

CHAPTER XVI

Three months more passed; the north-west monsoon, after its half-year of breath, had given way to the south-east trade; and Jerry still continued to live in the house of Agno and to have the run of the village. He had put on weight, increased in size, and, protected by the taboo, had become self-confident almost to lordliness. But he had found no master. Agno had never won a heart-throb from him. For that matter, Agno had never tried to win him. Nor, in his cold-blooded way, had he ever betrayed his hatred of Jerry.

Not even the several old women, the two acolytes, and the fly-flapping maid in Agno's house dreamed that the devil devil doctor hated Jerry. Nor did Jerry dream it. To him Agno was a neutral sort of person, a person who did not count. Those of the household Jerry recognized as slaves or servants to Agno, and he knew when they fed him that the food he ate proceeded from Agno and was Agno's food. Save himself, taboo protected, all of them feared Agno, and his house was truly a house of fear in which could bloom no love for a stray puppy dog. The eleven-years' maid might have placed a bid for Jerry's affection, had she not been deterred at the start by Agno, who reprimanded her sternly for presuming to touch or fondle a dog of such high taboo.

What delayed Agno's plot against Jerry for the half-year of the monsoon was the fact that the season of egg-laying for the megapodes in Bashti's

private laying-yard did not begin until the period of the south-east trades. And Agno, having early conceived his plot, with the patience that was characteristic of him was content to wait the time.

Now the megapode of the Solomons is a distant cousin to the brush turkey of Australia. No larger than a large pigeon, it lays an egg the size of a domestic duck's. The megapode, with no sense of fear, is so silly that it would have been annihilated hundreds of centuries before had it not been preserved by the taboos of the chiefs and priests. As it was, the chiefs were compelled to keep cleared patches of sand for it, and to fence out the dogs. It buried its eggs two feet deep, depending on the heat of the sun for the hatching. And it would dig and lay, and continue to dig and lay, while a black dug out its eggs within two or three feet of it.

The laying-yard was Bashti's. During the season, he lived almost entirely on megapode eggs. On rare occasion he even had megapodes that were near to finishing their laying killed for his kai-kai. This was no more than a whim, however, prompted by pride in such exclusiveness of diet only possible to one in such high place. In truth, he cared no more for megapode meat than for any other meat. All meat tasted alike to him, for his taste for meat was one of the vanished pleasures in the limbo of memory.

But the eggs! He liked to eat them. They were the only article of food he liked to eat, They gave him reminiscent thrills of the ancient food-

desires of his youth. Actually was he hungry when he had megapode eggs, and the well-nigh dried founts of saliva and of internal digestive juices were stimulated to flow again at contemplation of a megapode egg prepared for the eating. Wherefore, he alone of all Somo, barred rigidly by taboo, ate megapode eggs. And, since the taboo was essentially religious, to Agno was deputed the ecclesiastical task of guarding and cherishing and caring for the royal laying-yard.

But Agno was no longer young. The acid bite of belly desire had long since deserted him, and he, too, ate from a sense of duty, all meat tasting alike to him. Megapode eggs only stung his taste alive and stimulated the flow of his juices. Thus it was that he broke the taboos he imposed, and, privily, before the eyes of no man, woman, or child ate the eggs he stole from Bashti's private preserve.

So it was, as the laying season began, and when both Bashti and Agno were acutely egg-yearning after six months of abstinence, that Agno led Jerry along the taboo path through the mangroves, where they stepped from root to root above the muck that ever steamed and stank in the stagnant air where the wind never penetrated.

The path, which was not an ordinary path and which consisted, for a man, in wide strides from root to root, and for a dog in four-legged leaps and plunges, was new to Jerry. In all his ranging of Somo, because it was so unusual a path, he had never discovered it. The unbending of Agno, thus to lead him, was a surprise and a delight to Jerry, who, without

reasoning about it, in a vague way felt the preliminary sensations that possibly Agno, in a small way, might prove the master which his dog's soul continually sought.

Emerging from the swamp of mangroves, abruptly they came upon a patch of sand, still so salt and inhospitable from the sea's deposit that no great trees rooted and interposed their branches between it and the sun's heat. A primitive gate gave entrance, but Agno did not take Jerry through it. Instead, with weird little chirrupings of encouragement and excitation, he persuaded Jerry to dig a tunnel beneath the rude palisade of fence. He helped with his own hands, dragging out the sand in quantities, but imposing on Jerry the leaving of the indubitable marks of a dog's paws and claws.

And, when Jerry was inside, Agno, passing through the gate, enticed and seduced him into digging out the eggs. But Jerry had no taste of the eggs. Eight of them Agno sucked raw, and two of them he tucked whole into his arm-pits to take back to his house of the devil devils. The shells of the eight he sucked he broke to fragments as a dog might break them, and, to build the picture he had long visioned, of the eighth egg he reserved a tiny portion which he spread, not on Jerry's jowls where his tongue could have erased it, but high up about his eyes and above them, where it would remain and stand witness against him according to the plot he had planned.

Even worse, in high priestly sacrilege, he encouraged Jerry to attack a

megapode hen in the act of laying. And, while Jerry slew it, knowing that the lust of killing, once started, would lead him to continue killing the silly birds, Agno left the laying-yard to hot-foot it through the mangrove swamp and present to Bashti an ecclesiastical quandary. The taboo of the dog, as he expounded it, had prevented him from interfering with the taboo dog when it ate the taboo egg-layers. Which taboo might be the greater was beyond him. And Bashti, who had not tasted a megapode egg in half a year, and who was keen for the one recrudescence of thrill of remote youth still left to him, led the way back across the mangrove swamp at so prodigious a pace as quite to wind his high priest who was many years younger than he.

And he arrived at the laying-yard and caught Jerry, red-pawed and red-mouthed, in the midst of his fourth kill of an egg-layer, the raw yellow yolk of the portion of one egg, plastered by Agno to represent many eggs, still about his eyes and above his eyes to the bulge of his forehead. In vain Bashti looked about for one egg, the six months' hunger stronger than ever upon him in the thick of the disaster. And Jerry, under the consent and encouragement of Agno, wagged his tail to Bashti in a bid for recognition, of prowess, and laughed with his red-dripping jowls and yellow plastered eyes.

Bashti did not rage as he would have done had he been alone. Before the eyes of his chief priest he disdained to lower himself to such commonness of humanity. Thus it is always with those in the high places, ever temporising with their natural desires, ever masking their ordinariness

under a show of disinterest. So it was that Bashti displayed no vexation at the disappointment to his appetite. Agno was a shade less controlled, for he could not quite chase away the eager light in his eyes. Bashti glimpsed it and mistook it for simple curiosity of observation not guessing its real nature. Which goes to show two things of those in the high place: one, that they may fool those beneath them; the other, that they may be fooled by those beneath them.

Bashti regarded Jerry quizzically, as if the matter were a joke, and shot a careless side glance to note the disappointment in his priest's eyes. Ah, ha, thought Bashti; I have fooled him.

"Which is the high taboo?" Agno queried in the Somo tongue.

"As you should ask. Of a surety, the megapode."

"And the dog?" was Agno's next query.

"Must pay for breaking the taboo. It is a high taboo. It is my taboo. It was so placed by Somo, the ancient father and first ruler of all of us, and it has been ever since the taboo of the chiefs. The dog must die."

He paused and considered the matter, while Jerry returned to digging the sand where the scent was auspicious. Agno made to stop him, but Bashti interposed.

"Let be," he said. "Let the dog convict himself before my eyes."

And Jerry did, uncovering two eggs, breaking them and lapping that portion of their precious contents which was not spilled and wasted in the sand. Bashti's eyes were quite lack-lustre as he asked

"The feast of dogs for the men is to-day?"

"To-morrow, at midday," Agno answered. "Already are the dogs coming in. There will be at least fifty of them."

"Fifty and one," was Bashti's verdict, as he nodded at Jerry.

The priest made a quick movement of impulse to capture Jerry.

"Why now?" the chief demanded. "You will but have to carry him through the swamp. Let him trot back on his own legs, and when he is before the canoe house tie his legs there."

Across the swamp and approaching the canoe house, Jerry, trotting happily at the heels of the two men, heard the wailing and sorrowing of many dogs that spelt unmistakable woe and pain. He developed instant suspicion that was, however, without direct apprehension for himself. And at that moment, his ears cocked forward and his nose questing for further information in the matter, Bashti seized him by the nape of the neck and

held him in the air while Agno proceeded to tie his legs.

No whimper, nor sound, nor sign of fear, came from Jerry--only choking growls of ferociousness, intermingled with snarls of anger, and a belligerent up-clawing of hind-legs. But a dog, clutched by the neck from the back, can never be a match for two men, gifted with the intelligence and deftness of men, each of them two-handed with four fingers and an opposable thumb to each hand.

His fore-legs and hind-legs tied lengthwise and crosswise, he was carried head-downward the short distance to the place of slaughter and cooking, and flung to the earth in the midst of the score or more of dogs similarly tied and helpless. Although it was mid-afternoon, a number of them had so lain since early morning in the hot sun. They were all bush dogs or wild-dogs, and so small was their courage that their thirst and physical pain from cords drawn too tight across veins and arteries, and their dim apprehension of the fate such treatment foreboded, led them to whimper and wail and howl their despair and suffering.

The next thirty hours were bad hours for Jerry. The word had gone forth immediately that the taboo on him had been removed, and of the men and boys none was so low as to do him reverence. About him, till night-fall, persisted a circle of teasers and tormenters. They harangued him for his fall, sneered and jeered at him, rooted him about contemptuously with their feet, made a hollow in the sand out of which he could not roll and desposited him in it on his back, his four tied legs sticking

ignominiously in the air above him.

And all he could do was growl and rage his helplessness. For, unlike the other dogs, he would not howl or whimper his pain. A year old now, the last six months had gone far toward maturing him, and it was the nature of his breed to be fearless and stoical. And, much as he had been taught by his white masters to hate and despise niggers, he learned in the course of these thirty hours an especially bitter and undying hatred.

His torturers stopped at nothing. Even they brought wild-dog and set him upon Jerry. But it was contrary to wild-dog's nature to attack an enemy that could not move, even if the enemy was Jerry who had so often bullied him and rolled him on the deck. Had Jerry, with a broken leg or so, still retained power of movement, then he would have mauled him, perhaps to death. But this utter helplessness was different. So the expected show proved a failure. When Jerry snarled and growled, wild-dog snarled and growled back and strutted and bullied around him, him to persuasion of the blacks could induce but no sink his teeth into Jerry.

The killing-ground before the canoe house was a bedlam of horror. From time to time more bound dogs were brought in and flung down. There was a continuous howling, especially contributed to by those which had lain in the sun since early morning and had no water. At times, all joined in, the control of the quietest breaking down before the wave of excitement and fear that swept spasmodically over all of them. This howling, rising and falling, but never ceasing, continued throughout the night, and by

morning all were suffering from the intolerable thirst.

The sun blazing down upon them in the white sand and almost parboiling them, brought anything but relief. The circle of torturers formed about Jerry again, and again was wreaked upon him all abusive contempt for having lost his taboo. What drove Jerry the maddest were not the blows and physical torment, but the laughter. No dog enjoys being laughed at, and Jerry, least of all, could restrain his wrath when they jeered him and cackled close in his face.

Although he had not howled once, his snarling and growling, combined with his thirst, had hoarsened his throat and dried the mucous membranes of his mouth so that he was incapable, except under the sheerest provocation, of further sound. His tongue hung out of his mouth, and the eight o'clock sun began slowly to burn it.

It was at this time that one of the boys cruelly outraged him. He rolled Jerry out of the hollow in which he had lain all night on his back, turned him over on his side, and presented to him a small calabash filled with water. Jerry lapped it so fanatically that not for half a minute did he become aware that the boy had squeezed into it many hot seeds of ripe red peppers. The circle shrieked with glee, and what Jerry's thirst had been before was as nothing compared with this new thirst to which had been added the stinging agony of pepper.

Next in event, and a most important event it was to prove, came Nalasu.

Nalasu was an old man of three-score years, and he was blind, walking with a large staff with which he prodded his path. In his free hand he carried a small pig by its tied legs.

"They say the white master's dog is to be eaten," he said in the Somo speech. "Where is the white master's dog? Show him to me."

Agno, who had just arrived, stood beside him as he bent over Jerry and examined him with his fingers. Nor did Jerry offer to snarl or bite, although the blind man's hands came within reach of his teeth more than once. For Jerry sensed no enmity in the fingers that passed so softly over him. Next, Nalasu felt over the pig, and several times, as if calculating, alternated between Jerry and the pig.

Nalasu stood up and voiced judgment:

"The pig is as small as the dog. They are of a size, but the pig has more meat on it for the eating. Take the pig and I shall take the dog."

"Nay," said Agno. "The white master's dog has broken the taboo. It must be eaten. Take any other dog and leave the pig. Take a big dog."

"I will have the white master's dog," Nalasu persisted. "Only the white master's dog and no other."

The matter was at a deadlock when Bashti chanced upon the scene and stood

listening.

"Take the dog, Nalasu," he said finally. "It is a good pig, and I shall myself eat it."

"But he has broken the taboo, your great taboo of the laying-yard, and must go to the eating," Agno interposed quickly.

Too quickly, Bashti thought, while a vague suspicion arose in his mind of he knew not what.

"The taboo must be paid in blood and cooking," Agno continued.

"Very well," said Bashti. "I shall eat the small pig. Let its throat be cut and its body know the fire."

"I but speak the law of the taboo. Life must pay for the breaking."

"There is another law," Bashti grinned. "Long has it been since ever Somo built these walls that life may buy life."

"But of life of man and life of woman," Agno qualified.

"I know the law," Bashti held steadily on. "Somo made the law. Never has it been said that animal life may not buy animal life."

"It has never been practised," was the devil devil doctor's fling.

"And for reason enough," the old chief retorted. "Never before has a man been fool enough to give a pig for a dog. It is a young pig, and it is fat and tender. Take the dog, Nalasu. Take the dog now."

But the devil devil doctor was not satisfied.

"As you said, O Bashti, in your very great wisdom, he is the seed dog of strength and courage. Let him be slain. When he comes from the fire, his body shall be divided into many small pieces so that every man may eat of him and thereby get his portion of strength and courage. Better is it for Somo that its men be strong and brave rather than its dogs."

But Bashti held no anger against Jerry. He had lived too long and too philosophically to lay blame on a dog for breaking a taboo which it did not know. Of course, dogs often were slain for breaking the taboos. But he allowed this to be done because the dogs themselves in nowise interested him, and because their deaths emphasized the sacredness of the taboo. Further, Jerry had more than slightly interested him. Often, since, Jerry had attacked him because of Van Horn's head, he had pondered the incident. Baffling as it was, as all manifestations of life were baffling, it had given him food for thought. Then there was his admiration for Jerry's courage and that inexplicable something in him that prevented him crying out from the pain of the stick. And, without thinking of it as beauty, the beauty of line and colour of Jerry had

insensibly penetrated him with a sense of pleasantness. It was good to look upon.

There was another angle to Bashti's conduct. He wondered why his devil devil doctor so earnestly desired a mere dog's death. There were many dogs. Then why this particular dog? That the weight of something was on the other's mind was patent, although what it was Bashti could not gauge, guess--unless it might be revenge incubated the day he had prevented Agno from eating the dog. If such were the case, it was a state of mind he could not tolerate in any of his tribespeople. But whatever was the motive, guarding as he always did against the unknown, he thought it well to discipline his priest and demonstrate once again whose word was the last word in Somo. Wherefore Bashti replied:

"I have lived long and eaten many pigs. What man may dare say that the many pigs have entered into me and made me a pig?"

He paused and cast a challenging eye around the circle of his audience; but no man spoke. Instead, some men grinned sheepishly and were restless on their feet, while Agno's expression advertised sturdy unbelief that there was anything pig-like about his chief.

"I have eaten much fish," Bashti continued. "Never has one scale of a fish grown out on my skin. Never has a gill appeared on my throat. As you all know, by the looking, never have I sprouted one fin out of my backbone.--Nalasu, take the dog.--Aga, carry the pig to my house. I

shall eat it to-day.--Agno, let the killing of the dogs begin so that the canoe-men shall eat at due time."

Then, as he turned to go, he lapsed into beche-de-mer English and flung sternly over his shoulder, "My word, you make 'm me cross along you."