



The Terrible Solomons

by JACK LONDON

THERE is no gainsaying that the Solomons are a hard-bitten bunch of islanders. On the other hand, there are worse places in the world. But to the new comers, who have 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.

Bertie Arkwright was not 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, he told the lady tourists on the *Makembo*, though in different terms; and they worshipped 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 shrivelled 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 naughtie pickaninnies to rich 'cousines, 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."

"But the gun is always loaded."

"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."

Bertie started to put the muzzle to his own temple with the evident intention of pulling the trigger.

"Just a second," Captain Malu said, quietly, reaching out his hand. "Let me look at it."

He pointed it seaward and pulled the trigger. A heavy explosion followed, instantaneous with the sharp click of the mechanism that flipped a hot and smoking cartridge sideways along the deck. Bertie dropped in amazement.

"I slipped the barrel back once, didn't I?" he explained. "It was silly of me, I must say." He giggled, shabbily, and sat down in a steamer chair. The blood had ebbed from his face, exposing dark circles under his eyes. His hands were trembling and unable to guide the shaking cigarette to his lips. The world was too much with him, and he saw himself with dripping brains prone upon the deck.

"Really," he said—"really."

"It's a pretty weapon," said Captain Malu, returning the automatic to him.

The Commissioner was on board the *Makembo*, returning from Sydney, and by his permission a stop was made at Ugi to land a missionary. And at Ugi lay the ketch *Aria*, Captain Hansen, skipper. Now the *Aria* was one of many vessels owned by Captain Malu, and it was one at his suggestion and by his invitation that Bertie went aboard the *Aria* as guest for a four days' recruiting cruise on the coast of Malaita. Thereafter the *Aria* would drop him at Reminge plantation (also owned by Captain Malu), where Bertie could remain for a week, and then be sent up to Tulagi, the seat of government, where he would be interviewed by the Commissioner.

Captain Malu was responsible for two other suggestions, which given, disappeared from this narrative. One was to Captain Hansen, the other to Mr. Harrowell, manager of Reminge Plantation. Both suggestions were similar in tenor, namely, to give Mr. Bertie Arkwright an insight into the rawness and redness of life in the Solomons. Also, it is whispered that Captain Malu mentioned that a case of Scotch would be coincidental with any particularly gorgeous insight Mr. Arkwright might receive.

"Tea, Swartz always was too pig-headed. You see, he took four of his boat's crew to be flogged—officially, you know—then started back with them in the whale boat. It was pretty squealy, and the boat capsized just outside. Swartz was the only one drowned. Of course it was an accident."

"Was it? Really?" Bertie asked, only half interested, staring hard at the black mass at the wheel.

Ugi had dropped astern, and the *Aria* was sliding along through a summer sea toward the wooded ranges of Malaita. The helmsman who so attracted Bertie's eyes sported a ten-penny nail, stuck skewer-wise through his nose. About his neck was a string of pants buttons. Thrust through holes in his ears were a can opener, the broken handle of a toothbrush, a clay pipe, the brass wheel of an alarm clock and several Winchester rifle cartridges. On his chest, suspended from around his neck, hung the half of a chinna plate. Some forty similarly apparelled blacks lay about the deck, fifteen of whom were boat's crew, the remainder being fresh labor recruits.

"Of course it was an accident," spoke up the *Aria*'s mate, Jacobs, a slender, dark-eyed man who looked more a professor than a sailor. "Johnny Bedir nearly had the same kind of accident. He was bringing several from a flogging when they capsized him. But

No. 208, RELEASED FOR JANUARY 7, 1911.

the barbed wire at every jump. Bertie was horrified.

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 chloroform bottle.

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

The night of the twenty-fourth Bertie's accident cost the *Aria*'s 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 their drunken conduct to Captain Malu. Then the *Aria* dropped anchor at Reminge Plantation, on Guadalcanal, and Bertie landed on the beach with a sigh of relief and shook hands with the manager. Mr. Harrowell was ready for him.

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

objected to keeping those guns on the premises."

"They're still there," Mr. Harrowell 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. Harrowell 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. Harrowell drooped weary.

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

"It does look serious," Harrowell admitted. "But we'll come through it all right. What the sanguinary niggers are 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."

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

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

Harrowell was still hawking and spitting.

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

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

"I'll put the cook in irons," spluttered Harrowell.

"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 tenor voice.

"I'll put the cook in irons," spluttered Harrowell.

"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 Harrowell, dismally.

"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?" Harrowell bellowed, pointing accusingly at the omelet. Wi-wi was very naturally frightened and embarrassed.

"Him good fella Kui-ket," he murmured, apologetically.

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

Harrowell filled a spoon with the stuff and jumped for the cook, who fled 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?" Harrowell 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!"

Harrowell shrugged his shoulders, pityingly. "Sorry, old man, but it's 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.

Harrowell 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.

Harrowell took his pulse and temperature, made a short account, looking out for him, and doubted that the omelet had been poisoned. Brown and McTavish also doubted; but Bertie discerned an indolence 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 there's 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?"

Harrowell sat on a steplike, while Bertie discovered the rifle and loaded it with five belts. 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 Winchesters—all against a background of demagogic screeching and yelling.

"They've got them on the run," Harrowell 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.

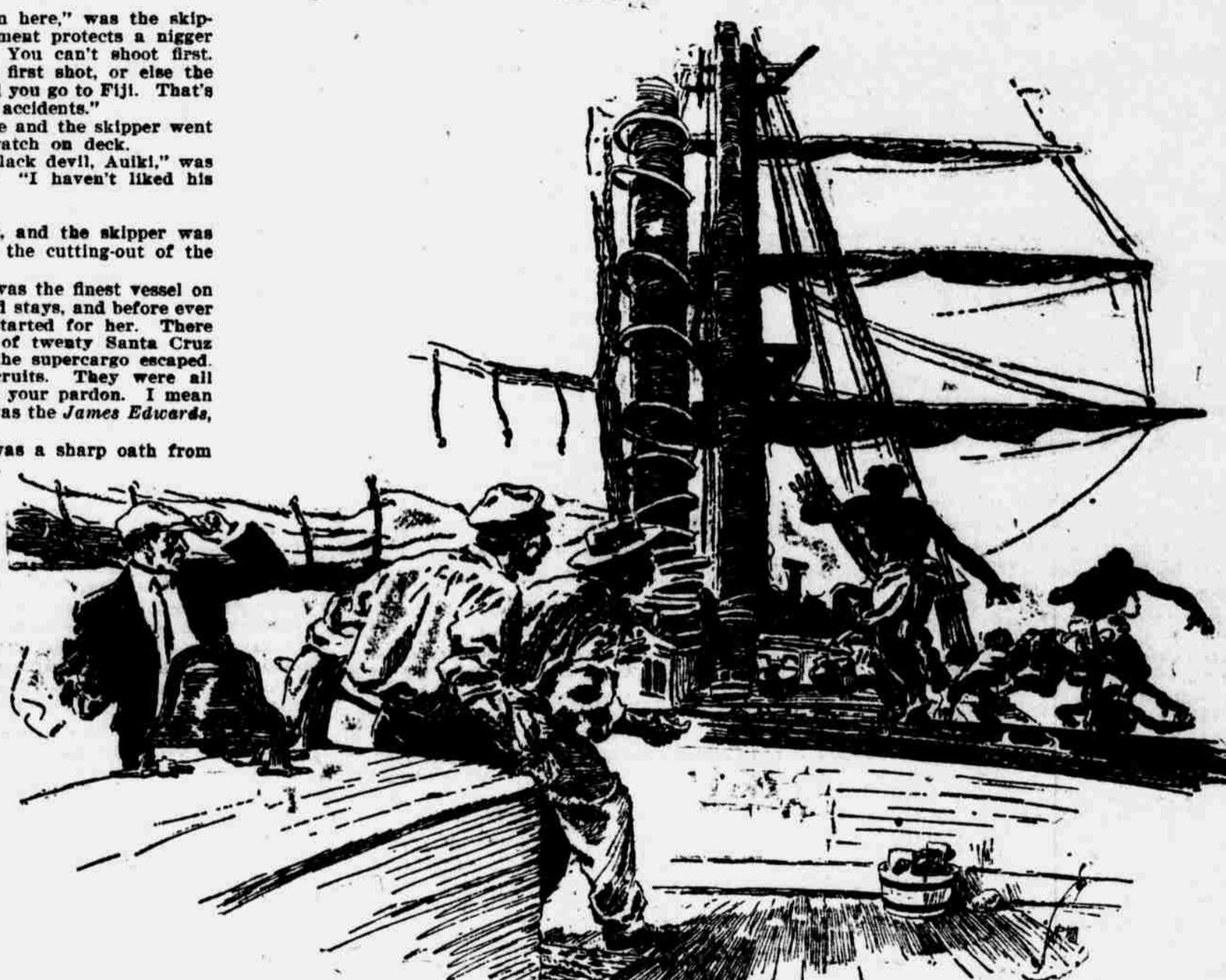
"Then let's charge them with dynamite," Harrowell proposed.

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 the end of 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 vengeance, 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, Bertie and his headachy from the gin, he crawled out to find the sun still in the sky and God presumably in heaven, for his hosts were alive and uninjured.

Harrowell pressed him to stay on longer, but Bertie insisted on sailing immediately. 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 sent 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. Harrowell who had given Bertie Arkwright, the more gorgous insight into life in the Solomons.

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He started for'ard and the natives took headers over the barbed wire at every jump.

after they'd taken to the water," the skipper explained.

"And that's why they die of disease nowadays," the mate added.

"Just fancy," said Bertie, as he felt a longing for the cruise to be over.

Later on in the day he interviewed the black who had been pointed out to him as a cannibal. This fellow's name was Sumasai. He had spent three years on a Queensland plantation. He had been to Samoa and Fiji and Sydney; and as a boat's crew had been on recruiting schooners through New Britain, New Ireland, New Guinea, and the Admiralties. Also, he was a wag, and he had taken a like on his skipper's conduct. Yes, he had eaten many men. How many? He could not remember the tally. Yes, white men, too; they were very good, unless they were sick. He had once eaten a sick one. "My word," he cried, at the recollection. "Me sick plenty along him. My belly walk about too much."

Bertie shuddered, and asked about heads.

Yes, Sumasai had several hidden ashore, in good condition, sun-dried and smoke-cured. One was of the captain of a schooner. It had long whiskers. He would sell it for two quid. Black men's heads he would sell for one quid. He had some pickaninnies heads, in poor condition; that he would let go for ten bob.

"Five minutes afterwards, Bertie found himself sitting on the deck, a slide alongside a black with a horrible skin disease. He sheered off, and on inquiry, was told that it was leprosy. He hurried below and washed himself with antiseptic soap. He took many antiseptic washes in the course of the day, for every native on board was afflicted with malignant ulcers of one sort or another.

As the *Aria* drew in to an anchorage in the midst of mangrove swamps, a double row of barbed wire was stretched around above her rail. That looked like business, and when Bertie saw the shore canoes alongside, armed with spears, bows and arrows, and Sniders, he wished more earnestly than ever that the cruise was over.

That evening the natives were slow in leaving the ship. A number of them checked the mate when he ordered them ashore.

"Never mind, I'll fix them," said Captain Hansen, diving below. When he came back he showed Bertie a stick of dynamite attached to a fishhook. Now it happens that a paper-wrapped bottle of chloroform with a piece of harmless fuse projecting can fool anybody. It fooled Bertie, and it fooled the natives.

When Captain Hansen lit the fuse and hooked the fishhook into the tail end of a native's loin cloth,

that native was smitten with so ardent a desire for the shore that he forgot to shed the loin cloth. He started for'ard, the fuse sizzling and spluttering at his rear, the natives in his path taking headers over

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