CHAPTER XVII

As blind Nalasu slowly plodded away, with one hand tapping the path before him and with the other carrying Jerry head-downward suspended by his tied legs, Jerry heard a sudden increase in the wild howling of the dogs as the killing began and they realized that death was upon them.

But, unlike the boy Lamai, who had known no better, the old man did not carry Jerry all the way to his house. At the first stream pouring down between the low hills of the rising land, he paused and put Jerry down to drink. And Jerry knew only the delight of the wet coolness on his tongue, all about his mouth, and down his throat. Nevertheless, in his subconsciousness was being planted the impression that, kinder than Lamai, than Agno, than Bashti, this was the kindest black he had encountered in Somo.

When he had drunk till for the moment he could drink no more, he thanked Nalasu with his tongue--not warmly nor ecstatically as had it been Skipper's hand, but with due gratefulness for the life-giving draught. The old man chuckled in a pleased way, rolled Jerry's parched body into the water, and, keeping his head above the surface, rubbed the water into his dry skin and let him lie there for long blissful minutes.

From the stream to Nalasu's house, a goodly distance, Nalasu still carried him with bound legs, although not head-downward but clasped in

one arm against his chest. His idea was to love the dog to him. For Nalasu, having sat in the lonely dark for many years, had thought far more about the world around him and knew it far better than had he been able to see it. For his own special purpose he had need of a dog. Several bush dogs he had tried, but they had shown little appreciation of his kindness and had invariably run away. The last had remained longest because he had treated it with the greatest kindness, but run away it had before he had trained it to his purpose. But the white master's dog, he had heard, was different. It never ran away in fear, while it was said to be more intelligent than the dogs of Somo.

The invention Lamai had made of tying Jerry with a stick had been noised abroad in the village, and by a stick, in Nalasu's house, Jerry found himself again tied. But with a difference. Never once was the blind man impatient, while he spent hours each day in squatting on his hams and petting Jerry. Yet, had he not done this, Jerry, who ate his food and who was growing accustomed to changing his masters, would have accepted Nalasu for master. Further, it was fairly definite in Jerry's mind, after the devil devil doctor's tying him and flinging him amongst the other helpless dogs on the killing-ground, that all mastership of Agno had ceased. And Jerry, who had never been without a master since his first days in the world, felt the imperative need of a master.

So it was, when the day came that the stick was untied from him, that Jerry remained, voluntarily in Nalasu's house. When the old man was satisfied there would be no running away, he began Jerry's training. By

slow degrees he advanced the training until hours a day were devoted to it.

First of all Jerry learned a new name for himself, which was Bao, and he was taught to respond to it from an ever-increasing distance no matter how softly it was uttered, and Nalasu continued to utter it more softly until it no longer was a spoken word, but a whisper. Jerry's ears were keen, but Nalasu's, from long use, were almost as keen.

Further, Jerry's own hearing was trained to still greater acuteness. Hours at a time, sitting by Nalasu or standing apart from him, he was taught to catch the slightest sounds or rustlings from the bush. Still further, he was taught to differentiate between the bush noises and between the ways he growled warnings to Nalasu. If a rustle took place that Jerry identified as a pig or a chicken, he did not growl at all. If he did not identify the noise, he growled fairly softly. But if the noise were made by a man or boy who moved softly and therefore suspiciously, Jerry learned to growl loudly; if the noise were loud and careless, then Jerry's growl was soft.

It never entered Jerry's mind to question why he was taught all this. He merely did it because it was this latest master's desire that he should. All this, and much more, at a cost of interminable time and patience, Nalasu taught him, and much more he taught him, increasing his vocabulary so that, at a distance, they could hold quick and sharply definite conversations.

Thus, at fifty feet away, Jerry would "Whuff!" softly the information that there was a noise he did not know; and Nalasu, with different sibilances, would hiss to him to stand still, to whuff more softly, or to keep silent, or to come to him noiselessly, or to go into the bush and investigate the source of the strange noise, or, barking loudly, to rush and attack it.

Perhaps, if from the opposite direction Nalasu's sharp ears alone caught a strange sound, he would ask Jerry if he had heard it. And Jerry, alert to his toes to listen, by an alteration in the quantity or quality of his whuff, would tell Nalasu that he did not hear; next, that he did hear; and, perhaps finally, that it was a strange dog, or a wood-rat, or a man, or a boy--all in the softest of sounds that were scarcely more than breath-exhalations, all monosyllables, a veritable shorthand of speech.

Nalasu was a strange old man. He lived by himself in a small grass house on the edge of the village. The nearest house was quite a distance away, while his own stood in a clearing in the thick jungle which approached no where nearer than sixty feet. Also, this cleared space he kept continually free from the fast-growing vegetation. Apparently he had no friends. At least no visitors ever came to his dwelling. Years had passed since he discouraged the last. Further, he had no kindred. His wife was long since dead, and his three sons, not yet married, in a foray behind the bounds of Somo had lost their heads in the jungle runways of the higher hills and been devoured by their bushman slayers.

For a blind man he was very busy. He asked favour of no one and was self-supporting. In his house-clearing he grew yams, sweet potatoes, and taro. In another clearing--because it was his policy to have no trees close to his house--he had plantains, bananas, and half a dozen coconut palms. Fruits and vegetables he exchanged down in the village for meat and fish and tobacco.

He spent a good portion of his time on Jerry's education, and, on occasion, would make bows and arrows that were so esteemed by his tribespeople as to command a steady sale. Scarcely a day passed in which he did not himself practise with bow and arrow. He shot only by direction of sound; and whenever a noise or rustle was heard in the jungle, and when Jerry had informed him of its nature, he would shoot an arrow at it. Then it was Jerry's duty cautiously to retrieve the arrow had it missed the mark.

A curious thing about Nalasu was that he slept no more than three hours in the twenty-four, that he never slept at night, and that his brief daylight sleep never took place in the house. Hidden in the thickest part of the neighbouring jungle was a sort of nest to which led no path. He never entered nor left by the same way, so that the tropic growth on the rich soil, being so rarely trod upon, ever obliterated the slightest sign of his having passed that way. Whenever he slept, Jerry was trained to remain on guard and never to go to sleep.

Reason enough there was and to spare for Nalasu's infinite precaution. The oldest of his three sons had slain one, Ao, in a quarrel. Ao had been one of six brothers of the family of Anno which dwelt in one of the upper villages. According to Somo law, the Anno family was privileged to collect the blood-debt from the Nalasu family, but had been balked of it by the deaths of Nalasu's three sons in the bush. And, since the Somo code was a life for a life, and since Nalasu alone remained alive of his family, it was well known throughout the tribe that the Annos would never be content until they had taken the blind man's life.

But Nalasu had been famous as a great fighter, as well as having been the progenitor of three such warlike sons. Twice had the Annos sought to collect, the first time while Nalasu still retained his eyesight. Nalasu had discovered their trap, circled about it, and in the rear encountered and slain Anno himself, the father, thus doubling the blood-debt.

Then had come his accident. While refilling many-times used Snider cartridges, an explosion of black powder put out both his eyes. Immediately thereafter, while he sat nursing his wounds, the Annos had descended upon him--just what he had expected. And for which he had made due preparation. That night two uncles and another brother stepped on poisoned thorns and died horribly. Thus the sum of lives owing the Annos had increased to five, with only a blind man from whom to collect.

Thenceforth the Annos had feared the thorns too greatly to dare again, although ever their vindictiveness smouldered and they lived in hope of

the day when Nalasu's head should adorn their ridgepole. In the meantime the state of affairs was not that of a truce but of a stalemate. The old man could not proceed against them, and they were afraid to proceed against him. Nor did the day come until after Jerry's adoption, when one of the Annos made an invention the like of which had never been known in all Malaita.