CHAPTER XIX

And had Bashti hastened delivery of the wives by one day, or by even two days, Nalasu would have entered the feared, purgatory of matrimony. But Bashti kept his word, and on the third day was too busy, with a more momentous problem, to deliver Bubu and Nena to the blind old man who apprehensively waited their coming. For the morning of the third day all the summits of leeward Malaita smoked into speech. A warship was on the coast--so the tale ran; a big warship that was heading in through the reef islands at Langa-Langa. The tale grew. The warship was not stopping at Langa-Langa. The warship was not stopping at Binu. It was directing its course toward Somo.

Nalasu, blind, could not see this smoke speech written in the air. Because of the isolation of his house, no one came and told him. His first warning was when shrill voices of women, cries of children, and wailings of babes in nameless fear came to him from the main path that led from the village to the upland boundaries of Somo. He read only fear and panic from the sounds, deduced that the village was fleeing to its mountain fastnesses, but did not know the cause of the flight.

He called Jerry to him and instructed him to scout to the great banyan tree, where Nalasu's path and the main path joined, and to observe and report. And Jerry sat under the banyan tree and observed the flight of all Somo. Men, women, and children, the young and the aged, babes at

breast and patriarchs leaning on sticks and staffs passed before his eyes, betraying the greatest haste and alarm. The village dogs were as frightened, whimpering and whining as they ran. And the contagion of terror was strong upon Jerry. He knew the prod of impulse to join in this rush away from some unthinkably catastrophic event that impended and that stirred his intuitive apprehensions of death. But he mastered the impulse with his sense of loyalty to the blind man who had fed him and caressed him for a long six months.

Back with Nalasu, sitting between his knees, he made his report. It was impossible for him to count more than five, although he knew the fleeing population numbered many times more than five. So he signified five men, and more; five women, and more five children, and more; five babies, and more; five dogs, and more--even of pigs did he announce five and more. Nalasu's ears told him that it was many, many times more, and he asked for names. Jerry know the names of Bashti, of Agno, and of Lamai, and Lumai. He did not pronounce them with the slightest of resemblance to their customary soundings, but pronounced them in the whiff-whuff of shorthand speech that Nalasu had taught him.

Nalasu named over many other names that Jerry knew by ear but could not himself evoke in sound, and he answered yes to most of them by simultaneously nodding his head and advancing his right paw. To some names he remained without movement in token that he did not know them. And to other names, which he recognized, but the owners of which he had not seen, he answered no by advancing his left paw.

And Nalasu, beyond knowing that something terrible was impending--something horribly more terrible than any foray of neighbouring salt-water tribes, which Somo, behind her walls, could easily fend off, divined that it was the long-expected punitive man-of-war. Despite his three-score years, he had never experienced a village shelling. He had heard vague talk of what had happened in the matter of shell-fire in other villages, but he had no conception of it save that it must be, bullets on a larger scale than Snider bullets that could be fired correspondingly longer distances through the air.

But it was given to him to know shell-fire before he died. Bashti, who had long waited the cruiser that was to avenge the destruction of the Arangi and the taking of the heads of the two white men, and who had long calculated the damage to be wrought, had given the command to his people to flee to the mountains. First in the vanguard, borne by a dozen young men, went his mat-wrapped parcels of heads. The last slow trailers in the rear of the exodus were just passing, and Nalasu, his bow and his eighty arrows clutched to him, Jerry at his heels, made his first step to follow, when the air above him was rent by a prodigiousness of sound.

Nalasu sat down abruptly. It was his first shell, and it was a thousand times more terrible than he had imagined. It was a rip-snorting, sky-splitting sound as of a cosmic fabric being torn asunder between the hands of some powerful god. For all the world it was like the roughest tearing across of sheets that were thick as blankets, that were broad as

the earth and wide as the sky.

Not only did he sit down just outside his door, but he crouched his head to his knees and shielded it with the arch of his arms. And Jerry, who had never heard shell-fire, much less imagined what it was like, was impressed with the awfulness of it. It was to him a natural catastrophe such as had happened to the Arangi when she was flung down reeling on her side by the shouting wind. But, true to his nature, he did not crouch down under the shriek of that first shell. On the contrary, he bristled his hair and snarled up with menacing teeth at whatever the thing was which was so enormously present and yet invisible to his eyes.

Nalasu crouched closer when the shell burst beyond, and Jerry snarled and rippled his hair afresh. Each repeated his actions with each fresh shell, for, while they screamed no more loudly, they burst in the jungle more closely. And Nalasu, who had lived a long life most bravely in the midst of perils he had known, was destined to die a coward out of his fear of the thing unknown, the chemically propelled missile of the white masters. As the dropping shells burst nearer and nearer, what final self-control he possessed left him. Such was his utter panic that he might well have bitten his veins and howled. With a lunatic scream, he sprang to his feet and rushed inside the house as if forsooth its grass thatch could protect his head from such huge projectiles. He collided with the door-jamb, and, ere Jerry could follow him, whirled around in a part circle into the centre of the floor just in time to receive the next shell squarely upon his head.

Jerry had just gained the doorway when the shell exploded. The house went into flying fragments, and Nalasu flew into fragments with it. Jerry, in the doorway, caught in the out-draught of the explosion, was flung a score of feet away. All in the same fraction of an instant, earthquake, tidal wave, volcanic eruption, the thunder of the heavens and the fire-flashing of an electric bolt from the sky smote him and smote consciousness out of him.

He had no conception of how long he lay. Five minutes passed before his legs made their first spasmodic movements, and, as he stumbled to his feet and rocked giddily, he had no thought of the passage of time. He had no thought about time at all. As a matter of course, his own idea, on which he proceeded to act without being aware of it, was that, a part of a second before, he had been struck a terrific blow magnified incalculable times beyond the blow of a stick at a nigger's hands.

His throat and lungs filled with the pungent stifling smoke of powder, his nostrils with earth and dust, he frantically wheezed and sneezed, leaping about, falling drunkenly, leaping into the air again, staggering on his hind-legs, dabbing with his forepaws at his nose head-downward between his forelegs, and even rubbing his nose into the ground. He had no thought for anything save to remove the biting pain from his nose and mouth, the suffocation from his lungs.

By a miracle he had escaped being struck by the flying splinters of iron,

and, thanks to his strong heart, had escaped being killed by the shock of the explosion. Not until the end of five minutes of mad struggling, in which he behaved for all the world like a beheaded chicken, did he find life tolerable again. The maximum of stifling and of agony passed, and, although he was still weak and giddy, he tottered in the direction of the house and of Nalasu. And there was no house and no Nalasu--only a debris intermingled of both.

While the shells continued to shriek and explode, now near, now far, Jerry investigated the happening. As surely as the house was gone, just as surely was Nalasu gone. Upon both had descended the ultimate nothingness. All the immediate world seemed doomed to nothingness. Life promised only somewhere else, in the high hills and remote bush whither the tribe had already fled. Loyal he was to his salt, to the master whom he had obeyed so long, nigger that he was, who so long had fed him, and for whom he had entertained a true affection. But this master no longer was.

Retreat Jerry did, but he was not hasty in retreat. For a time he snarled at every shell-scream in the air and every shell-burst in the bush. But after a time, while the awareness of them continued uncomfortably with him, the hair on his neck remained laid down and he neither uttered a snarl nor bared his teeth.

And when he parted from what had been and which had ceased to be, not like the bush dogs did he whimper and run. Instead, he trotted along the

path at a regular and dignified pace. When he emerged upon the main path, he found it deserted. The last refugee had passed. The path, always travelled from daylight to dark, and which he had so recently seen glutted with humans, now in its emptiness affected him profoundly with the impression of the endingness of all things in a perishing world. So it was that he did not sit down under the banyan tree, but trotted along at the far rear of the tribe.

With his nose he read the narrative of the flight. Only once did he encounter what advertised its terror. It was an entire group annihilated by a shell. There were: an old man of fifty, with a crutch because of the leg which had been slashed off by a shark when he was a young boy; a dead Mary with a dead babe at her breast and a dead child of three clutching her hand; and two dead pigs, huge and fat, which the woman had been herding to safety.

And Jerry's nose told him of how the stream of the fugitives had split and flooded past on each side and flowed together again beyond. Incidents of the flight he did encounter: a part-chewed joint of sugar-cane some child had dropped; a clay pipe, the stem short from successive breakages; a single feather from some young man's hair, and a calabash, full of cooked yams and sweet potatoes, deposited carefully beside the trail by some Mary for whom its weight had proved too great.

The shell-fire ceased as Jerry trotted along; next he heard the rifle-fire from the landing-party, as it shot down the domestic pigs on Somo's

streets. He did not hear, however, the chopping down of the coconut trees, any more than did he ever return to behold what damage the axes had wrought.

For right here occurred with Jerry a wonderful thing that thinkers of the world have not explained. He manifested in his dog's brain the free agency of life, by which all the generations of metaphysicians have postulated God, and by which all the deterministic philosophers have been led by the nose despite their clear denouncement of it as sheer illusion. What Jerry did he did. He did not know how or why he did it any more than does the philosopher know how or why he decides on mush and cream for breakfast instead of two soft-boiled eggs.

What Jerry did was to yield in action to a brain impulse to do, not what seemed the easier and more usual thing, but to do what seemed the harder and more unusual thing. Since it is easier to endure the known than to fly to the unknown; since both misery and fear love company; the apparent easiest thing for Jerry to have done would have been to follow the tribe of Somo into its fastnesses. Yet what Jerry did was to diverge from the line of retreat and to start northward, across the bounds of Somo, and continue northward into a strange land of the unknown.

Had Nalasu not been struck down by the ultimate nothingness, Jerry would have remained. This is true, and this, perhaps, to the one who considers his action, might have been the way he reasoned. But he did not reason it, did not reason at all; he acted on impulse. He could count five

objects, and pronounce them by name and number, but he was incapable of reasoning that he would remain in Somo if Nalasu lived, depart from Somo if Nalasu died. He merely departed from Somo because Nalasu was dead, and the terrible shell-fire passed quickly into the past of his consciousness, while the present became vivid after the way of the present. Almost on his toes did he tread the wild bushmen's trails, tense with apprehension of the lurking death he know infested such paths, his ears cocked alertly for jungle sounds, his eyes following his ears to discern what made the sounds.

No more doughty nor daring was Columbus, venturing all that he was to the unknown, than was Jerry in venturing this jungle-darkness of black Malaita. And this wonderful thing, this seeming great deed of free will, he performed in much the same way that the itching of feet and tickle of fancy have led the feet of men over all the earth.

Though Jerry never laid eyes on Somo again, Bashti returned with his tribe the same day, grinning and chuckling as he appraised the damage. Only a few grass houses had been damaged by the shells. Only a few coconuts had been chopped down. And as for the slain pigs, lest they spoil, he made of their carcasses a great feast. One shell had knocked a hole through his sea-wall. He enlarged it for a launching-ways, faced the sides of it with dry-fitted coral rock, and gave orders for the building of an additional canoe-house. The only vexation he suffered was the death of Nalasu and the disappearance of Jerry--his two experiments in primitive eugenics.