

CHAPTER XIII

The boy's name, as Jerry was to learn, was Lamai, and to Lamai's house Jerry was carried. It was not much of a house, even as cannibal grass-houses go. On an earthen floor, hard-packed of the filth of years, lived Lamai's father and mother and a spawn of four younger brothers and sisters. A thatched roof that leaked in every heavy shower leaned to a wabby ridge-pole over the floor. The walls were even more pervious to a driving rain. In fact, the house of Lamai, who was the father of Lumai, was the most miserable house in all Somo.

Lumai, the house-master and family head, unlike most Malaitans, was fat. And of his fatness it would seem had been begotten his good nature with its allied laziness. But as the fly in his ointment of jovial irresponsibility was his wife, Lenerengo--the prize shrew of Somo, who was as lean about the middle and all the rest of her as her husband was rotund; who was as remarkably sharp-spoken as he was soft-spoken; who was as ceaselessly energetic as he was unceasingly idle; and who had been born with a taste for the world as sour in her mouth as it was sweet in his.

The boy merely peered into the house as he passed around it to the rear, and he saw his father and mother, at opposite corners, sleeping without covering, and, in the middle of the floor, his four naked brothers and sisters curled together in a tangle like a litter of puppies. All about

the house, which in truth was scarcely more than an animal lair, was an earthly paradise. The air was spicily and sweetly heavy with the scents of wild aromatic plants and gorgeous tropic blooms. Overhead three breadfruit trees interlaced their noble branches. Banana and plantain trees were burdened with great bunches of ripening fruit. And huge, golden melons of the papaia, ready for the eating, globuled directly from the slender-trunked trees not one-tenth the girth of the fruits they bore. And, for Jerry, most delightful of all, there was the gurgle and splash of a brooklet that pursued its invisible way over mossy stones under a garmenture of tender and delicate ferns. No conservatory of a king could compare with this wild wantonness of sun-generous vegetation.

Maddened by the sound of the water, Jerry had first to endure an embracing and hugging from the boy, who, squatted on his hams, rocked back and forth and mumbled a strange little crooning song. And Jerry, lacking articulate speech, had no way of telling him of the thirst of which he was perishing.

Next, Lamai tied him securely with a sennit cord about the neck and untied the cords that bit into his legs. So numb was Jerry from lack of circulation, and so weak from lack of water through part of a tropic day and all of a tropic night, that he stood up, tottered and fell, and, time and again, essaying to stand, floundered and fell. And Lamai understood, or tentatively guessed. He caught up a coconut calabash attached to the end of a stick of bamboo, dipped into the greenery of ferns, and presented to Jerry the calabash brimming with the precious water.

Jerry lay on his side at first as he drank, until, with the moisture, life flowed back into the parched channels of him, so that, soon, still weak and shaky, he was up and braced on all his four wide-spread legs and still eagerly lapping. The boy chuckled and chirped his delight in the spectacle, and Jerry found surcease and easement sufficient to enable him to speak with his tongue after the heart-eloquent manner of dogs. He took his nose out of the calabash and with his rose-ribbon strip of tongue licked Lamai's hand. And Lamai, in ecstasy over this establishment of common speech, urged the calabash back under Jerry's nose, and Jerry drank again.

He continued to drink. He drank until his sun-shrunken sides stood out like the walls of a balloon, although longer were the intervals from the drinking in which, with his tongue of gratefulness, he spoke against the black skin of Lamai's hand. And all went well, and would have continued to go well, had not Lamai's mother, Lenerengo, just awakened, stepped across her black litter of progeny and raised her voice in shrill protest against her eldest born's introducing of one more mouth and much more nuisance into the household.

A squabble of human speech followed, of which Jerry knew no word but of which he sensed the significance. Lamai was with him and for him. Lamai's mother was against him. She shrilled and shrewed her firm conviction that her son was a fool and worse because he had neither the consideration nor the silly sense of a fool's solicitude for a

hard-worked mother. She appealed to the sleeping Lumai, who awoke heavily and fatly, who muttered and mumbled easy terms of Somo dialect to the effect that it was a most decent world, that all puppy dogs and eldest-born sons were right delightful things to possess, that he had never yet starved to death, and that peace and sleep were the finest things that ever befell the lot of mortal man--and, in token thereof, back into the peace of sleep, he snuggled his nose into the biceps of his arm for a pillow and proceeded to snore.

But Lamai, eyes stubbornly sullen, with mutinous foot-stampings and a perfect knowledge that all was clear behind him to leap and flee away if his mother rushed upon him, persisted in retaining his puppy dog. In the end, after an harangue upon the worthlessness of Lamai's father, she went back to sleep.

Ideas beget ideas. Lamai had learned how astonishingly thirsty Jerry had been. This engendered the idea that he might be equally hungry. So he applied dry branches of wood to the smouldering coals he dug out of the ashes of the cooking-fire, and builded a large fire. Into this, as it gained strength, he placed many stones from a convenient pile, each fire-blackened in token that it had been similarly used many times. Next, hidden under the water of the brook in a netted hand-bag, he brought to light the carcass of a fat wood-pigeon he had snared the previous day. He wrapped the pigeon in green leaves, and, surrounding it with the hot stones from the fire, covered pigeon and stones with earth.

When, after a time, he removed the pigeon and stripped from it the scorched wrappings of leaves, it gave forth a scent so savoury as to prick up Jerry's ears and set his nostrils to quivering. When the boy had torn the steaming carcass across and cooled it, Jerry's meal began; nor did the meal cease till the last sliver of meat had been stripped and tongued from the bones and the bones crunched and crackled to fragments and swallowed. And throughout the meal Lamai made love to Jerry, crooning over and over his little song, and patting and caressing him.

On the other hand, refreshed by the water and the meat, Jerry did not reciprocate so heartily in the love-making. He was polite, and received his petting with soft-shining eyes, tail-waggings and the customary body-wrigglings; but he was restless, and continually listened to distant sounds and yearned away to be gone. This was not lost upon the boy, who, before he curled himself down to sleep, securely tied to a tree the end of the cord that was about Jerry's neck.

After straining against the cord for a time, Jerry surrendered and slept. But not for long. Skipper was too much with him. He knew, and yet he did not know, the irretrievable ultimate disaster to Skipper. So it was, after low whinings and whimperings, that he applied his sharp first-teeth to the sennit cord and chewed upon it till it parted.

Free, like a homing pigeon, he headed blindly and directly for the beach and the salt sea over which had floated the Arangi, on her deck Skipper in command. Somo was largely deserted, and those that were in it were

sunk in sleep. So no one vexed him as he trotted through the winding pathways between the many houses and past the obscene kingposts of totemic heraldry, where the forms of men, carved from single tree trunks, were seated in the gaping jaws of carved sharks. For Somo, tracing back to Somo its founder, worshipped the shark-god and the salt-water deities as well as the deities of the bush and swamp and mountain.

Turning to the right until he was past the sea-wall, Jerry came on down to the beach. No Arangi was to be seen on the placid surface of the lagoon. All about him was the debris of the feast, and he scented the smouldering odours of dying fires and burnt meat. Many of the feasters had not troubled to return to their houses, but lay about on the sand, in the mid-morning sunshine, men, women, and children and entire families, wherever they had yielded to slumber.

Down by the water's edge, so close that his fore-feet rested in the water, Jerry sat down, his heart bursting for Skipper, thrust his nose heavenward at the sun, and wailed his woe as dogs have ever wailed since they came in from the wild woods to the fires of men.

And here Lamai found him, hushed his grief against his breast with cuddling arms, and carried him back to the grass house by the brook. Water he offered, but Jerry could drink no more. Love he offered, but Jerry could not forget his torment of desire for Skipper. In the end, disgusted with so unreasonable a puppy, Lamai forgot his love in his boyish savageness, clouted Jerry over the head, right side and left, and

tied him as few whites men's dogs have ever been tied. For, in his way, Lamai was a genius. He had never seen the thing done with any dog, yet he devised, on the spur of the moment, the invention of tying Jerry with a stick. The stick was of bamboo, four feet long. One end he tied shortly to Jerry's neck, the other end, just as shortly to a tree. All that Jerry's teeth could reach was the stick, and dry and seasoned bamboo can defy the teeth of any dog.