



Terrible Solomons

by JACK LONDON

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HERE is no gainsaying that the Solomons are a hard-bitten bunch of islands. On the other hand, there are worse places in the world. But to the new chum who has no constitutional understanding of men and life in the rough, the Solomons may indeed prove terrible.

All the foregoing is quite true, and yet there are white men who have lived in the Solomons a score of years and who feel homesick when they go away from them. A man needs only to be careful—and lucky—to live a long time in the Solomons; but he must also be of the right sort. He must have the hall-mark of the inevitable white man stamped upon his soul. He must be inevitable. He must have a certain grand carelessness of odds; a certain colossal self-satisfaction, and a racial egotism that convinces him that one white man is better than a thousand niggers every day in the week, and that on Sunday he is well able to clean out two thousand niggers. For such are the things that have made the white man inevitable. He was too sensitive, too finely strung, and he possessed too much imagination. The world was too much with him. He projected himself too quiveringly into his environment. Wherefore, the last place in the world for him to go was the Solomons. He did not go expecting to stay. A five weeks' stop-over between steamers, he decided, would satisfy the call of the primitive he felt thrumming the strings of his being. At least, so he told the lady tourists on the Makemo, though in different terms; and they worshiped him as a hero, for they were lady tourists and they would know only the safety of the steamer's deck as she threaded her way through the Solomons.

There was another man on board, of whom the ladies took no notice. He was a little shriveled wisp of a man, with a withered skin the color of mahogany. His name on the passenger list does not matter, but his other name, Captain Malu, was a name for niggers to conjure with, and to scare night-pickers into their rich houses, from New Hanover to the New Hebrides.

Bertie talked with Captain Malu in the smoking room, confiding to him his intention of seeing life red and bleeding in the Solomons. Captain Malu agreed that the intention was ambitious and honorable. It was not until several days later that he became interested in Bertie, when that young adventurer insisted on showing him an automatic forty-four-calibre pistol. Bertie explained the mechanism and demonstrated by slipping a loaded magazine up the hollow butt.

"It is so simple," he said. "He shot the outer barrel back along the inner one. That loads it and cocks it, you see. And then all I have to do is pull the trigger, eight times, as fast as I can quiver my finger. See that safety clutch? That's what I like about it. It is so safe. It is positively fool-proof." He slipped out the magazine. "You see how safe it is."

As he held it in his hand the muzzle came in line with Captain Malu's stomach. Captain Malu's blue eyes looked at it unswervingly.

"Would you mind pointing it in some other direction?" he asked.

"It's perfectly safe," Bertie assured him. "I withdrew the magazine. It's not loaded, now, you know. A gun is always loaded."

"But this one isn't."

"Turn it away, just the same."

Captain Malu's voice was flat, metallic, and low, but his eyes never left the muzzle until the line of it was drawn past him and away from him.

"I'll bet a fiver it isn't loaded," Bertie proposed, warmly.

The other shook his head.

"Then I'll show you."

He knew how to swim as well as they, and two of them were drowned. He used a boat stretcher and a revolver. Of course it was an accident.

"Quite common, then accidents," remarked the skipper. "You see that man at the wheel, Mr. Arkwright? He's a man-eater. Six months ago he and the rest of the boat's crew drowned the then captain of the *Aria*. They did it on deck, sir, right aft there by the mizzen-traveler."

"The deck was in a shocking state," said the mate. "Do I understand—" Bertie began.

"Yes, just that," said Captain Hansen. "It was accidental drowning."

"But on deck—"

"Just so. I don't mind telling you, in confidence, of course, that they used an ax."

"This present crew of yours?"

"The other skipper always was too careless," explained the mate. "He but just turned his back when they let him have it."

"We haven't any show down here," was the skipper's complaint. "The government protects a nigger against a white every time. You can't shoot first. You've got to give the nigger first shot, or else the government calls it murder and you go to Fiji. That's why there's so many drowning accidents."

Dinner was called and Bertie and the skipper went below, leaving the mate to watch on deck.

"Keep an eye out for that black devil, Auki!" was the skipper's parting caution. "I haven't liked his looks for several days."

"Right O," said the mate.

Dinner was part way along, and the skipper was in the middle of his story of the cutting-out of the *Scottish Chiefs*.

"Yes," he was saying, "she was the finest vessel on the coast. But when she missed stays, and before ever she hit the reef, the canoes started for her. There were five white men, a crew of twenty Santa Cruz boys and Samoans, and only the supercargo escaped. Besides, there were sixty recruits. They were all *kat-kat's*. *Kat-kat*—oh, I beg your pardon. I mean they were eaten. Then there was the *James Edwards*, a dandy rig."

But at that moment there was a sharp oath from the mate on deck and a chorus of savage cries. A revolver went off three times, and then was heard a loud splash. Captain Hansen had sprung up the companionway slide, on the instant, and Bertie's eyes had been fascinated by a glimpse of him drawing his revolver as he sprang. Bertie went up more circumspectly, hesitating before he put his head above the companionway slide. But nothing happened. The mate was shaking with excitement, his revolver in his hand. Once he started and half jumped around, as if danger threatened his back.

"One of the natives fell overboard," he was saying, in a queer, tense voice. "He couldn't swim."

"Who was it?" the skipper demanded.

"Auki," was the answer.

"But I say, you know, I heard shots," Bertie said, in trembling eagerness, for he scented adventure, and adventure that was happily over with. The mate whirled upon him, snarling:

"It's a lie. There ain't been a shot fired. The nigger fell overboard."

Captain Hansen regarded Bertie with unblinking, lack-luster eyes.

"I—I—thought—" Bertie was beginning.

"Shots?" said Captain Hansen, dreamily. "Shots? Did you hear any shots, Mr. Jacobs?"

"Not a shot," replied Mr. Jacobs.

The skipper looked at his guest, triumphantly, and said:

"Evidently an accident. Let us go down, Mr. Arkwright, and finish dinner."

Bertie slept that night in the captain's cabin, a tiny stateroom off the main cabin. The forward bulkhead was decorated with a stand of rifles. Over the bunk were three more rifles. Under the bunk was a big drawer, which, when he pulled it out, he found filled with ammunition, dynamite, and several boxes of detonators. He elected to take the settee on the opposite side. Lying conspicuously on the small table was the *Aria's* log. Bertie did not know that it had been especially prepared for the occasion by Captain Malu, and he read therein how, on September 21, two boat's crew had fallen overboard and been drowned. Bertie read between that line and knew better. He read how the *Aria's* whaleboat had been bushwhacked at Suva and had lost three men; of how the skipper discovered the cook stewing human flesh on the galley fire—flesh purchased by the boat's crew, ashore in Fuli. He read of how an accidental discharge of dynamite, while signaling, had killed another boat's crew; of night attacks, ports fled from between the daws, attacks by bushmen in mangrove swamps and by fleets of salt-water men in the larger passages. One item that occurred with monotonous frequency was death by dysentery. He noticed with alarm that two white men had so died—guests, like himself, on the *Aria*.

"I say, you know," Bertie said next day to Captain Hansen, "I've been glancing through your log."

The skipper displayed quick vexation that the log had been left lying about.

"And all that dysentery, you know, that's all rot, just like the accidental drownings," Bertie continued.

"What does dysentery really stand for?"

The skipper openly admired his guest's acumen, stifled himself to make indignant denial, then gracefully surrendered.

"You see, it's like this, Mr. Arkwright. These islands have got a bad enough name as it is. It's getting harder every day to sign on white men. Suppose a man is killed. The company has to pay 'through the nose' for another man to take the place. But if the new chum doesn't mind disease. What they draw the line at is being murdered."

"Besides," said Mr. Jacobs, "there's altogether too many accidental drownings, anyway. It don't look right. It's the fault of the government. A white man hasn't a chance to defend himself from the niggers."

"Yes, look at the *Princess* and that Yankee mate," the skipper took up the tale. "She carried five white men besides a government agent. The captain, the agent and the supercargo were ashore in the two boats. They were killed to the last man. The mate and boson, with about fifteen of the crew—Samoans and Tongans—were on board. A crowd of niggers came off from shore. First thing the mate knew, the boson and the crew were killed in the first rush. The mate grabbed three cartridge belts and two Winchester-ter and skinned up to the cross-trees. He was the sole survivor, and you can't blame him for being mad. He pumped one rifle till it got so hot he couldn't hold it, then he pumped the other. The deck was black with niggers. He cleaned them out. He dropped them as fast as they picked up their paddles. Then they jumped into the water and started to swim for it, and, being mad, he got half a dozen more. And what did he get for it?"

"Seven years in Fiji," snapped the mate.

"The government said he wasn't justified in shooting the barbed wire at every jump. Bertie was horror-stricken. So was Captain Hansen. He had forgotten his twenty-five recruits, on each of which he had paid thirty shillings. They went over the side along with the shore-dwelling folk, followed by him who trailed the sizzling chlorodyne bottle.

Bertie did not see the bottle go off; but the mate opportunely discharging a stick of real dynamite aft where it would harm nobody, Bertie would have sworn in any admiralty court to a nigger blown to flinders.

The flight of the twenty-five recruits had actually cost the *Aria* forty pounds, and since they had taken to the bush, there was no hope of recovering them. The skipper and his mate proceeded to drown their sorrows in cold tea. The cold tea was in whisky bottles, so Bertie did not know it was cold tea they were mopping up. All he knew was that the two men got very drunk and argued eloquently and at length as to whether the exploded nigger should be reported as a case of disease or as an accidental drowning. When they snored off to sleep he was the only white man left, and he kept a perilous watch till dawn, in fear of an attack from shore and an uprising of the crew.

Three more days the *Aria* spent on the coast, and three more nights the skipper and the mate drank over-fondly of cold tea, leaving Bertie to keep the watch. They knew he could be depended upon, while he was equally certain that if he lived he would report their drunken conduct to Captain Malu. Then the *Aria* dropped anchor at Reminga Plantation, on Guadalcanar, and Bertie landed on the beach with a sigh of relief and shook hands with the manager, Mr. Harriwell, who was ready for him.

"Now you mustn't be alarmed if some of our fellows seem downcast," Mr. Harriwell said, having drawn him aside in confidence. "There's been talk of an outbreak, and two or three suspicious signs I'm

willing to admit, but personally I think it's all poppycock."

"How—how many blacks have you on the plantation?" Bertie asked, with a sinking heart.

"We're working four hundred just now," replied Mr. Harriwell, cheerfully; "but the three of us, with you, of course, and the skipper and mate of the *Aria*, can handle them all right."

Bertie turned to meet one McTavish, the storekeeper, who scarcely acknowledged the introduction, such was his eagerness to present his resignation. "It being that I'm a married man, Mr. Harriwell, I can't very well afford to remain on longer. Trouble is working up, as plain as the nose on your face. The niggers are going to break out, and there'll be another Hobono horror here."

"What's a Hobono horror?" Bertie asked, after the storekeeper had been persuaded to remain until the end of the month.

"Oh, he means Hobono Plantation, on Yasabel," said the manager. "The niggers killed the five white men ashore, captured the schooner, killed the captain and mate, and escaped in a body to Malaita. But I always said they were careless on Hobono. They won't catch us napping here. Come along, Mr. Arkwright, and see our view from the veranda."

Bertie was too busy wondering how he could get away to the Commissioner's house in Tulagi, to see much of the view. He was still wondering when a rifle exploded very near to him, behind his back. At the same moment his arm was nearly dislocated, so earnestly did Mr. Harriwell drag him indoors.

"I say, old man, that was a close shave," said the manager, waving him over to see if he had been hit. "I can't tell you how sorry I am. But it was broad daylight, and I never dreamed." Bertie was beginning to turn pale.

"They got the other manager that way," McTavish vouchsafed. "And a dashed fine chap he was. Blew his brains out all over the veranda. You noticed that dark stain there between the steps and the door?"

Bertie was ripe for the cocktail which Mr. Harriwell pitched in and compounded for him; but before he could drink it a man in riding trousers and puttees entered.

"What's the matter now?" the manager asked, after one look at the newcomer's face. "Is the river up again?"

"River be blowed—it's the niggers. Stepped out of the cane grass, not a dozen feet away, and popped at me." It was a Snider, and he shot from the hip. Now, what I want to know is, where'd he get that Snider?—Oh, I beg pardon! Glad to know you, Mr. Arkwright."

"Mr. Brown is my assistant," explained Mr. Harriwell. "And now let's have that drink." But where'd he get that Snider? Mr. Brown insisted. "I always

objected to keeping those guns on the premises."

"They're still there," Mr. Harriwell said, with a show of heat. Mr. Brown smiled incredulously. "Come along and see," said the manager.

Bertie joined the procession into the office, where Mr. Harriwell pointed triumphantly at a big packing case in a dusty corner.

"Well, then, where did the beggar get that Snider?" harped Mr. Brown. But just then McTavish lifted the packing case. The manager started, then tore off the lid. The case was empty. They gazed at one another in horrified silence. Harriwell drooped wearily.

Then McTavish cursed. "What I contended all along—the house boys are not to be trusted."

"It does look serious," Harriwell admitted, "but we'll come through it all right. What the singular niggers bring is a shaking up. Will you gentlemen please bring your rifles to dinner, and will you, Mr. Brown, kindly prepare forty or fifty sticks of dynamite. Make the fuses good and short. We'll give them a lesson. And now, gentlemen, dinner is served."

One thing that Bertie detested was rice and curry, so it happened that he alone partook of an inviting omelet. He had quite finished his plate, when Harriwell helped himself to the omelet. One mouthful he tasted, then spat out vociferously.

"That's the second time," McTavish announced, ominously.

Harriwell was still hawking and spitting.

"Second time, what?" Bertie quavered.

"Poison," was the answer. "That cook will be hanged yet."

"That's the way the bookkeeper went out at Cape Marsh," Brown spoke up. "Died horribly. They said on the *Jason* that they heard him screaming three miles away."

"I'll put the cook in irons," spluttered Harriwell. "Fortunately we discovered it in time."

Bertie sat paralyzed. There was no color in his face. He attempted to speak, but only an inarticulate gurgle resulted. All eyed him anxiously.

"Don't say it, don't say it," McTavish cried in a tense voice.

"Yes, I ate it, plenty of it, a whole plateful!" Bertie cried, explosively, like a diver suddenly regaining breath. The awful silence continued half a minute longer, and he read his fate in their eyes.

"Maybe it wasn't poison after all," said Harriwell, dully.

"Call in the cook," said Brown.

In came the cook, a grinning black boy, nose-spiked and ear-plugged.

"Here you, Wi-Wi, what name that?" Harriwell bellowed, pointing accusingly at the omelet. Wi-Wi was very naturally frightened and embarrassed.

"Him good fella *kat-kat*," he murmured, apologetically.

"Make him eat it," suggested McTavish. "That's a proper test."

Harriwell filled a spoon with the stuff and jumped for the cook, who died in panic.

"That settles it," was Brown's solemn pronouncement. "He won't eat it."

"Mr. Brown, will you please go and put the irons on him," Harriwell turned cheerfully to Bertie. "It's all right, old man, the Commissioner will deal with him, and if you die, depend upon it, he will be hanged."

"Don't think the government'll do it," objected McTavish.

"But, gentlemen, gentlemen," Bertie cried, "in the meantime think of me!"

Harriwell shrugged his shoulders, pityingly. "Sorry, old man, but it's a native poison, and there are no known antidotes for native poisons. Try and compose yourself, and if—"

Two sharp reports of a rifle from without interrupted the discourse, and Brown, entering, reloaded his rifle and sat down to table.

"The cook's dead," he said. "Fever. A rather sudden attack."

"I was just telling Mr. Arkwright that there are no antidotes for native poisons—"

"Except gin," said Brown.

Harriwell called himself an absent-minded idiot and rushed for the gin bottle.

"Neat, man, neat," he warned Bertie, who gulped down a tumbler two-thirds full of the raw spirits and coughed and choked from the angry bite of it till the tears ran down his cheeks.

Harriwell took his pulse and temperature, made a show of looking out for him, and doubted that the omelet had been poisoned. Brown and McTavish also doubted; but Bertie discerned an insincere ring in their voices. His appetite had left him, and he took his own pulse stealthily under the table. There was no question but what it was increasing, but he failed to ascribe it to the gin he had taken.

McTavish, rifle in hand, went out on the veranda to reconnoiter. "They're massing up at the cook house," was his report. "And they're no end of Sniders. My idea is to sneak around on the other side and take them in flank. Strike the first blow, you know. Will you come along, Brown?"

Harriwell ate on steadily, while Bertie discovered that his pulse was leaping up five beats. Nevertheless, he could not help jumping when the rifle began to go off. Above the scattering of Sniders could be heard the pumping of Brown's and McTavish's Winchester— all against a background of demoniacal screeching and yelling.

"They've got them on the run," Harriwell remarked, as voices and gunshots faded away in the distance.

Scarcely were Brown and McTavish back at the table when the latter reconnoitered.

"They've got dynamite," he said.

"Then let's charge them with dynamite," Harriwell proposed.

Thrusting half a dozen sticks each into their pockets and equipping themselves with lighted cigars they started for the door, and just then it happened. They blamed McTavish for it afterwards, and he admitted that the charge had been a trifle excessive. But at any rate it went off under the house, which lifted up cornerwise and settled back on its foundations. Half the china on the table was shattered, while the eight-day clock stopped. Yelling for grace, the three men rushed out into the night and the bombardment began.

When they returned, there was no Bertie. He had dragged himself away to the office, barricaded himself in, and sunk upon the floor in a gin-soaked nightmare, wherein he died a thousand deaths while the valorous fight went on around him. In the morning, glib and headachy from the gin, he crawled out to find the sun still in the sky and God presumably in heaven, for his boots were alive and uninjured.

Harriwell pressed him to stay on longer, but Bertie insisted on sailing immediately on the *Aria* for Tulagi, where, until the following steamer day, he stuck close by the Commissioner's house. There were lady tourists on the outgoing steamer, and Bertie was again a hero, while Captain Malu, as usual, passed unnoticed. But Captain Malu went back from Sydney two cases of the best Scotch whisky on the market, for he was not able to make up his mind as to whether it was Captain Hansen or Mr. Harriwell who had given Bertie Arkwright, the more gorgeous insight into life in the Solomons.

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