

CHAPTER V

And swift tropic night smote the Arangi, as she alternately rolled in calms and heeled and plunged ahead in squalls under the lee of the cannibal island of Malaita. It was a stoppage of the south-east trade wind that made for variable weather, and that made cooking on the exposed deck galley a misery and sent the return boys, who had nothing to wet but their skins, scuttling below.

The first watch, from eight to twelve, was the mate's; and Captain Van Horn, forced below by the driving wet of a heavy rain squall, took Jerry with him to sleep in the tiny stateroom. Jerry was weary from the manifold excitements of the most exciting day in his life; and he was asleep and kicking and growling in his sleep, ere Skipper, with a last look at him and a grin as he turned the lamp low, muttered aloud: "It's that wild-dog, Jerry. Get him. Shake him. Shake him hard."

So soundly did Jerry sleep, that when the rain, having robbed the atmosphere of its last breath of wind, ceased and left the stateroom a steaming, suffocating furnace, he did not know when Skipper, panting for air, his loin cloth and undershirt soaked with sweat, arose, tucked blanket and pillow under his arm, and went on deck.

Jerry only awakened when a huge three-inch cockroach nibbled at the sensitive and hairless skin between his toes. He awoke kicking the

offended foot, and gazed at the cockroach that did not scuttle, but that walked dignifiedly away. He watched it join other cockroaches that paraded the floor. Never had he seen so many gathered together at one time, and never had he seen such large ones. They were all of a size, and they were everywhere. Long lines of them poured out of cracks in the walls and descended to join their fellows on the floor.

The thing was indecent--at least, in Jerry's mind, it was not to be tolerated. Mister Haggin, Derby, and Bob had never tolerated cockroaches, and their rules were his rules. The cockroach was the eternal tropic enemy. He sprang at the nearest, pouncing to crush it to the floor under his paws. But the thing did what he had never known a cockroach to do. It arose in the air strong-flighted as a bird. And as if at a signal, all the multitude of cockroaches took wings of flight and filled the room with their flutterings and circlings.

He attacked the winged host, leaping into the air, snapping at the flying vermin, trying to knock them down with his paws. Occasionally he succeeded and destroyed one; nor did the combat cease until all the cockroaches, as if at another signal, disappeared into the many cracks, leaving the room to him.

Quickly, his next thought was: Where is Skipper? He knew he was not in the room, though he stood up on his hind-legs and investigated the low bunk, his keen little nose quivering delightedly while he made little sniffs of delight as he smelled the recent presence of Skipper. And what

made his nose quiver and sniff, likewise made his stump of a tail bob back and forth.

But where was Skipper? It was a thought in his brain that was as sharp and definite as a similar thought would be in a human brain. And it similarly preceded action. The door had been left hooked open, and Jerry trotted out into the cabin where half a hundred blacks made queer sleep-moanings, and sighings, and snorings. They were packed closely together, covering the floor as well as the long sweep of bunks, so that he was compelled to crawl over their naked legs. And there was no white god about to protect him. He knew it, but was unafraid.

Having made sure that Skipper was not in the cabin, Jerry prepared for the perilous ascent of the steep steps that were almost a ladder, then recollected the lazarette. In he trotted and sniffed at the sleeping girl in the cotton shift who believed that Van Horn was going to eat her if he could succeed in fattening her.

Back at the ladder-steps, he looked up and waited in the hope that Skipper might appear from above and carry him up. Skipper had passed that way, he knew, and he knew for two reasons. It was the only way he could have passed, and Jerry's nose told him that he had passed. His first attempt to climb the steps began well. Not until a third of the way up, as the Arangi rolled in a sea and recovered with a jerk, did he slip and fall. Two or three boys awoke and watched him while they prepared and chewed betel nut and lime wrapped in green leaves.

Twice, barely started, Jerry slipped back, and more boys, awakened by their fellows, sat up and enjoyed his plight. In the fourth attempt he managed to gain half way up before he fell, coming down heavily on his side. This was hailed with low laughter and querulous chirpings that might well have come from the throats of huge birds. He regained his feet, absurdly bristled the hair on his shoulders and absurdly growled his high disdain of these lesser, two-legged things that came and went and obeyed the wills of great, white-skinned, two-legged gods such as Skipper and Mister Haggin.

Undeterred by his heavy fall, Jerry essayed the ladder again. A temporary easement of the Arangi's rolling gave him his opportunity, so that his forefeet were over the high combing of the companion when the next big roll came. He held on by main strength of his bent forelegs, then scrambled over and out on deck.

Amidships, squatting on the deck near the sky-light, he investigated several of the boat's crew and Lerumie. He identified them circumspectly, going suddenly stiff-legged as Lerumie made a low, hissing, menacing noise. Aft, at the wheel, he found a black steering, and, near him, the mate keeping the watch. Just as the mate spoke to him and stooped to pat him, Jerry whiffed Skipper somewhere near at hand. With a conciliating, apologetic bob of his tail, he trotted on up wind and came upon Skipper on his back, rolled in a blanket so that only his head stuck out, and sound asleep.

First of all Jerry needs must joyfully sniff him and joyfully wag his tail. But Skipper did not awake and a fine spray of rain, almost as thin as mist, made Jerry curl up and press closely into the angle formed by Skipper's head and shoulder. This did awake him, for he uttered "Jerry" in a low, crooning voice, and Jerry responded with a touch of his cold damp nose to the other's cheek. And then Skipper went to sleep again. But not Jerry. He lifted the edge of the blanket with his nose and crawled across the shoulder until he was altogether inside. This roused Skipper, who, half-asleep, helped him to curl up.

Still Jerry was not satisfied, and he squirmed around until he lay in the hollow of Skipper's arm, his head resting on Skipper's shoulder, when, with a profound sigh of content, he fell asleep.

Several times the noises made by the boat's crew in trimming the sheets to the shifting draught of air roused Van Horn, and each time, remembering the puppy, he pressed him caressingly with his hollowed arm. And each time, in his sleep, Jerry stirred responsively and snuggled cosily to him.

For all that he was a remarkable puppy, Jerry had his limitations, and he could never know the effect produced on the hard-bitten captain by the soft warm contact of his velvet body. But it made the captain remember back across the years to his own girl babe asleep on his arm. And so poignantly did he remember, that he became wide awake, and many pictures,

beginning, with the girl babe, burned their torment in his brain. No white man in the Solomons knew what he carried about with him, waking and often sleeping; and it was because of these pictures that he had come to the Solomons in a vain effort to erase them.

First, memory-prodded by the soft puppy in his arm, he saw the girl and the mother in the little Harlem flat. Small, it was true, but tight-packed with the happiness of three that made it heaven.

He saw the girl's flaxen-yellow hair darken to her mother's gold as it lengthened into curls and ringlets until finally it became two thick long braids. From striving not to see these many pictures he came even to dwelling upon them in the effort so to fill his consciousness as to keep out the one picture he did not want to see.

He remembered his work, the wrecking car, and the wrecking crew that had toiled under him, and he wondered what had become of Clancey, his right-hand man. Came the long day, when, routed from bed at three in the morning to dig a surface car out of the wrecked show windows of a drug store and get it back on the track, they had laboured all day clearing up a half-dozen smash-ups and arrived at the car house at nine at night just as another call came in.

"Glory be!" said Clancey, who lived in the next block from him. He could see him saying it and wiping the sweat from his grimy face. "Glory be,

'tis a small matter at most, an' right in our neighbourhood--not a dozen blocks away. Soon as it's done we can beat it for home an' let the downtown boys take the car back to the shop."

"We've only to jack her up for a moment," he had answered.

"What is it?" Billy Jaffers, another of the crew, asked.

"Somebody run over--can't get them out," he said, as they swung on board the wrecking-car and started.

He saw again all the incidents of the long run, not omitting the delay caused by hose-carts and a hook-and-ladder running to a cross-town fire, during which time he and Clancey had joked Jaffers over the dates with various fictitious damsels out of which he had been cheated by the night's extra work.

Came the long line of stalled street-cars, the crowd, the police holding it back, the two ambulances drawn up and waiting their freight, and the young policeman, whose beat it was, white and shaken, greeting him with: "It's horrible, man. It's fair sickening. Two of them. We can't get them out. I tried. One was still living, I think."

But he, strong man and hearty, used to such work, weary with the hard day and with a pleasant picture of the bright little flat waiting him a dozen blocks away when the job was done, spoke cheerfully, confidently, saying

that he'd have them out in a jiffy, as he stooped and crawled under the car on hands and knees.

Again he saw himself as he pressed the switch of his electric torch and looked. Again he saw the twin braids of heavy golden hair ere his thumb relaxed from the switch, leaving him in darkness.

"Is the one alive yet?" the shaken policeman asked.

And the question was repeated, while he struggled for will power sufficient to press on the light.

He heard himself reply, "I'll tell you in a minute."

Again he saw himself look. For a long minute he looked.

"Both dead," he answered quietly. "Clancey, pass in a number three jack, and get under yourself with another at the other end of the truck."

He lay on his back, staring straight up at one single star that rocked mistily through a thinning of cloud-stuff overhead. The old ache was in his throat, the old harsh dryness in mouth and eyes. And he knew--what no other man knew--why he was in the Solomons, skipper of the teak-built yacht Arangi, running niggers, risking his head, and drinking more Scotch whiskey than was good for any man.

Not since that night had he looked with warm eyes on any woman. And he had been noted by other whites as notoriously cold toward pickanninnies white or black.

But, having visioned the ultimate horror of memory, Van Horn was soon able to fall asleep again, delightfully aware, as he drowsed off, of Jerry's head on his shoulder. Once, when Jerry, dreaming of the beach at Meringe and of Mister Haggin, Bidy, Terrence, and Michael, set up a low whimpering, Van Horn roused sufficiently to soothe him closer to him, and to mutter ominously: "Any nigger that'd hurt that pup. . . "

At midnight when the mate touched him on the shoulder, in the moment of awakening and before he was awake Van Horn did two things automatically and swiftly. He darted his right hand down to the pistol at his hip, and muttered: "Any nigger that'd hurt that pup . . ."

"That'll be Kopo Point abreast," Borckman explained, as both men stared to windward at the high loom of the land. "She hasn't made more than ten miles, and no promise of anything steady."

"There's plenty of stuff making up there, if it'll ever come down," Van Horn said, as both men transferred their gaze to the clouds drifting with many breaks across the dim stars.

Scarcely had the mate fetched a blanket from below and turned in on deck, than a brisk steady breeze sprang up from off the land, sending the

Arangi through the smooth water at a nine-knot clip. For a time Jerry tried to stand the watch with Skipper, but he soon curled up and dozed off, partly on the deck and partly on Skipper's bare feet.

When Skipper carried him to the blanket and rolled him in, he was quickly asleep again; and he was quickly awake, out of the blanket, and padding after along the deck as Skipper paced up and down. Here began another lesson, and in five minutes Jerry learned it was the will of Skipper that he should remain in the blanket, that everything was all right, and that Skipper would be up and down and near him all the time.

At four the mate took charge of the deck.

"Reeled off thirty miles," Van Horn told him. "But now it is baffling again. Keep an eye for squalls under the land. Better throw the halyards down on deck and make the watch stand by. Of course they'll sleep, but make them sleep on the halyards and sheets."

Jerry roused to Skipper's entrance under the blanket, and, quite as if it were a long-established custom, curled in between his arm and side, and, after one happy sniff and one kiss of his cool little tongue, as Skipper pressed his cheek against him caressingly, dozed off to sleep.

Half an hour later, to all intents and purposes, so far as Jerry could or could not comprehend, the world might well have seemed suddenly coming to an end. What awoke him was the flying leap of Skipper that sent the

blanket one way and Jerry the other. The deck of the Arangi had become a wall, down which Jerry slipped through the roaring dark. Every rope and shroud was thrumming and screeching in resistance to the fierce weight of the squall.

"Stand by main halyards!--Jump!" he could hear Skipper shouting loudly; also he heard the high note of the mainsheet screaming across the sheaves as Van Horn, bending braces in the dark, was swiftly slacking the sheet through his scorching palms with a single turn on the cleat.

While all this, along with many other noises, squealings of boat-boys and shouts of Borckman, was impacting on Jerry's ear-drums, he was still sliding down the steep deck of his new and unstable world. But he did not bring up against the rail where his fragile ribs might well have been broken. Instead, the warm ocean water, pouring inboard across the buried rail in a flood of pale phosphorescent fire, cushioned his fall. A raffle of trailing ropes entangled him as he struck out to swim.

And he swam, not to save his life, not with the fear of death upon him. There was but one idea in his mind. Where was Skipper? Not that he had any thought of trying to save Skipper, nor that he might be of assistance to him. It was the heart of love that drives one always toward the beloved. As the mother in catastrophe tries to gain her babe, as the Greek who, dying, remembered sweet Argos, as soldiers on a stricken field pass with the names of their women upon their lips, so Jerry, in this wreck of a world, yearned toward Skipper.

The squall ceased as abruptly as it had struck. The Arangi righted with a jerk to an even keel, leaving Jerry stranded in the starboard scuppers. He trotted across the level deck to Skipper, who, standing erect on wide-spread legs, the bight of the mainsheet still in his hand, was exclaiming:

"Gott-fer-dang! Wind he go! Rain he no come!"

He felt Jerry's cool nose against his bare calf, heard his joyous sniff, and bent and caressed him. In the darkness he could not see, but his heart warmed with knowledge that Jerry's tail was surely bobbing.

Many of the frightened return boys had crowded on deck, and their plaintive, querulous voices sounded like the sleepy noises of a roost of birds. Borckman came and stood by Van Horn's shoulder, and both men, strung to their tones in the tenseness of apprehension, strove to penetrate the surrounding blackness with their eyes, while they listened with all their ears for any message of the elements from sea and air.

"Where's the rain?" Borckman demanded peevishly. "Always wind first, the rain follows and kills the wind. There is no rain."

Van Horn still stared and listened, and made no answer.

The anxiety of the two men was sensed by Jerry, who, too, was on his

toes. He pressed his cool nose to Skipper's leg, and the rose-kiss of his tongue brought him the salt taste of sea-water.

Skipper bent suddenly, rolled Jerry with quick toughness into the blanket, and deposited him in the hollow between two sacks of yams lashed on deck aft of the mizzenmast. As an afterthought, he fastened the blanket with a piece of rope yarn, so that Jerry was as if tied in a sack.

Scarcely was this finished when the spanker smashed across overhead, the headsails thundered with a sudden filling, and the great mainsail, with all the scope in the boom-tackle caused by Van Horn's giving of the sheet, came across and fetched up to tautness on the tackle with a crash that shook the vessel and heeled her violently to port. This second knock-down had come from the opposite direction, and it was mightier than the first.

Jerry heard Skipper's voice ring out, first, to the mate: "Stand by main-halyards! Throw off the turns! I'll take care of the tackle!"; and, next, to some of the boat's crew: "Batto! you fella slack spanker tackle quick fella! Ranga! you fella let go spanker sheet!"

Here Van Horn was swept off his legs by an avalanche of return boys who had cluttered the deck with the first squall. The squirming mass, of which he was part, slid down into the barbed wire of the port rail beneath the surface of the sea.

Jerry was so secure in his nook that he did not roll away. But when he heard Skipper's commands cease, and, seconds later, heard his cursings in the barbed wire, he set up a shrill yelping and clawed and scratched frantically at the blanket to get out. Something had happened to Skipper. He knew that. It was all that he knew, for he had no thought of himself in the chaos of the ruining world.

But he ceased his yelping to listen to a new noise--a thunderous slatting of canvas accompanied by shouts and cries. He sensed, and sensed wrongly, that it boded ill, for he did not know that it was the mainsail being lowered on the run after Skipper had slashed the boom-tackle across with his sheath-knife.

As the pandemonium grew, he added his own yelping to it until he felt a fumbling hand without the blanket. He stilled and sniffed. No, it was not Skipper. He sniffed again and recognized the person. It was Lerumie, the black whom he had seen rolled on the beach by Bidy only the previous morning, who, still were recently, had kicked him on his stub of a tail, and who not more than a week before he had seen throw a rock at Terrence.

The rope yarn had been parted, and Lerumie's fingers were feeling inside the blanket for him. Jerry snarled his wickedest. The thing was sacrilege. He, as a white man's dog, was taboo to all blacks. He had early learned the law that no nigger must ever touch a white-god's dog.

Yet Lerumie, who was all of evil, at this moment when the world crashed about their ears, was daring to touch him.

And when the fingers touched him, his teeth closed upon them. Next, he was clouted by the black's free hand with such force as to tear his clenched teeth down the fingers through skin and flesh until the fingers went clear.

Raging like a tiny fiend, Jerry found himself picked up by the neck, half-throttled, and flung through the air. And while flying through the air, he continued to squall his rage. He fell into the sea and went under, gulping a mouthful of salt water into his lungs, and came up strangling but swimming. Swimming was one of the things he did not have to think about. He had never had to learn to swim, any more than he had had to learn to breathe. In fact, he had been compelled to learn to walk; but he swam as a matter of course.

The wind screamed about him. Flying froth, driven on the wind's breath, filled his mouth and nostrils and beat into his eyes, stinging and blinding him. In the struggle to breathe he, all unlearned in the ways of the sea, lifted his muzzle high in the air to get out of the suffocating welter. As a result, off the horizontal, the churning of his legs no longer sustained him, and he went down and under perpendicularly. Again he emerged, strangling with more salt water in his windpipe. This time, without reasoning it out, merely moving along the line of least resistance, which was to him the line of greatest comfort, he

straightened out in the sea and continued so to swim as to remain straightened out.

Through the darkness, as the squall spent itself, came the slatting of the half-lowered mainsail, the shrill voices of the boat's crew, a curse of Borckman's, and, dominating all, Skipper's voice, shouting:

"Grab the leech, you fella boys! Hang on! Drag down strong fella! Come in mainsheet two blocks! Jump, damn you, jump!"