchor chain.

Once during an unusually vivid flash of lightning that was like a score of flashes united in a prolonged streak, he saw something dimly resembling the shape of a ship, and when the nightmare peal of thunder had subsided a pair of hands caught hold of his head and drew it down while a voice which he could only guess to be Chris Wingrove's shouted in his ear:

"She's holding all right, sir."

Chris drew back from the window to repeat the information to Dr. Molesey. His outstretched right hand as he felt his way came in contact with a naked wet arm, while his left rested against a bare chest that was heaving up and down in curious agitation. And in the next flash of lightning he saw Koroku's face in front of him, with closed eyes and palpitating nostrils and half-open mouth panting violently.

Koroku shook his head as if he had been diving in the sea, and when the thunder ceased for a moment he said in a breathless voice which betrayed his exhaustion:

"Flowers belong'm fella doctor they altogether safe."

Chris was astonished. This was the explanation of Koroku's absence. All the time while the others were in shelter he had been out alone in

the awful storm working his utmost to protect Dr. Molesey's precious orchids!

Seizing Wingrove's arm Koroku felt at the pocket nearest him. Chris understood and pulled out his electric torch and switched on the light. Koroku then drew him to a hidden doorway and pointed into the darkness. The electric beam revealed a narrow flight of stairs leading downward between damp and mouldy walls.

Chris followed him down, and soon discovered himself in a spacious underground chamber, furnished with bunks, couches, chairs and a table, a fireplace and gun-racks. A musty, earthy smell pervaded the place.

Here the clamour of surf and thunder was subdued.

"You got'm piccaninny light belong you?" Koroku asked. He indicated a hurricane lamp swinging over the table. There was oil in the well, and Chris lighted the wick and looked round inquiringly.

"Room belong Marster Drummond plenty safe suppose big rain he stop," said Koroku. "He taboo along fella black boy. Marster Drummond he bash'm head belong me suppose he savvy I walk about here. Room he no taboo along fella white man. You tell'm doctor bring'm sick white man here?"

Chris found his way back up the uneven stairs and brought Dr. Molesey down.

"Yes, this is better," said the doctor, "if we

can get a fire going. I see there's an oil stove in the corner. Fetch Mr. Knight and a couple of the bluejackets. We'll soon make things snug."

He busied himself making preparations. Mr. Knight discovered a store cupboard in which were two unopened tins of biscuits, some cans of preserved meat, bottles of wine and spirits and tins of condensed milk. With the oil stove going it was possible to prepare nourishing food for all.

Ned Pickup was sent with a cup of wine for Mr. Bagley, who had refused to share the comforts of the underground chamber while the fate of the *Albatross* remained uncertain. In this extremity he was anticipating the possibility of the expedition being stranded unprotected on this grim island of cannibal headhunters.

The hurricane was now at its full height. In the frequent flashes of lightning he could see great trees being uprooted and hurled along the ground. More than once he felt thankful to the dead George Drummond who had built this stout dwelling to resist the force of such a tropical tornado.

He wondered as he sipped the invigorating wine what had happened to the cruiser. He could see no sign of her. He wondered, too, if the cable of the schooner, even if paid out to its fullest stretch, could possibly withstand such a terrible strain. Her anchor, he knew, had a secure grip upon the coral bottom of the lagoon; but the strength of her chain had never been put to an unusual test.

The schooner was still tugging wildly at her tether when in a momentary lifting of the mist of spray a lurid flash of lightning revealed the gallant vessel. He could not see if her masts were standing. Her stern was towards him, lifted high on a great wave, exposing even the keel below her propeller.

When he looked again, she was hidden beyond a tremendous wave that swept landward and broke in a towering mountain of foam on the beach. As the wave lifted to plunge forward, he saw in its midst the black shape of the Australian ketch. The vessel was flung bodily upon the beach and left there by the retreating swirl of sea.

"My word!" exclaimed Koroku at Mr. Bagley's elbow.

He pushed past and crawled out by the open window space. Bagley followed him. Jakki and Ned Pickup went after them. All four crept on their hands and knees, scarcely able to move against the compelling force of the wind.

Koroku was the first to reach the wreck. The ketch was now lying on her side with her bare and shattered deck towards him. In the open space that had been her deck-house he had seen two men clinging desperately to the broken timbers. He climbed up to them. One refused to be helped before his companion, or perhaps he feared that Koroku was one of the dreaded head-hunting cannibals.

But when Jakki and Ned Pickup appeared they both climbed out and indicated that there was a third survivor in the cabin. Ned and Mr. Bagley rescued him from a pool of sea-water in which he was lying unconscious from an injury to his head.

They were all three dragged up to the shelter of the bungalow, and when they had recovered their composure they explained that four of their shipmates had been blown overboard. The *Albatross*, they believed, was still safe. An officer from the cruiser was in charge of her. He had taken down her aërials and made all snug before the breaking of the storm. The skipper of the ketch had not let out enough chain and the cable had parted. The cruiser, the men reported, was not in the lagoon, but still out at sea.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### KOROKU'S GOOD TURN

**T**HE hurricane ceased as suddenly as it had begun. It was with almost a shock of surprise that Chris Wingrove mounted the cellar stairs to find that there was no wind blowing, that the rain had ceased and that the sky in the south-east showed an expanse of dazzling blue.

In the north-west it was still black ; but the dark curtain was visibly drifting away and the lightning was still flashing over the lion mountain of Guadalcanar.

But as he stood on the gaping floor of the wrecked veranda, all around him was ruin and desolation. Many of the stately palms stood up as bare as poles, destitute of leaves, others were lying in splintered confusion. The stockade and the canoe-house had disappeared, the bungalow itself was roofless.

But out in the lagoon the schooner rode at her anchor, shaking her shortened masts as she rolled and pitched on the swell that came in through the gaps in the barrier reef. Her rigging hung in a disreputable tangle, her twisted davits were empty of boats and her deck-houses were damaged. But her hull, although battered, had suffered no obvious injury.



Chris saw someone moving on her poop deck. He took out his revolver and fired three shots into the air. The figure on the poop stood at the wrecked taffrail looking searchingly landward through a pair of binoculars. Chris then took off his wet jacket and vest, held one in each hand, and, standing where he could be clearly seen, sent across a semaphore message to say that the expedition was safe and that three of the crew of the ketch had been rescued. It was Mr. Pride who answered him with a pair of signalling flags, and as the messages ended the setting sun broke through the western sky.

Mr. Bagley was anxious to get out to the *Albatross* as soon as possible, and Mr. Knight, Wingrove, Hendon and Koroku accompanied him across the devastated compound and the almost impassable mangrove swamp down to the creek where they had abandoned the boats.

It was only then that Chris Wingrove fully understood what Koroku had done in his efforts to save the property of the white men. He had not been able to protect the motor dinghy. It was smashed to fragments under a fallen tree; the Australian whale-boat with its cargo of stores was at the bottom of the creek; the cruiser's whale-boat was waterlogged with rain and the canoe was nowhere to be found.

But the schooner's launch was unharmed. She had been completely covered with canvas and tarpaulin, held down by the weight of rifles

and boxes piled on top, while the third whale-boat containing Dr. Molesey's collection of orchids had been similarly covered and weighted with the Lewis gun and boxes of spare ammunition and stores.

While daylight lasted, Mr. Knight and Sam Hendon cleaned up the engine, and Mr. Bagley and Chris baled out the cockpit. Koroku returned to summon two of the bluejackets to help with the other boats. When she was ready the launch was taken round to the beach beside the bungalow, and Bagley, Knight and Squirrel went out to the schooner, leaving the shore party in Dr. Molesey's charge.

It was not until late on the following afternoon that the *Paramatta* steamed into the quiet lagoon. Commander Robson had discovered by his instruments that a storm was brewing, and he had kept to the open sea. By good luck his ship had caught only the outer fringe of the hurricane and had escaped all serious damage.

She could therefore afford to lend a party of carpenters and engineers to Captain Croft to make repairs on the *Albatross*. During something like a week she remained in Su'u Lagoon; for it was the duty of her commander to examine the books and papers of the late resident commissioner and to make preparations for the appointment of his successor and the rebuilding of the bungalow.

It appeared that George Drummond had been on this station for many years and that his term

of office had been within a few months of expiring. Documents and letters were found showing that at the very time of the raid by the headhunters he was engaged in making plans for retiring and returning to his home in Scotland.

On the third day after the storm Dr. Molesey went off in the launch and landed in the mouth of the creek to see what might be salvaged from the wrecked boats. He found the carved prow of the war canoe, and this reminded him of the tray of orchids which Koroku had hidden in the roots of the mangrove tree. Koroku, who was with him, saw him digging away a mound of mud and dead leaves that had been piled up among the roots.

“What name?” laughed Koroku, watching him. “Me savvy he look’m eye belong him for find’m fella flowers.”

“Yes, that’s his idea,” said Chris Wingrove. “Your taboo wouldn’t protect them from the hurricane, though. He won’t find ’em.”

“No,” returned Koroku. “Me fella me find’m before’m wind he come—put’m in boat alongside other fella flowers close up.”

“You did?” cried Wingrove. “Then they’re on board the schooner!”

He ran forward to inform the doctor of Koroku’s practical forethought. But before he reached Dr. Molesey he came to an abrupt halt at sight of a crowd of black people scrambling through the swamp in an aimless, forlorn bewilderment

—men, women and children. The men were obviously bush savages, but they carried no weapons. They were not at all alarming. They dragged themselves along wearily and made no sign of hostility. Nevertheless Chris Wingrove was startled.

“ Doctor ! ” he shouted.

The doctor turned sharply, saw the savages, and, dropping his spade, felt for his revolver. But Koroku waded past him through the mud and went empty handed towards the savages. Chris Wingrove followed him. One of the bushmen strode forward.

Chris recognized him by his necklace of human finger bones as one of the cannibals who had led the attack near the banyan tree in the forest. He had seen him also in front of the devil-devil house in the bush village at the moment when Koroku had been hanging from the tree under the shadow of the executioner's knife.

“ What name you fella bushman walk about along here ? ” Koroku demanded with an air of proprietorship. “ Me savvy fella Mary belong you she plenty hungry, eh ? Piccaninny belong you he cry too much ; he altogether hungry. You savvy big ship belong white man he stop close up ? ”

The savage nodded.

“ Me fella me want'm kai-kai belong white man, ” he answered.

Koroku glowered at him angrily.

“ Yes,” he retorted. “ You suppose fella white marster he plenty friend belong bushmen. You kill’m white man ; you eat’m, you take’m head belong him. Afterwards you think he got no savvy belong him. Fella white man he plenty fool, he love’m fella bushman close up, shake’m hand, give’m bacca, give’m calico, give’m every-thing.”

“ What’s up ? ” questioned Dr. Molesey, coming along with a finger twitching at the guard of his revolver.

“ Well, you need hardly ask, sir,” Chris Wingrove answered. “ They’re refugees. We burnt their homes, they’d no shelter in the storm. They’ve lost everything, and their fruit trees are all destroyed. They’re destitute. That’s about the size of it, and I expect they’re here begging for relief.”

Dr. Molesey glanced around at the miserable crowd.

“ It’s fortunate that the cruiser is still in the lagoon with a good reserve of stores,” he reflected. “ We cannot build new huts for these poor misguided heathens. But we can give them food, Wingrove. Get Koroku to herd them all together on the beach and we will go back to the ships and see what can be done. They’re all cannibal savages—headhunters. But, my dear boy, we must not forget that they are our King’s subjects, under the protection of the British flag, and that we are Britons.”

On the way out to the anchorage, as he watched the savages assembling on the beach, Dr. Molesey was very reflective.

"After all, sir," said Chris Wingrove, "we haven't done so badly. We were bound to protect ourselves against the savages who attacked us and meant to eat us and make a collection of our heads, and a good many of our bullets were fatal. But we didn't do any needless killing, did we?"

"Indeed no," agreed Molesey. "It was in self-defence all the time. And even the burning of the village was done by the express order of our superiors."

"And while we've not lost a single one of the expedition," continued Chris, "we were in time to save the two gold-seekers as well as rescue three from the wrecked ketch. At the same time—well, I don't think you've any cause to grumble at your collection of orchids."

"It's simply wonderful, Chris," nodded the doctor. "We have enough to go home with even already. And still we shall add to the lot from the other islands we shall explore."

"I suppose, sir," pursued Chris, "we shall take Koroku back with us to England?"

The doctor lighted a cigarette.

"I don't know about that," he ruminated. "A savage is all very well in his natural surroundings. But what on earth could we do with him at home in England?"

## CHAPTER XXX

### SAVAGE AND SEA SCOUT

“**Y**OU’D make a ripping good Sea Scout, Koroku,” said Chris Wingrove, watching his companion shortening the bight of a rope by means of a sheepshank knot.

Koroku glanced across at him and smiled, showing his even white teeth.

“And you, Marster Chris, you make’m plenty good ripping savage,” he returned.

They were aloft together in the foretop of the *Albatross*. She was sailing with a favourable breeze across the wide strait that separates the islands of Bogutu and Rossel on her way to Rubiana Lagoon. Chris had gone aloft to his favourite perch on the cross-trees to enjoy a quiet read and also to get a good view of the beautiful island on the starboard bow.

Koroku had followed him, hoping that Chris would “talk” the story that he was reading. In the weeks that had gone by since the schooner left Malaita, Koroku had been learning to speak book English, and nothing helped him more in his education than listening to Chris Wingrove’s elocution.

But Chris had dropped his book into his jacket pocket. The weather was too bright and hot for reading, and besides, there was a heavy ocean

swell on the sea, and the constant rolling of the ship made it difficult for him to keep his eyes on the printed page.

"I don't know that I've shown any special gift in your line," he rejoined. "You've taught me a lot of things, of course—diving and quick swimming, climbing trees, and tracking. And I've learned through you that even a Solomon Island savage may have a few good points."

"Points?" repeated Koroku.

"Yes. You've got a lot of good points. You're honest and truthful, you're brave, too, in your way. Once you said to me that your heart wasn't quite as black as your skin. You thought it was even a little bit white. I think so, too."

Koroku modestly bent his head. Chris supposed that he was merely watching the sharks that showed their black triangular fins above the surface alongside, keeping equal pace with the schooner. But Koroku was thinking deeply and seriously.

"Me not altogether bad," he said, looking up.

"You're altogether good," Chris assured him.

Koroku, who was sitting at ease astride of the starboard quarter of the yard, moved a few inches nearer.

"You make'm fella me plenty happy," he said gently, fixing his soft dark eyes upon Wingrove's tanned face. "You no cross. You big friend belong me? You brother?"

Chris smiled. "Um! Yes, in a way," he acknowledged.



"Me no savvy what way," Koroku pursued a little awkwardly. "Suppose you close up brother alonga me, you drink'm blood belong me, I drink'm blood belong you. Savvy?"

Wingrove leaned back against the mast. He was astonished at this barbaric proposal. Yet he well understood the custom among the Pacific natives of making a serious declaration of blood-brotherhood. It was usually accompanied by the ceremony of each friend pricking a finger and drawing a drop of blood which the other swallowed, and thereafter they were regarded as brothers devoted to each other for life. Occasionally, also, they exchanged names.

"Yes," Chris nodded. "I savvy. But white men don't do that sort of thing. It isn't necessary for them to go through any formal ceremony. Their word is enough. If they're pals, they trust one another."

Koroku's expression changed into a look of disappointment. But he kept to his purpose.

"You fella you trust me?" he questioned.

"Yes, of course. Don't I always show that I trust you?"

"My word, yes," Koroku answered. "You savvy altogether, for you I give everything. I give'm life. I no gammon along you. I give'm life."

"I believe you would, 'Roco, if there was ever any need," affirmed Chris. "And I'm not sure I wouldn't do the same for you."

Koroku seemed to be well content with this declaration. But he was a Solomon Island savage and he believed in the binding force of ceremony. If Chris Wingrove shrank from the idea of exchanging drops of blood and from the yet greater pact implied in an exchange of names, there remained still another ceremony which he knew to be respected by the white people as a compact that could not be honourably broken. He paused for a long time, pondering over the proposal that was in his mind. Then, again fixing his eyes upon Chris, he said :

“ You shake’ m hand belong me ? ”

Wingrove thrust out his hand and Koroku clasped it.

“ Right-o ! ” he laughed. And turning on his seat, he jockeyed his way along to the yardarm and sat there holding on to the lift and gazing as it seemed at the palm trees on the far-off island. Once with the back of his free hand he wiped his eyes. Wingrove realized that he was crying.

“ You’re not unhappy, Koroku, are you ? ” he called aloud. “ We’re pals, you know, and that’s nearly as good as being brothers.”

Koroku turned. At the same moment the schooner rolled to starboard. He lost his balance and fell over. But his strong right hand still gripped the lift. One leg remained across the support of the yardarm and with the other he was struggling to reach one of the foot-ropes.

Chris Wingrove, seeing and understanding his

position of peril, jockeyed his way towards him along the yard and leaned over to help him. Koroku was as cool and collected as if he were up among the leaves and fruit of one of his native coco-palms and he was as agile as a trained acrobat.

Wingrove, on the other hand, was alarmed, and it was he who was in the greater danger. He was trusting to the weight of his body to keep him secure. But again the schooner rolled, and he was shot out into the empty air to fall down and down until he plunged into the sea.

Koroku saw him falling, saw the splash as he went under, and in an instant he had swung himself over, first on his knees, then on his bare feet. He stood upright, took a deep breath as he stepped to the extreme end of the yardarm, and then leapt out like a bird leaving its perch. Like a bird with outstretched wings he curved downward and dived cleanly as an arrow into the green depths.

“Man overboard!” shouted Sam Hendon from the poop. He seized a lifebuoy and flung it out over the quarter rail, while Mr. Bagley, Angus Tait and Gabbitas dashed to the nearest boat.

Chris Wingrove had hardly come to the surface when, looking round for the schooner, he saw Koroku’s head rise from a near wave and shake off a rain of sea-water. They were swimming towards each other. Both were strong swimmers, but Koroku had the greater skill and speed.

“All right, Koroku!” Chris called.

He turned on his side and did not see the sharp

black fin that came up between them. Koroku had seen it. He made a dash towards it. By a quick movement he got both his hands on the shark's nose and drove him downward. Chris felt something pushing against his side. He looked for Koroku, but could not see him. Then he put his face in the water and peering into its green sunlit depths saw a long black shape gliding away from under him and felt the pressure of a hand on the small of his back.

"Swim for the schooner—swim quick!" said Koroku. And again he went under.

Looking towards the *Albatross*, Chris saw the men swinging out the quarter davits and getting into the boat. He also caught sight of the lifebuoy floating on the round top of the wave in front of him, but a little to his left. Koroku's hand pushed him in that direction, but this time from his other side. He realized that Koroku was swimming round and round him. Beyond this he realized that there was more than one shark. One was nosing at the lifebuoy, and he felt the rasping hide of another scrape across his bare left shin.

"Fella boat he come close up," cried Koroku from behind him. "Swim for the boat."

The shark in front had turned from the lifebuoy. Chris saw it charging towards him. Then Koroku came in between, diving downward and driving the huge monster away.

"Sam throw'm rope. You catchee rope plenty

quick," urged Koroku. "Shark he no stop. He walk away home belong him."

Chris struck out desperately for the nearing boat. The rope was cast to him by Sam Hendon. Its coil fell with a splash in front of him just beyond his reach. He flung himself forward to grasp it and his hand rasped against the bulging side of a shark. It was the shark that seized the rope—the shark and Koroku at the same moment. The line was pulled taut under Wingrove's chin as Koroku tried to thrust it into his hand. He caught hold of it and felt himself being pulled towards the boat, the other end falling slack.

A cry of horror reached him from the men who were hauling. He turned to look for Koroku. For an instant their eyes met. Koroku spoke.

"Good-bye, brother!" he cried feebly and as he was dragged under the surrounding water turned from green to an ominous red.

Chris Wingrove knew no more until he found himself lying on a couch in Dr. Molesey's deck cabin.

"I saw it from beginning to end," Mr. Bagley was saying. "It was a wonderful act of self-sacrifice. He could have saved himself. But they couldn't both be saved, and he deliberately gave up his life for the sake of Chris."

"Koroku was black," added Dr. Molesey. "He was a Solomon Island savage. But never so long as I live will I cease to declare that he was also a true and noble hero."

THE END





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