

CHAPTER VI

At recognition of Skipper's voice, Jerry, floundering in the stiff and crispering sea that sprang up with the easement of the wind, yelped eagerly and yearningly, all his love for his new-found beloved eloquent in his throat. But quickly all sounds died away as the Arangi drifted from him. And then, in the loneliness of the dark, on the heaving breast of the sea that he recognized as one more of the eternal enemies, he began to whimper and cry plaintively like a lost child.

Further, by the dim, shadowy ways of intuition, he knew his weakness in that merciless sea with no heart of warmth, that threatened the unknowable thing, vaguely but terribly guessed, namely, death. As regarded himself, he did not comprehend death. He, who had never known the time when he was not alive, could not conceive of the time when he would cease to be alive.

Yet it was there, shouting its message of warning through every tissue cell, every nerve quickness and brain sensitivity of him--a totality of sensation that foreboded the ultimate catastrophe of life about which he knew nothing at all, but which, nevertheless, he felt to be the conclusive supreme disaster. Although he did not comprehend it, he apprehended it no less poignantly than do men who know and generalize far more deeply and widely than mere four-legged dogs.

As a man struggles in the throes of nightmare, so Jerry struggled in the vexed, salt-suffocating sea. And so he whimpered and cried, lost child, lost puppy-dog that he was, only half a year existent in the fair world sharp with joy and suffering. And he wanted Skipper. Skipper was a god.

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On board the Arangi, relieved by the lowering of her mainsail, as the fierceness went out of the wind and the cloudburst of tropic rain began to fall, Van Horn and Borckman lurched toward each other in the blackness.

"A double squall," said Van Horn. "Hit us to starboard and to port."

"Must a-split in half just before she hit us," the mate concurred.

"And kept all the rain in the second half--"

Van Horn broke off with an oath.

"Hey! What's the matter along you fella boy?" he shouted to the man at the wheel.

For the ketch, under her spanker which had just then been flat-hauled, had come into the wind, emptying her after-sail and permitting her

headsails to fill on the other tack. The Arangi was beginning to work back approximately over the course she had just traversed. And this meant that she was going back toward Jerry floundering in the sea. Thus, the balance, on which his life titubated, was inclined in his favour by the blunder of a black steersman.

Keeping the Arangi on the new tack, Van Horn set Borckman clearing the mess of ropes on deck, himself, squatting in the rain, undertaking to long-splice the tackle he had cut. As the rain thinned, so that the crackle of it on deck became less noisy, he was attracted by a sound from out over the water. He suspended the work of his hands to listen, and, when he recognized Jerry's wailing, sprang to his feet, galvanized into action.

"The pup's overboard!" he shouted to Borckman. "Back your jib to wind'ard!"

He sprang aft, scattering a cluster of return boys right and left.

"Hey! You fella boat's crew! Come in spanker sheet! Flatten her down good fella!"

He darted a look into the binnacle and took a hurried compass bearing of the sounds Jerry was making.

"Hard down your wheel!" he ordered the helmsman, then leaped to the wheel

and put it down himself, repeating over and over aloud, "Nor'east by east a quarter, nor'east by east a quarter."

Back and peering into the binnacle, he listened vainly for another wail from Jerry in the hope of verifying his first hasty bearing. But not long he waited. Despite the fact that by his manoeuvre the Arangi had been hove to, he knew that windage and sea-driftage would quickly send her away from the swimming puppy. He shouted Borckman to come aft and haul in the whaleboat, while he hurried below for his electric torch and a boat compass.

The ketch was so small that she was compelled to tow her one whaleboat astern on long double painters, and by the time the mate had it hauled in under the stern, Van Horn was back. He was undeterred by the barbed wire, lifting boy after boy of the boat's crew over it and dropping them sprawling into the boat, following himself, as the last, by swinging over on the spanker boom, and calling his last instructions as the painters were cast off.

"Get a riding light on deck, Borckman. Keep her hove to. Don't hoist the mainsail. Clean up the decks and bend the watch tackle on the main boom."

He took the steering-sweep and encouraged the rowers with:

"Washee-washee, good fella, washee-washee!"--which is the beche-de-mer for "row hard."

As he steered, he kept flashing the torch on the boat compass so that he could keep headed north-east by east a quarter east. Then he remembered that the boat compass, on such course, deviated two whole points from the Arangi's compass, and altered his own course accordingly.

Occasionally he bade the rowers cease, while he listened and called for Jerry. He had them row in circles, and work back and forth, up to windward and down to leeward, over the area of dark sea that he reasoned must contain the puppy.

"Now you fella boy listen ear belong you," he said, toward the first.

"Maybe one fella boy hear 'm pickaninny dog sing out, I give 'm that fella boy five fathom calico, two ten sticks tobacco."

At the end of half an hour he was offering "Two ten fathoms calico and ten ten sticks tobacco" to the boy who first heard "pickaninny dog sing out."

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Jerry was in bad shape. Not accustomed to swimming, strangled by the salt water that lapped into his open mouth, he was getting loggy when first he chanced to see the flash of the captain's torch. This, however, he did not connect with Skipper, and so took no more notice of it than he did of the first stars showing in the sky. It never entered his mind

that it might be a star nor even that it might not be a star. He continued to wail and to strangle with more salt water. But when he at length heard Skipper's voice he went immediately wild. He attempted to stand up and to rest his forepaws on Skipper's voice coming out of the darkness, as he would have rested his forepaws on Skipper's leg had he been near. The result was disastrous. Out of the horizontal, he sank down and under, coming up with a new spasm of strangling.

This lasted for a short time, during which the strangling prevented him from answering Skipper's cry, which continued to reach him. But when he could answer he burst forth in a joyous yelp. Skipper was coming to take him out of the stinging, biting sea that blinded his eyes and hurt him to breathe. Skipper was truly a god, his god, with a god's power to save.

Soon he heard the rhythmic clack of the oars on the thole-pins, and the joy in his own yelp was duplicated by the joy in Skipper's voice, which kept up a running encouragement, broken by objurgations to the rowers.

"All right, Jerry, old man. All right, Jerry. All right.--Washee-washee, you fella boy!--Coming, Jerry, coming. Stick it out, old man. Stay with it.--Washee-washee like hell!--Here we are, Jerry. Stay with it. Hang on, old boy, we'll get you.--Easy . . . easy. 'Vast washee."

And then, with amazing abruptness, Jerry saw the whaleboat dimly emerge from the gloom close upon him, was blinded by the stab of the torch full in his eyes, and, even as he yelped his joy, felt and recognized

Skipper's hand clutching him by the slack of the neck and lifting him into the air.

He landed wet and soppily against Skipper's rain-wet chest, his tail bobbing frantically against Skipper's containing arm, his body wriggling, his tongue dabbing madly all over Skipper's chin and mouth and cheeks and nose. And Skipper did not know that he was himself wet, and that he was in the first shock of recurrent malaria precipitated by the wet and the excitement. He knew only that the puppy-dog, given him only the previous morning, was safe back in his arms.

While the boat's crew bent to the oars, he steered with the sweep between his arm and his side in order that he might hold Jerry with the other arm.

"You little son of a gun," he crooned, and continued to croon, over and over. "You little son of a gun."

And Jerry responded with tongue-kisses, whimpering and crying as is the way of lost children immediately after they are found. Also, he shivered violently. But it was not from the cold. Rather was it due to his overstrung, sensitive nerves.

Again on board, Van Horn stated his reasoning to the mate.

"The pup didn't just calmly walk overboard. Nor was he washed overboard.

I had him fast and triced in the blanket with a rope yarn."

He walked over, the centre of the boat's crew and of the three-score return boys who were all on deck, and flashed his torch on the blanket still lying on the yams.

"That proves it. The rope-yarn's cut. The knot's still in it. Now what nigger is responsible?"

He looked about at the circle of dark faces, flashing the light on them, and such was the accusation and anger in his eyes, that all eyes fell before his or looked away.

"If only the pup could speak," he complained. "He'd tell who it was."

He bent suddenly down to Jerry, who was standing as close against his legs as he could, so close that his wet forepaws rested on Skipper's bare feet.

"You know 'm, Jerry, you known the black fella boy," he said, his words quick and exciting, his hand moving in questing circles toward the blacks.

Jerry was all alive on the instant, jumping about, barking with short yelps of eagerness.

"I do believe the dog could lead me to him," Van Horn confided to the mate. "Come on, Jerry, find 'm, sick 'm, shake 'm down. Where is he, Jerry? Find 'm. Find 'm."

All that Jerry knew was that Skipper wanted something. He must find something that Skipper wanted, and he was eager to serve. He pranced about aimlessly and willingly for a space, while Skipper's urging cries increased his excitement. Then he was struck by an idea, and a most definite idea it was. The circle of boys broke to let him through as he raced for'ard along the starboard side to the tight-lashed heap of trade-boxes. He put his nose into the opening where the wild-dog laired, and sniffed. Yes, the wild-dog was inside. Not only did he smell him, but he heard the menace of his snarl.

He looked up to Skipper questioningly. Was it that Skipper wanted him to go in after the wild-dog? But Skipper laughed and waved his hand to show that he wanted him to search in other places for something else.

He leaped away, sniffing in likely places where experience had taught him cockroaches and rats might be. Yet it quickly dawned on him that it was not such things Skipper was after. His heart was wild with desire to serve, and, without clear purpose, he began sniffing legs of black boys.

This brought livelier urgings and encouragements from Skipper, and made him almost frantic. That was it. He must identify the boat's crew and the return boys by their legs. He hurried the task, passing swiftly from

boy to boy, until he came to Lerumie.

And then he forgot that Skipper wanted him to do something. All he knew was that it was Lerumie who had broken the taboo of his sacred person by laying hands on him, and that it was Lerumie who had thrown him overboard.

With a cry of rage, a flash of white teeth, and a bristle of short neck-hair, he sprang for the black. Lerumie fled down the deck, and Jerry pursued amid the laughter of all the blacks. Several times, in making the circuit of the deck, he managed to scratch the flying calves with his teeth. Then Lerumie took to the main rigging, leaving Jerry impotently to rage on the deck beneath him.

About this point the blacks grouped in a semi-circle at a respectful distance, with Van Horn to the fore beside Jerry. Van Horn centred his electric torch on the black in the rigging, and saw the long parallel scratches on the fingers of the hand that had invaded Jerry's blanket. He pointed them out significantly to Borckman, who stood outside the circle so that no black should be able to come at his back.

Skipper picked Jerry up and soothed his anger with:

"Good boy, Jerry. You marked and sealed him. Some dog, you, some big man-dog."

He turned back to Lerumie, illuminating him as he clung in the rigging, and his voice was harsh and cold as he addressed him.

"What name belong along you fella boy?" he demanded.

"Me fella Lerumie," came the chirping, quavering answer.

"You come along Pennduffryn?"

"Me come along Meringe."

Captain Van Horn debated the while he fondled the puppy in his arms. After all, it was a return boy. In a day, in two days at most, he would have him landed and be quit of him.

"My word," he harangued, "me angry along you. Me angry big fella too much along you. Me angry along you any amount. What name you fella boy make 'm pickaninny dog belong along me walk about along water?"

Lerumie was unable to answer. He rolled his eyes helplessly, resigned to receive a whipping such as he had long since bitterly learned white masters were wont to administer.

Captain Van Horn repeated the question, and the black repeated the helpless rolling of his eyes.

"For two sticks tobacco I knock 'm seven bells outa you," the skipper bullied. "Now me give you strong fella talk too much. You look 'm eye belong you one time along this fella dog belong me, I knock 'm seven bells and whole starboard watch outa you. Savve?"

"Me savve," Lerumie, plaintively replied; and the episode was closed.

The return boys went below to sleep in the cabin. Borckman and the boat's crew hoisted the mainsail and put the Arangi on her course. And Skipper, under a dry blanket from below, lay down to sleep with Jerry, head on his shoulder, in the hollow of his arm.