

CHAPTER XII

What happened aboard the Arangi Jerry never knew. He did know that it was a world destroyed, for he saw it destroyed. The boy who had knocked him on the head with the paddle, tied his legs securely and tossed him out on the beach ere he forgot him in the excitement of looting the Arangi.

With great shouting and song, the pretty teak-built yacht was towed in by the long canoes and beached close to where Jerry lay just beyond the confines of the coral-stone walls. Fires blazed on the beach, lanterns were lighted on board, and, amid a great feasting, the Arangi was gutted and stripped. Everything portable was taken ashore, from her pigs of iron ballast to her running gear and sails. No one in Somo slept that night. Even the tiniest of children toddled about the feasting fires or sprawled surfeited on the sands. At two in the morning, at Bashti's command, the shell of the boat was fired. And Jerry, thirsting for water, having whimpered and wailed himself to exhaustion, lying helpless, leg-tied, on his side, saw the floating world he had known so short a time go up in flame and smoke.

And by the light of her burning, old Bashti apportioned the loot. No one of the tribe was too mean to receive nothing. Even the wretched bush-slaves, who had trembled through all the time of their captivity from fear of being eaten, received each a clay pipe and several sticks of

tobacco. The main bulk of the trade goods, which was not distributed, Bashti had carried up to his own large grass house. All the wealth of gear was stored in the several canoe houses. While in the devil devil houses the devil devil doctors set to work curing the many heads over slow smudges; for, along with the boat's crew there were a round dozen of No-ola return boys and several Malu boys which Van Horn had not yet delivered.

Not all these had been slain, however. Bashti had issued stern injunctions against wholesale slaughter. But this was not because his heart was kind. Rather was it because his head was shrewd. Slain they would all be in the end. Bashti had never seen ice, did not know it existed, and was unversed in the science of refrigeration. The only way he knew to keep meat was to keep it alive. And in the biggest canoe house, the club house of the stags, where no Mary might come under penalty of death by torture, the captives were stored.

Tied or trussed like fowls or pigs, they were tumbled on the hard-packed earthen floor, beneath which, shallowly buried, lay the remains of ancient chiefs, while, overhead, in wrappings of grass mats, swung all that was left of several of Bashti's immediate predecessors, his father latest among them and so swinging for two full generations. Here, too, since she was to be eaten and since the taboo had no bearing upon one condemned to be cooked, the thin little Mary from the lazarette was tumbled trussed upon the floor among the many blacks who had teased and mocked her for being fattened by Van Horn for the eating.

And to this canoe house Jerry was also brought to join the others on the floor. Agno, chief of the devil devil doctors, had stumbled across him on the beach, and, despite the protestations of the boy who claimed him as personal trove, had ordered him to the canoe house. Carried past the fires of the feasting, his keen nostrils had told him of what the feast consisted. And, new as the experience was, he had bristled and snarled and struggled against his bonds to be free. Likewise, at first, tossed down in the canoe house, he had bristled and snarled at his fellow captives, not realizing their plight, and, since always he had been trained to look upon niggers as the eternal enemy, considering them responsible for the catastrophe to the Arangi and to Skipper.

For Jerry was only a little dog, with a dog's limitations, and very young in the world. But not for long did he throat his rage at them. In vague ways it was borne in upon him that they, too, were not happy. Some had been cruelly wounded, and kept up a moaning and groaning. Without any clearness of concept, nevertheless Jerry had a realization that they were as painfully circumstanced as himself. And painful indeed was his own circumstance. He lay on his side, the cords that bound his legs so tight as to bite into his tender flesh and shut off the circulation. Also, he was perishing for water, and panted, dry-tongued, dry-mouthed, in the stagnant heat.

A dolorous place it was, this canoe house, filled with groans and sighs, corpses beneath the floor and composing the floor, creatures soon to be

corpses upon the floor, corpses swinging in aerial sepulchre overhead, long black canoes, high-ended like beaked predatory monsters, dimly looming in the light of a slow fire where sat an ancient of the tribe of Somo at his interminable task of smoke-curing a bushman's head. He was withered, and blind, and senile, gibbering and mowing like some huge ape as ever he turned and twisted, and twisted back again, the suspended head in the pungent smoke, and handful by handful added rotten punk of wood to the smudge fire.

Sixty feet in the clear, the dim fire occasionally lighted, through shadowy cross-beams, the ridge-pole that was covered with sennit of coconut that was braided in barbaric designs of black and white and that was stained by the smoke of years almost to a monochrome of dirty brown. From the lofty cross-beams, on long sennit strings, hung the heads of enemies taken aforetime in jungle raid and sea foray. The place breathed the very atmosphere of decay and death, and the imbecile ancient, curing in the smoke the token of death, was himself palsiedly shaking into the disintegration of the grave.

Toward daylight, with great shouting and heaving and pull and haul, scores of Somo men brought in another of the big war canoes. They made way with foot and hand, kicking and thrusting dragging and shoving, the bound captives to either side of the space which the canoe was to occupy. They were anything but gentle to the meat with which they had been favoured by good fortune and the wisdom of Bashti.

For a time they sat about, all pulling at clay pipes and chirruping and laughing in queer thin falsettos at the events of the night and the previous afternoon. Now one and now another stretched out and slept without covering; for so, directly under the path of the sun, had they slept nakedly from the time they were born.

Remained awake, as dawn paled the dark, only the grievously wounded or the too-tightly bound, and the decrepit ancient who was not so old as Bashti. When the boy who had stunned Jerry with his paddle-blade and who claimed him as his own stole into the canoe house, the ancient did not hear him. Being blind, he did not see him. He continued gibbering and chuckling dementedly, to twist the bushman's head back and forth and to feed the smudge with punk-wood. This was no night-task for any man, nor even for him who had forgotten how to do aught else. But the excitement of cutting out the Arangi had been communicated to his addled brain, and, with vague reminiscent flashes of the strength of life triumphant, he shared deliriously in this triumph of Somo by applying himself to the curing of the head that was in itself the concrete expression of triumph.

But the twelve-year-old lad who stole in and cautiously stepped over the sleepers and threaded his way among the captives, did so with his heart in his mouth. He knew what taboos he was violating. Not old enough even to leave his father's grass roof and sleep in the youths' canoe house, much less to sleep with the young bachelors in their canoe house, he knew that he took his life, with all of its dimly guessed mysteries and arrogances, in his hand thus to trespass into the sacred precinct of the

full-made, full-realized, full-statured men of Somo.

But he wanted Jerry and he got him. Only the lean little Mary, trussed for the cooking, staring through her wide eyes of fear, saw the boy pick Jerry up by his tied legs and carry him out and away from the booty of meat of which she was part. Jerry's heroic little heart of courage would have made him snarl and resent such treatment of handling had he not been too exhausted and had not his mouth and throat been too dry for sound. As it was, miserably and helplessly, not half himself, a puppet dreamer in a half-nightmare, he knew, as a restless sleeper awakening between vexing dreams, that he was being transported head-downward out of the canoe house that stank of death, through the village that was only less noisome, and up a path under lofty, wide-spreading trees that were beginning languidly to stir with the first breathings of the morning wind.