

CHAPTER XIV

For many days, tied by the stick, Jerry remained Lamai's prisoner. It was not a happy time, for the house of Lumai was a house of perpetual bickering and quarrelling. Lamai fought pitched battles with his brothers and sisters for teasing Jerry, and these battles invariably culminated in Lenerengo taking a hand and impartially punishing all her progeny.

After that, as a matter of course and on general principles, she would have it out with Lumai, whose soft voice always was for quiet and repose, and who always, at the end of a tongue-lashing, took himself off to the canoe house for a couple of days. Here, Lenerengo was helpless. Into the canoe house of the stags no Mary might venture. Lenerengo had never forgotten the fate of the last Mary who had broken the taboo. It had occurred many years before, when she was a girl, and the recollection was ever vivid of the unfortunate woman hanging up in the sun by one arm for all of a day, and for all of a second day by the other arm. After that she had been feasted upon by the stags of the canoe house, and for long afterward all women had talked softly before their husbands.

Jerry did discover liking for Lamai, but it was not strong nor passionate. Rather was it out of gratitude, for only Lamai saw to it that he received food and water. Yet this boy was no Skipper, no Mister Haggin. Nor was he even a Derby or a Bob. He was that inferior

man-creature, a nigger, and Jerry had been thoroughly trained all his brief days to the law that the white men were the superior two-legged gods.

He did not fail to recognize, however, the intelligence and power that resided in the niggers. He did not reason it out. He accepted it. They had power of command over other objects, could propel sticks and stones through the air, could even tie him a prisoner to a stick that rendered him helpless. Inferior as they might be to the white-gods, still they were gods of a sort.

It was the first time in his life that Jerry had been tied up, and he did not like it. Vainly he hurt his teeth, some of which were loosening under the pressure of the second teeth rising underneath. The stick was stronger than he. Although he did not forget Skipper, the poignancy of his loss faded with the passage of time, until uppermost in his mind was the desire to be free.

But when the day came that he was freed, he failed to take advantage of it and scuttle away for the beach. It chanced that Lenerengo released him. She did it deliberately, desiring to be quit of him. But when she untied Jerry, he stopped to thank her, wagging his tail and smiling up at her with his hazel-brown eyes. She stamped her foot at him to be gone, and uttered a harsh and intimidating cry. This Jerry did not understand, and so unused was he to fear that he could not be frightened into running away. He ceased wagging his tail, and, though he continued to look up at

her, his eyes no longer smiled. Her action and noise he identified as unfriendly, and he became alert and watchful, prepared for whatever hostile act she might next commit.

Again she cried out and stamped her foot. The only effect on Jerry was to make him transfer his watchfulness to the foot. This slowness in getting away, now that she had released him, was too much for her short temper. She launched the kick, and Jerry, avoiding it, slashed her ankle.

War broke on the instant, and that she might have killed Jerry in her rage was highly probable had not Lamai appeared on the scene. The stick untied from Jerry's neck told the tale of her perfidy and incensed Lamai, who sprang between and deflected the blow with a stone poi-pounder that might have brained Jerry.

Lamai was now the one in danger of grievous damage, and his mother had just knocked him down with a clout alongside the head when poor Lumai, roused from sleep by the uproar, ventured out to make peace. Lenerengo, as usual, forgot everything else in the fiercer pleasure of berating her spouse.

The conclusion of the affair was harmless enough. The children stopped their crying, Lamai retied Jerry with the stick, Lenerengo harangued herself breathless, and Lumai departed with hurt feelings for the canoe house where stags could sleep in peace and Marys pestered not.

That night, in the circle of his fellow stags, Lumai recited his sorrows and told the cause of them--the puppy dog which had come on the Arangi. It chanced that Agno, chief of the devil devil doctors, or high priest, heard the tale, and recollected that he had sent Jerry to the canoe house along with the rest of the captives. Half an hour later he was having it out with Lamai. Beyond doubt, the boy had broken the taboos, and privily he told him so, until Lamai trembled and wept and squirmed abjectly at his feet, for the penalty was death.

It was too good an opportunity to get a hold over the boy for Agno to misplay it. A dead boy was worth nothing to him, but a living boy whose life he carried in his hand would serve him well. Since no one else knew of the broken taboo, he could afford to keep quiet. So he ordered Lamai forthright down to live in the youths' canoe house, there to begin his novitiate in the long series of tasks, tests and ceremonies that would graduate him into the bachelors' canoe house and half way along toward being a recognized man.

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In the morning, obeying the devil devil doctor's commands, Lenerengo tied Jerry's feet together, not without a struggle in which his head was banged about and her hands were scratched. Then she carried him down through the village on the way to deliver him at Agno's house. On the way, in the open centre of the village where stood the kingposts, she

left him lying on the ground in order to join in the hilarity of the population.

Not only was old Bashti a stern law-giver, but he was a unique one. He had selected this day at the one time to administer punishment to two quarrelling women, to give a lesson to all other women, and to make all his subjects glad once again that they had him for ruler. Tiha and Wiwau, the two women, were squat and stout and young, and had long been a scandal because of their incessant quarrelling. Bashti had set them a race to run. But such a race. It was side-splitting. Men, women, and children, beholding, howled with delight. Even elderly matrons and greybeards with a foot in the grave screeched and shrilled their joy in the spectacle.

The half-mile course lay the length of the village, through its heart, from the beach where the Arangi had been burned to the beach at the other end of the sea-wall. It had to be covered once in each direction by Tiha and Wiwau, in each case one of them urging speed on the other and the other desiring speed that was unattainable.

Only the mind of Bashti could have devised the show. First, two round coral stones, weighing fully forty pounds each, were placed in Tiha's arms. She was compelled to clasp them tightly against her sides in order that they might not roll to the ground. Behind her, Bashti placed Wiwau, who was armed with a bristle of bamboo splints mounted on a light long shaft of bamboo. The splints were sharp as needles, being indeed the

needles used in tattooing, and on the end of the pole they were intended to be applied to Tiha's back in the same way that men apply ox-goads to oxen. No serious damage, but much pain, could be inflicted, which was just what Bashti had intended.

Wiwau prodded with the goad, and Tiha stumbled and wobbled in gymnastic efforts to make speed. Since, when the farther beach had been reached, the positions would be reversed and Wiwau would carry the stones back while Tiha prodded, and since Wiwau knew that for what she gave Tiha would then try to give more, Wiwau exerted herself to give the utmost while yet she could. The perspiration ran down both their faces. Each had her partisans in the crowd, who encouraged and heaped ridicule with every prod.

Ludicrous as it was, behind it lay iron savage law. The two stones were to be carried the entire course. The woman who prodded must do so with conviction and dispatch. The woman who was prodded must not lose her temper and fight her tormentor. As they had been duly forewarned by Bashti, the penalty for infraction of the rules he had laid down was staking out on the reef at low tide to be eaten by the fish-sharks.

As the contestants came opposite where Bashti and Aora his prime minister stood, they redoubled their efforts, Wiwau goading enthusiastically, Tiha jumping with every thrust to the imminent danger of dropping the stones. At their heels trooped the children of the village and all the village dogs, whooping and yelping with excitement.

"Long time you fella Tiha no sit 'm along canoe," Aora bawled to the victim and set Bashti cackling again.

At an unusually urgent prod, Tiha dropped a stone and was duly goaded while she sank to her knees and with one arm scooped it in against her side, regained her feet, and waddled on.

Once, in stark mutiny at so much pain, she deliberately stopped and addressed her tormentor.

"Me cross along you too much," she told Wiwau. "Bime by, close--"

But she never completed the threat. A warmly administered prod broke through her stoicism and started her tottering along.

The shouting of the rabble ebbed away as the queer race ran on toward the beach. But in a few minutes it could be heard flooding back, this time Wiwau panting with the weight of coral stone and Tiha, a-smart with what she had endured, trying more than to even the score.

Opposite Bashti, Wiwau lost one of the stones, and, in the effort to recover it, lost the other, which rolled a dozen feet away from the first. Tiha became a whirlwind of avenging fury. And all Somo went wild. Bashti held his lean sides with merriment while tears of purest joy ran down his prodigiously wrinkled cheeks.

And when all was over, quoth Bashti to his people: "Thus shall all women fight when they desire over much to fight."

Only he did not say it in this way. Nor did he say it in the Somo tongue. What he did say was in beche-de-mer, and his words were:

"Any fella Mary he like 'm fight, all fella Mary along Somo fight 'm this fella way."