CHAPTER XV

For some time after the conclusion of the race, Bashti stood talking with his head men, Agno among them. Lenerengo was similarly engaged with several old cronies. As Jerry lay off to one side where she had forgotten him, the wild-dog he had bullied on the Arangi came up and sniffed at him. At first he sniffed at a distance, ready for instant flight. Then he drew cautiously closer. Jerry watched him with smouldering eyes. At the moment wild-dog's nose touched him, he uttered a warning growl. Wild-dog sprang back and whirled away in headlong flight for a score of yards before he learned that he was not pursued.

Again he came back cautiously, as it was the instinct in him to stalk wild game, crouching so close to the ground that almost his belly touched. He lifted and dropped his feet with the lithe softness of a cat, and from time to time glanced to right and to left as if in apprehension of some flank attack. A noisy outburst of boys' laughter in the distance caused him to crouch suddenly down, his claws thrust into the ground for purchase, his muscles tense springs for the leap he knew not in what direction, from the danger he knew not what that might threaten him. Then he identified the noise, know that no harm impended, and resumed his stealthy advance on the Irish terrier.

What might have happened there is no telling, for at that moment Bashti's eyes chanced to rest on the golden puppy for the first time since the

capture of the Arangi. In the rush of events Bashti had forgotten the puppy.

"What name that fella dog?" he cried out sharply, causing wild-dog to crouch down again and attracting Lenerengo's attention.

She cringed in fear to the ground before the terrible old chief and quavered a recital of the facts. Her good-for-nothing boy Lamai had picked the dog from the water. It had been the cause of much trouble in her house. But now Lamai had gone to live with the youths, and she was carrying the dog to Agno's house at Agno's express command.

"What name that dog stop along you?" Bashti demanded directly of Agno.

"Me kai-kai along him," came the answer. "Him fat fella dog. Him good fella dog kai-kai."

Into Bashti's alert old brain flashed an idea that had been long maturing.

"Him good fella dog too much," he announced. "Better you eat 'm bush fella dog," he advised, pointing at wild-dog.

Agno shook his head. "Bush fella dog no good kai-kai."

"Bush fella dog no good too much," was Bashti's judgment. "Bush fella

dog too much fright. Plenty fella bush dog too much fright. White marster's dog no fright. Bush dog no fight. White marster's dog fight like hell. Bush dog run like hell. You look 'm eye belong you, you see."

Bashti stepped over to Jerry and cut the cords that tied his legs. And Jerry, upon his feet in a surge, was for once in too great haste to pause to give thanks. He hurled himself after wild-dog, caught him in mid-flight, and rolled him over and over in a cloud of dust. Ever wild-dog strove to escape, and ever Jerry cornered him, rolled him, and bit him, while Bashti applauded and called on his head men to behold.

By this time Jerry had become a raging little demon. Fired by all his wrongs, from the bloody day on the Arangi and the loss of Skipper down to this latest tying of his legs, he was avenging himself on wild-dog for everything. The owner of wild-dog, a return boy, made the mistake of trying to kick Jerry away. Jerry was upon him in a flash scratching his calves with his teeth, in the suddenness of his onslaught getting between the black's legs and tumbling him to the ground.

"What name!" Bashti cried in a rage at the offender, who lay fear-stricken where he had fallen, trembling for what next words might fall from his chief's lips.

But Bashti was already doubling with laughter at sight of wild-dog running for his life down the street with Jerry a hundred feet behind and

tearing up the dust.

As they disappeared, Bashti expounded his idea. If men planted banana trees, it ran, what they would get would be bananas. If they planted yams, yams would be produced, not sweet potatoes or plantains, but yams, nothing but yams. The same with dogs. Since all black men's dogs were cowards, all the breeding of all black men's dogs would produce cowards. White men's dogs were courageous fighters. When they were bred they produced courageous fighters. Very well, and to the conclusion, namely, here was a white man's dog in their possession. The height of foolishness would be to eat it and to destroy for all time the courage that resided in it. The wise thing to do was to regard it as a seed dog, to keep it alive, so that in the coming generations of Somo dogs its courage would be repeated over and over and spread until all Somo dogs would be strong and brave.

Further, Bashti commanded his chief devil devil doctor to take charge of Jerry and guard him well. Also, he sent his word forth to all the tribe that Jerry was taboo. No man, woman, or child was to throw spear or stone at him, strike him with club or tomahawk, or hurt him in any way.

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Thenceforth, and until Jerry himself violated one of the greatest of taboos, he had a happy time in Agno's gloomy grass house. For Bashti, unlike most chiefs, ruled his devil devil doctors with an iron hand.

Other chiefs, even Nau-hau of Langa-Langa, were ruled by their devil devil doctors. For that matter, the population of Somo believed that Bashti was so ruled. But the Somo folk did not know what went on behind the scenes, when Bashti, a sheer infidel, talked alone now with one doctor and now with another.

In these private talks he demonstrated that he knew their game as well as they did, and that he was no slave to the dark superstitions and gross impostures with which they kept the people in submission. Also, he exposited the theory, as ancient as priests and rulers, that priests and rulers must work together in the orderly governance of the people. He was content that the people should believe that the gods, and the priests who were the mouth-pieces of the gods, had the last word, but he would have the priests know that in private the last word was his. Little as they believed in their trickery, he told them, he believed less.

He knew taboo, and the truth behind taboo. He explained his personal taboos, and how they came to be. Never must he eat clam-meat, he told Agno. It was so selected by himself because he did not like clam-meat. It was old Nino, high priest before Agno, with an ear open to the voice of the shark-god, who had so laid the taboo. But, he, Bashti, had privily commanded Nino to lay the taboo against clam-meat upon him, because he, Bashti, did not like clam-meat and had never liked clam-meat.

Still further, since he had lived longer than the oldest priest of them, his had been the appointing of every one of them. He knew them, had made

them, had placed them, and they lived by his pleasure. And they would continue to take program from him, as they had always taken it, or else they would swiftly and suddenly pass. He had but to remind them of the passing of Kori, the devil devil doctor who had believed himself stronger than his chief, and who, for his mistake, had screamed in pain for a week ere what composed him had ceased to scream and for ever ceased to scream.

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In Agno's large grass house was little light and much mystery. There was no mystery there for Jerry, who merely knew things, or did not know things, and who never bothered about what he did not know. Dried heads and other cured and mouldy portions of human carcasses impressed him no more than the dried alligators and dried fish that contributed to the festooning of Agno's dark abode.

Jerry found himself well cared for. No children nor wives cluttered the devil devil doctor's house. Several old women, a fly-flapping girl of eleven, and two young men who had graduated from the canoe house of the youths and who were studying priestcraft under the master, composed the household and waited upon Jerry. Food of the choicest was his. After Agno had eaten first-cut of pig, Jerry was served second. Even the two acolytes and the fly-flapping maid ate after him, leaving the debris for the several old women. And, unlike the mere bush dogs, who stole shelter from the rain under overhanging eaves, Jerry was given a dry place under the roof where the heads of bushmen and of forgotten sandalwood traders

hung down from above in the midst of a dusty confusion of dried viscera of sharks, crocodile skulls, and skeletons of Solomons rats that measured two-thirds of a yard in length from bone-tip of nose to bone-tip of tail.

A number of times, all freedom being his, Jerry stole away across the village to the house of Lumai. But never did he find Lamai, who, since Skipper, was the only human he had met that had placed a bid to his heart. Jerry never appeared openly, but from the thick fern of the brookside observed the house and scented out its occupants. No scent of Lamai did he ever obtain, and, after a time, he gave up his vain visits and accepted the devil devil doctor's house as his home and the devil devil doctor as his master.

But he bore no love for this master. Agno, who had ruled by fear so long in his house of mystery, did not know love. Nor was affection any part of him, nor was geniality. He had no sense of humour, and was as frostily cruel as an icicle. Next to Bashti he stood in power, and all his days had been embittered in that he was not first in power. He had no softness for Jerry. Because he feared Bashti he feared to harm Jerry.

The months passed, and Jerry got his firm, massive second teeth and increased in weight and size. He came as near to being spoiled as is possible for a dog. Himself taboo, he quickly learned to lord it over the Somo folk and to have his way and will in all matters. No one dared to dispute with him with stick or stone. Agno hated him--he knew that; but also he gleaned the knowledge that Agno feared him and would not dare

to hurt him. But Agno was a chill-blooded philosopher and bided his time, being different from Jerry in that he possessed human prevision and could adjust his actions to remote ends.

From the edge of the lagoon, into the waters of which, remembering the crocodile taboo he had learned on Meringe, he never ventured, Jerry ranged to the outlying bush villages of Bashti's domain. All made way for him. All fed him when he desired food. For the taboo was upon him, and he might unchidden invade their sleeping-mats or food calabashes. He might bully as he pleased, and be arrogant beyond decency, and there was no one to say him nay. Even had Bashti's word gone forth that if Jerry were attacked by the full-grown bush dogs, it was the duty of the Somo folk to take his part and kick and stone and beat the bush dogs. And thus his own four-legged cousins came painfully to know that he was taboo.

And Jerry prospered. Fat to stupidity he might well have become, had it not been for his high-strung nerves and his insatiable, eager curiosity. With the freedom of all Somo his, he was ever a-foot over it, learning its metes and bounds and the ways of the wild creatures that inhabited its swamps and forests and that did not acknowledge his taboo.

Many were his adventures. He fought two battles with the wood-rats that were almost of his size, and that, being mature and wild and cornered, fought him as he had never been fought before. The first he had killed, unaware that it was an old and feeble rat. The second, in prime of

vigour, had so punished him that he crawled back, weak and sick to the devil devil doctor's house, where, for a week, under the dried emblems of death, he licked his wounds and slowly came back to life and health.

He stole upon the dugong and joyed to stampede that silly timid creature by sudden ferocious onslaughts which he knew himself to be all sound and fury, but which tickled him and made him laugh with the consciousness of playing a successful joke. He chased the unmigratory tropi-ducks from their shrewd-hidden nests, walked circumspectly among the crocodiles hauled out of water for slumber, and crept under the jungle-roof and spied upon the snow-white saucy cockatoos, the fierce ospreys, the heavy-flighted buzzards, the lories and kingfishers, and the absurdly garrulous little pygmy parrots.

Thrice, beyond the boundaries of Somo, he encountered the little black bushmen who were more like ghosts than men, so noiseless and unperceivable were they, and who, guarding the wild-pig runways of the jungle, missed spearing him on the three memorable occasions. As the wood-rats had taught him discretion, so did these two-legged lurkers in the jungle twilight. He had not fought with them, although they tried to spear him. He quickly came to know that these were other folk than Somo folk, that his taboo did not extend to them, and that, even of a sort, they were two-legged gods who carried flying death in their hands that reached farther than their hands and bridged distance.

As he ran the jungle, so Jerry ran the village. No place was sacred to

him. In the devil devil houses, where, before the face of mystery men and women crawled in fear and trembling, he walked stiff-legged and bristling; for fresh heads were suspended there--heads his eyes and keen nostrils identified as those of once living blacks he had known on board the Arangi. In the biggest devil devil house he encountered the head of Borckman, and snarled at it, without receiving response, in recollection of the fight he had fought with the schnapps-addled mate on the deck of the Arangi.

Once, however, in Bashti's house, he chanced upon all that remained on earth of Skipper. Bashti had lived very long, had lived most wisely and thought much, and was thoroughly aware that, having lived far beyond the span of man his own span was very short. And he was curious about it all--the meaning and purpose of life. He loved the world and life, into which he had been fortunately born, both as to constitution and to place, which latter, for him, had been the high place over hie priests and people. He was not afraid to die, but he wondered if he might live again. He discounted the silly views of the tricky priests, and he was very much alone in the chaos of the confusing problem.

For he had lived so long, and so luckily, that he had watched the waning to extinction of all the vigorous appetites and desires. He had known wives and children, and the keen-edge of youthful hunger. He had seen his children grow to manhood and womanhood and become fathers and grandfathers, mothers and grandmothers. But having known woman, and love, and fatherhood, and the belly-delights of eating, he had passed on

beyond. Food? Scarcely did he know its meaning, so little did he eat. Hunger, that bit him like a spur when he was young and lusty, had long since ceased to stir and prod him. He ate out of a sense of necessity and duty, and cared little for what he ate, save for one thing: the eggs of the megapodes that were, in season, laid in his private, personal, strictly tabooed megapode laying-yard. Here was left to him his last lingering flesh thrill. As for the rest, he lived in his intellect, ruling his people, seeking out data from which to induce laws that would make his people stronger and rivet his people's clinch upon life.

But he realized clearly the difference between that abstract thing, the tribe, and that most concrete of things, the individual. The tribe persisted. Its members passed. The tribe was a memory of the history and habits of all previous members, which the living members carried on until they passed and became history and memory in the intangible sum that was the tribe. He, as a member, soon or late, and late was very near, must pass. But pass to what? There was the rub. And so it was, on occasion, that he ordered all forth from his big grass house, and, alone with his problem, lowered from the roof-beams the matting-wrapped parcels of heads of men he had once seen live and who had passed into the mysterious nothingness of death.

Not as a miser had he collected these heads, and not as a miser counting his secret hoard did he ponder these heads, unwrapped, held in his two hands or lying on his knees. He wanted to know. He wanted to know what he guessed they might know, now that they had long since gone into the

darkness that rounds the end of life.

Various were the heads Bashti thus interrogated--in his hands, on his knees, in his dim-lighted grasshouse, while the overhead sun blazed down and the fading south-east sighed through the palm-fronds and breadfruit branches. There was the head of a Japanese--the only one he had ever seen or heard of. Before he was born it had been taken by his father. Ill-cured it was, and battered and marred with ancientness and rough usage. Yet he studied its features, decided that it had once had two lips as live as his own and a mouth as vocal and hungry as his had often been in the past. Two eyes and a nose it had, a thatched crown of roof, and a pair of ears like to his own. Two legs and a body it must once have had, and desires and lusts. Heats of wrath and of love, so he decided, had also been its once on a time when it never thought to die.

A head that amazed him much, whose history went back before his father's and grandfather's time, was the head of a Frenchman, although Bashti knew it not. Nor did he know it was the head of La Perouse, the doughty old navigator, who had left his bones, the bones of his crews, and the bones of his two frigates, the Astrolabe and the Boussole, on the shores of the cannibal Solomons. Another head--for Bashti was a confirmed head-collector--went back two centuries before La Perouse to Alvaro de Mendana, the Spaniard. It was the head of one of Mendana's armourers, lost in a beach scrimmage to one of Bashti's remote ancestors.

Still another head, the history of which was vague, was a white woman's

head. What wife of what navigator there was no telling. But earrings of gold and emerald still clung to the withered ears, and the hair, two-thirds of a fathom long, a shimmering silk of golden floss, flowed from the scalp that covered what had once been the wit and will of her that Bashti reasoned had in her ancient time been quick with love in the arms of man.

Ordinary heads, of bushmen and salt-water men, and even of schnapps-drinking white men like Borckman, he relegated to the canoe houses and devil devil houses. For he was a connoisseur in the matter of heads. There was a strange head of a German that lured him much. Red-bearded it was, and red-haired, but even in dried death there was an ironness of feature and a massive brow that hinted to him of mastery of secrets beyond his ken. No more than did he know it once had been a German, did he know it was a German professor's head, an astronomer's head, a head that in its time had carried within its content profound knowledge of the stars in the vasty heavens, of the way of star-directed ships upon the sea, and of the way of the earth on its starry course through space that was a myriad million times beyond the slight concept of space that he possessed.

Last of all, sharpest of bite in his thought, was the head of Van Horn. And it was the head of Van Horn that lay on his knees under his contemplation when Jerry, who possessed the freedom of Somo, trotted into Bashti's grass house, scented and identified the mortal remnant of Skipper, wailed first in woe over it, then bristled into rage.

Bashti did not notice at first, for he was deep in interrogation of Van Horn's head. Only short months before this head had been alive, he pondered, quick with wit, attached to a two-legged body that stood erect and that swaggered about, a loincloth and a belted automatic around its middle, more powerful, therefrom, than Bashti, but with less wit, for had not he, Bashti, with an ancient pistol, put darkness inside that skull where wit resided, and removed that skull from the soddenly relaxed framework of flesh and bone on which it had been supported to tread the earth and the deck of the Arangi?

What had become of that wit? Had that wit been all of the arrogant, upstanding Van Horn, and had it gone out as the flickering flame of a splinter of wood goes out when it is quite burnt to a powder-fluff of ash? Had all that made Van Horn passed like the flame of the splinter? Had he passed into the darkness for ever into which the beast passed, into which passed the speared crocodile, the hooked bonita, the netted mullet, the slain pig that was fat to eat? Was Van Horn's darkness as the darkness of the blue-bottle fly that his fly-flapping maid smashed and disrupted in mid-flight of the air?--as the darkness into which passed the mosquito that knew the secret of flying, and that, despite its perfectness of flight, with almost an unthought action, he squashed with the flat of his hand against the back of his neck when it bit him?

What was true of this white man's head, so recently alive and erectly dominant, Bashti knew was true of himself. What had happened to this

white man, after going through the dark gate of death, would happen to him. Wherefore he questioned the head, as if its dumb lips might speak to him from out of the mystery and tell him the meaning of life, and the meaning of death that inevitably laid life by the heels.

Jerry's long-drawn howl of woe at sight and scent of all that was left of Skipper, roused Bashti from his reverie. He looked at the sturdy, golden-brown puppy, and immediately included it in his reverie. It was alive. It was like man. It knew hunger, and pain, anger and love. It had blood in its veins, like man, that a thrust of a knife could make redly gush forth and denude it to death. Like the race of man it loved its kind, and birthed and breast-nourished its young. And passed. Ay, it passed; for many a dog, as well as a human, had he, Bashti, devoured in his hey-dey of appetite and youth, when he knew only motion and strength, and fed motion and strength out of the calabashes of feasting.

But from woe Jerry went on into anger. He stalked stiff-legged, with a snarl writhen on his lips, and with recurrent waves of hair-bristling along his back and up his shoulders and neck. And he stalked not the head of Skipper, where rested his love, but Bashti, who held the head on his knees. As the wild wolf in the upland pasture stalks the mare mother with her newly delivered colt, so Jerry stalked Bashti. And Bashti, who had never feared death all his long life and who had laughed a joke with his forefinger blown off by the bursting flint-lock pistol, smiled gleefully to himself, for his glee was intellectual and in admiration of this half-grown puppy whom he rapped on the nose with a short, hardwood

stick and compelled to keep distance. No matter how often and fiercely Jerry rushed him, he met the rush with the stick, and chuckled aloud, understanding the puppy's courage, marvelling at the stupidity of life that impelled him continually to thrust his nose to the hurt of the stick, and that drove him, by passion of remembrance of a dead man to dare the pain of the stick again and again.

This, too, was life, Bashti meditated, as he deftly rapped the screaming puppy away from him. Four-legged life it was, young and silly and hot, heart-prompted, that was like any young man making love to his woman in the twilight, or like any young man fighting to the death with any other young man over a matter of passion, hurt pride, or thwarted desire. As much as in the dead head of Van Horn or of any man, he realized that in this live puppy might reside the clue to existence, the solution of the riddle.

So he continued to rap Jerry on the nose away from him, and to marvel at the persistence of the vital something within him that impelled him to leap forward always to the stick that hurt him and made him recoil. The valour and motion, the strength and the unreasoning of youth he knew it to be, and he admired it sadly, and envied it, willing to exchange for it all his lean grey wisdom if only he could find the way.

"Some dog, that dog, sure some dog," he might have uttered in Van Horn's fashion of speech. Instead, in beche-de-mer, which was as habitual to him as his own Somo speech, he thought:

"My word, that fella dog no fright along me."

But age wearied sooner of the play, and Bashti put an end to it by rapping Jerry heavily behind the ear and stretching him out stunned. The spectacle of the puppy, so alive and raging the moment before, and, the moment after, lying as if dead, caught Bashti's speculative fancy. The stick, with a single sharp rap of it, had effected the change. Where had gone the anger and wit of the puppy? Was that all it was, the flame of the splinter that could be quenched by any chance gust of air? One instant Jerry had raged and suffered, snarled and leaped, willed and directed his actions. The next instant he lay limp and crumpled in the little death of unconsciousness. In a brief space, Bashti knew, consciousness, sensation, motion, and direction would flow back into the wilted little carcass. But where, in the meanwhile, at the impact of the stick, had gone all the consciousness, and sensitiveness, and will?

Bashti sighed wearily, and wearily wrapped the heads in their grass-mat coverings--all but Van Horn's; and hoisted them up in the air to hang from the roof-beams--to hang as he debated, long after he was dead and out if it, even as some of them had so hung from long before his father's and his grandfather's time. The head of Van Horn he left lying on the floor, while he stole out himself to peer in through a crack and see what next the puppy might do.

Jerry quivered at first, and in the matter of a minute struggled feebly

to his feet where he stood swaying and dizzy; and thus Bashti, his eye to the crack, saw the miracle of life flow back through the channels of the inert body and stiffen the legs to upstanding, and saw consciousness, the mystery of mysteries, flood back inside the head of bone that was covered with hair, smoulder and glow in the opening eyes, and direct the lips to writhe away from the teeth and the throat to vibrate to the snarl that had been interrupted when the stick smashed him down into darkness.

And more Bashti saw. At first, Jerry looked about for his enemy, growling and bristling his neck hair. Next, in lieu of his enemy, he saw Skipper's head, and crept to it and loved it, kissing with his tongue the hard cheeks, the closed lids of the eyes that his love could not open, the immobile lips that would not utter one of the love-words they had been used to utter to the little dog.

Next, in profound desolation, Jerry set down before Skipper's head, pointed his nose toward the lofty ridge-pole, and howled mournfully and long. Finally, sick and subdued, he crept out of the house and away to the house of his devil devil master, where, for the round of twenty-four hours, he waked and slept and dreamed centuries of nightmares.

For ever after in Somo, Jerry feared that grass house of Bashti. He was not in fear of Bashti. His fear was indescribable and unthinkable. In that house was the nothingness of what once was Skipper. It was the token of the ultimate catastrophe to life that was wrapped and twisted into every fibre of his heredity. One step advanced beyond this, Jerry's

uttermost, the folk of Somo, from the contemplation of death, had achieved concepts of the spirits of the dead still living in immaterial and supersensuous realms.

And thereafter Jerry hated Bashti intensely, as a lord of life who possessed and laid on his knees the nothingness of Skipper. Not that Jerry reasoned it out. All dim and vague it was, a sensation, an emotion, a feeling, an instinct, an intuition, name it mistily as one will in the misty nomenclature of speech wherein words cheat with the impression of definiteness and lie to the brain an understanding which the brain does not possess.