

# SHORT STORY AMERICA

## THE JOKERS OF NEW GIBBON

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"I'm almost afraid to take you in to New Gibbon," David Grief said. "It wasn't until you and the British gave me a free hand and let the place alone that any results were accomplished."

Wallenstein, the German Resident Commissioner from Bougainville, poured himself a long Scotch and soda and smiled.

"We take off our hats to you, Mr. Grief," he said in perfectly good English. "What you have done on the devil island is a miracle. And we shall continue not to interfere. It is a devil island, and old Koho is the big chief devil of them all. We never could bring him to terms. He is a liar, and he is no fool. He is a black Napoleon, a head-hunting, man-eating Talleyrand. I remember six years ago, when I landed there in the British cruiser. The niggers cleared out for the bush, of course, but we found several who couldn't get away. One was his latest wife. She had been hung up by one arm in the sun for two days and nights. We cut her down, but she died just the same. And staked out in the fresh running water, up to their necks, were three more women. All their bones were broken and their joints crushed. The process is supposed to make them tender for the eating. They were

still alive. Their vitality was remarkable. One woman, the oldest, lingered nearly ten days. Well, that was a sample of Koho's diet. No wonder he's a wild beast. How you ever pacified him is our everlasting puzzlement."

"I wouldn't call him exactly pacified," Grief answered. "Though he comes in once in a while and eats out of the hand."

"That's more than we accomplished with our cruisers. Neither the German nor the English ever laid eyes on him. You were the first."

"No; McTavish was the first," Grief disclaimed.

"Ah, yes, I remember him—the little, dried-up Scotchman." Wallenstein sipped his whiskey. "He's called the Trouble-mender, isn't he?"

Grief nodded.

"And they say the screw you pay him is bigger than mine or the British Resident's?"

"I'm afraid it is," Grief admitted. "You see, and no offence, he's really worth it. He spends his time wherever the trouble is. He is a wizard. He's the one who got me my lodgment on New Gibbon. He's down on Malaita now, starting a plantation for me."

"The first?"

"There's not even a trading station on all Malaita. The recruiters still use covering boats and carry the old barbed wire above their rails. There's the plantation now. We'll be in in half an hour." He handed the binoculars to his guest. "Those are the boat-sheds to the left of the bungalow. Beyond are the barracks. And to the right are the copra-sheds. We dry quite a bit already. Old Koho's getting civilized enough to make his people bring in the

nuts. There's the mouth of the stream where you found the three women softening."

The *Wonder*, wing-and-wing, was headed directly in for the anchorage. She rose and fell lazily over a glassy swell flawed here and there by catspaws from astern. It was the tail-end of the monsoon season, and the air was heavy and sticky with tropic moisture, the sky a florid, leaden muss of formless clouds. The rugged land was swathed with cloud-banks and squall wreaths, through which headlands and interior peaks thrust darkly. On one promontory a slant of sunshine blazed torridly, on another, scarcely a mile away, a squall was bursting in furious downpour of driving rain.

This was the dank, fat, savage island of New Gibbon, lying fifty miles to leeward of Choiseul. Geographically, it belonged to the Solomon Group. Politically, the dividing line of German and British influence cut it in half, hence the joint control by the two Resident Commissioners. In the case of New Gibbon, this control existed only on paper in the colonial offices of the two countries. There was no real control at all, and never had been. The *bêche de mer* fishermen of the old days had passed it by. The sandalwood traders, after stern experiences, had given it up. The blackbirders had never succeeded in recruiting one labourer on the island, and, after the schooner *Dorset* had been cut off with all hands, they left the place severely alone. Later, a German company had attempted a cocoanut plantation, which was abandoned after several managers and a number of contract labourers had lost their heads. German cruisers and British cruisers had failed to get the savage blacks to listen to reason. Four times the missionary societies had essayed the peaceful conquest of the island, and four times, between sickness and massacre, they had been driven away. More cruisers, more pacifications, had followed, and followed fruitlessly. The cannibals had always retreated into the bush and laughed at the screaming shells. When the warships left it was an easy matter to rebuild the burned grass houses and set up the ovens in the old-fashioned way.

New Gibbon was a large island, fully one hundred and fifty miles long and half as broad. Its windward coast was iron-bound, without anchorages or inlets, and it was inhabited by scores of warring tribes—at least it had been, until Koho had arisen, like a Kamehameha, and, by force of arms and considerable statecraft, firmly welded the greater portion of the tribes into a confederation. His policy of permitting no intercourse with white men had been eminently right, so far as survival of his own people was concerned; and after the visit of the last cruiser he had had his own way until David Grief and McTavish the Troublemender landed on the deserted beach where once had stood the German bungalow and barracks and the various English mission-houses.

Followed wars, false peaces, and more wars. The wizened little Scotchman could make trouble as well as mend it, and, not content with holding the beach, he imported bushmen from Malaita and invaded the wild-pig runs of the interior jungle. He burned villages until Koho wearied of rebuilding them, and when he captured Koho's eldest son he compelled a conference with the old chief. It was then that McTavish laid down the rate of head-exchange. For each head of his own people he promised to take ten of Koho's. After Koho had learned that the Scotchman was a man of his word, the first true peace was made. In the meantime McTavish had built the bungalow and barracks, cleared the jungle-land along the beach, and laid out the plantation. After that he had gone on his way to mend trouble on the atoll of Tasman, where a plague of black measles had broken out and been ascribed to Grief's plantation by the devil-devil doctors. Once, a year later, he had been called back again to straighten up New Gibbon; and Koho, after paying a forced fine of two hundred thousand cocoanuts, decided it was cheaper to keep the peace and sell the nuts. Also, the fires of his youth had burned down. He was getting old and limped of one leg where a Lee-Enfield bullet had perforated the calf.