

CHAPTER XXIII

One thing Jerry learned early on the Ariel, namely, that nigger-chasing was not permitted. Eager to please and serve his new gods, he took advantage of the first opportunity to worry a canoe-load of blacks who came visiting on board. The quick chiding of Villa and the command of Harley made him pause in amazement. Fully believing he had been mistaken, he resumed his ragging of the particular black he had picked upon. This time Harley's voice was peremptory, and Jerry came to him, his wagging tail and wriggling body all eagerness of apology, as was his rose-strip of tongue that kissed the hand of forgiveness with which Harley patted him.

Next, Villa called him to her. Holding him close to her with her hands on his jowls, eye to eye and nose to nose, she talked to him earnestly about the sin of nigger-chasing. She told him that he was no common bush-dog, but a blooded Irish gentleman, and that no dog that was a gentleman ever did such things as chase unoffending black men. To all of which he listened with unblinking serious eyes, understanding little of what she said, yet comprehending all. "Naughty" was a word in the Ariel language he had already learned, and she used it several times. "Naughty," to him, meant "must not," and was by way of expressing a taboo.

Since it was their way and their will, who was he, he might well have

asked himself, to disobey their rule or question it? If niggers were not to be chased, then chase them he would not, despite the fact that Skipper had encouraged him to chase them. Not in such set terms did Jerry consider the matter; but in his own way he accepted the conclusions.

Love of a god, with him, implied service. It pleased him to please with service. And the foundation-stone of service, in his case, was obedience. Yet it strained him sore for a time to refrain from snarl and snap when the legs of strange and presumptuous blacks passed near him along the Ariel's white deck.

But there were times and times, as he was to learn, and the time came when Villa Kennan wanted a bath, a real bath in fresh, rain-descended, running water, and when Johnny, the black pilot from Tulagi, made a mistake. The chart showed a mile of the Suli river where it emptied into the sea. Why it showed only a mile was because no white man had ever explored it farther. When Villa proposed the bath, her husband advised with Johnny. Johnny shook his head.

"No fella boy stop 'm along that place," he said. "No make 'm trouble along you. Bush fella boy stop 'm long way too much."

So it was that the launch went ashore, and, while its crew lolled in the shade of the beach coconuts, Villa, Harley, and Jerry followed the river inland a quarter of a mile to the first likely pool.

"One can never be too sure," Harley said, taking his automatic pistol from its holster and placing it on top his heap of clothes. "A stray bunch of blacks might just happen to surprise us."

Villa stepped into the water to her knees, looked up at the dark jungle roof high overhead through which only occasional shafts of sunlight penetrated, and shuddered.

"An appropriate setting for a dark deed," she smiled, then scooped a handful of chill water against her husband, who plunged in in pursuit.

For a time Jerry sat by their clothes and watched the frolic. Then the drifting shadow of a huge butterfly attracted his attention, and soon he was nosing through the jungle on the trail of a wood-rat. It was not a very fresh trail. He knew that well enough; but in the deeps of him were all his instincts of ancient training--instincts to hunt, to prowl, to pursue living things, in short, to play the game of getting his own meat though for ages man had got the meat for him and his kind.

So it was, exercising faculties that were no longer necessary, but that were still alive in him and clamorous for exercise, he followed the long-since passed wood-rat with all the soft-footed crouching craft of the meat-pursuer and with utmost fineness of reading the scent. The trail crossed a fresh trail, a trail very fresh, very immediately fresh. As if a rope had been attached to it, his head was jerked abruptly to right angles with his body. The unmistakable smell of a black was in his

nostrils. Further, it was a strange black, for he did not identify it with the many he possessed filed away in the pigeon-holes of his brain.

Forgotten was the stale wood-rat as he followed the new trail. Curiosity and play impelled him. He had no thought of apprehension for Villa and Harley--not even when he reached the spot where the black, evidently startled by bearing their voices, had stood and debated, and so left a very strong scent. From this point the trail swerved off toward the pool. Nervously alert, strung to extreme tension, but without alarm, still playing at the game of tracking, Jerry followed.

From the pool came occasional cries and laughter, and each time they reached his ears Jerry experienced glad little thrills. Had he been asked, and had he been able to express the sensations of emotion in terms of thought, he would have said that the sweetest sound in the world was any sound of Villa Kennan's voice, and that, next sweetest, was any sound of Harley Kennan's voice. Their voices thrilled him, always, reminding him of his love for them and that he was beloved of them.

With the first sight of the strange black, which occurred close to the pool, Jerry's suspicions were aroused. He was not conducting himself as an ordinary black, not on evil intent, should conduct himself. Instead, he betrayed all the actions of one who lurked in the perpetration of harm. He crouched on the jungle floor, peering around a great root of a board tree. Jerry bristled and himself crouched as he watched.

Once, the black raised his rifle half-way to his shoulder; but, with an outburst of splashing and laughter, his unconscious victims evidently removed themselves from his field of vision. His rifle was no old-fashioned Snider, but a modern, repeating Winchester; and he showed habituation to firing it from his shoulder rather than from the hip after the manner of most Malaitans.

Not satisfied with his position by the board tree, he lowered his gun to his side and crept closer to the pool. Jerry crouched low and followed. So low did he crouch that his head, extended horizontally forward, was much lower than his shoulders which were humped up queerly and composed the highest part of him. When the black paused, Jerry paused, as if instantly frozen. When the black moved, he moved, but more swiftly, cutting down the distance between them. And all the while the hair of his neck and shoulders bristled in recurrent waves of ferocity and wrath. No golden dog this, ears flattened and tongue laughing in the arms of the lady-god, no Sing Song Silly chanting ancient memories in the cloud-entanglement of her hair; but a four-legged creature of battle, a fanged killer ripe to rend and destroy.

Jerry intended to attack as soon as he had crept sufficiently near. He was unaware of the Ariel taboo against nigger-chasing. At that moment it had no place in his consciousness. All he knew was that harm threatened the man and woman and that this nigger intended this harm.

So much had Jerry gained on his quarry, that when again the black

squatted for his shot, Jerry deemed he was near enough to rush. The rifle was coming to shoulder when he sprang forward. Swiftly as he sprang, he made no sound, and his victim's first warning was when Jerry's body, launched like a projectile, smote the black squarely between the shoulders. At the same moment his teeth entered the back of the neck, but too near the base in the lumpy shoulder muscles to permit the fangs to penetrate to the spinal cord.

In the first fright of surprise, the black's finger pulled the trigger and his throat loosed an unearthly yell. Knocked forward on his face, he rolled over and grappled with Jerry, who slashed cheek-bone and cheek and ribboned an ear; for it is the way of an Irish terrier to bite repeatedly and quickly rather than to hold a bulldog grip.

When Harley Kennan, automatic in hand and naked as Adam, reached the spot, he found dog and man locked together and tearing up the forest mould in their struggle. The black, his face streaming blood, was throttling Jerry with both hands around his neck; and Jerry, snorting, choking, snarling, was scratching for dear life with the claws of his hind feet. No puppy claws were they, but the stout claws of a mature dog that were stiffened by a backing of hard muscles. And they ripped naked chest and abdomen full length again and again until the whole front of the man was streaming red. Harley Kennan did not dare chance a shot, so closely were the combatants locked. Instead, stepping in close; he smashed down the butt of his automatic upon the side of the man's head. Released by the relaxing of the stunned black's hands, Jerry flung

himself in a flash upon the exposed throat, and only Harley's hand on his neck and Harley's sharp command made him cease and stand clear. He trembled with rage and continued to snarl ferociously, although he would desist long enough to glance up with his eyes, flatten his ears, and wag his tail each time Harley uttered "Good boy."

"Good boy" he knew for praise; and he knew beyond any doubt, by Harley's repetition of it, that he had served him and served him well.

"Do you know the beggar intended to bush-whack us," Harley told Villa, who, half-dressed and still dressing, had joined him. "It wasn't fifty feet and he couldn't have missed. Look at the Winchester. No old smooth bore. And a fellow with a gun like that would know how to use it."

"But why didn't he?" she queried.

Her husband pointed to Jerry.

Villa's eyes brightened with quick comprehension. "You mean . . . ?" she began.

He nodded. "Just that. Sing Song Silly beat him to it." He bent, rolled the man over, and discovered the lacerated back of the neck.

"That's where he landed on him first, and he must have had his finger on the trigger, drawing down on you and me, most likely me first, when Sing Song Silly broke up his calculations."

Villa was only half hearing, for she had Jerry in her arms and was calling him "Blessed Dog," the while she stilled his snarling and soothed down the last bristling hair.

But Jerry snarled again and was for leaping upon the black when he stirred restlessly and dizzily sat up. Harley removed a knife from between the bare skin and a belt.

"What name belong you?" he demanded.

But the black had eyes only for Jerry, staring at him in wondering amaze until he pieced the situation together in his growing clarity of brain and realized that such a small chunky animal had spoiled his game.

"My word," he grinned to Harley, "that fella dog put 'm crimp along me any amount."

He felt out the wounds of his neck and face, while his eyes embraced the fact that the white master was in possession of his rifle.

"You give 'm musket belong me," he said impudently.

"I give 'm you bang alongside head," was Harley's answer.

"He doesn't seem to me to be a regular Malaitan," he told Villa. "In the

first place, where would he get a rifle like that? Then think of his nerve. He must have seen us drop anchor, and he must have known our launch was on the beach. Yet he played to take our heads and get away with them back into the bush--"

"What name belong you?" he again demanded.

But not until Johnny and the launch crew arrived breathless from their run, did he learn. Johnny's eyes gloated when he beheld the prisoner, and he addressed Kennan in evident excitement.

"You give 'm me that fella boy," he begged. "Eh? You give 'm me that fella boy."

"What name you want 'm?"

Not for some time would Johnny answer this question, and then only when Kennan told him that there was no harm done and that he intended to let the black go. At this Johnny protested vehemently.

"Maybe you fetch 'm that fella boy along Government House, Tulagi, Government House give 'm you twenty pounds. Him plenty bad fella boy too much. Makawao he name stop along him. Bad fella boy too much. Him Queensland boy--"

"What name Queensland?" Kennan interrupted. "He belong that fella

place?"

Johnny shook his head.

"Him belong along Malaita first time. Long time before too much he recruit 'm along schooner go work along Queensland."

"He's a return Queenslander," Harley interpreted to Villa. "You know, when Australia went 'all white,' the Queensland plantations had to send all the black birds back. This Makawao is evidently one of them, and a hard case as well, if there's anything in Johnny's gammon about twenty pounds reward for him. That's a big price for a black."

Johnny continued his explanation which, reduced to flat and sober English, was to the effect that Makawao had always borne a bad character. In Queensland he had served a total of four years in jail for thefts, robberies, and attempted murder. Returned to the Solomons by the Australian government, he had recruited on Buli Plantation for the purpose--as was afterwards proved--of getting arms and ammunition. For an attempt to kill the manager he had received fifty lashes at Tulagi and served a year. Returned to Buli Plantation to finish his labour service, he had contrived to kill the owner in the manager's absence and to escape in a whaleboat.

In the whaleboat with him he had taken all the weapons and ammunition of the plantation, the owner's head, ten Malaita recruits, and two recruits

from San Cristobal--the two last because they were salt-water men and could handle the whaleboat. Himself and the ten Malaitans, being bushmen, were too ignorant of the sea to dare the long passage from Guadalcanar.

On the way, he had raided the little islet of Ugi, sacked the store, and taken the head of the solitary trader, a gentle-souled half-caste from Norfolk Island who traced back directly to a Pitcairn ancestry straight from the loins of McCoy of the Bounty. Arrived safely at Malaita, he and his fellows, no longer having any use for the two San Cristobal boys, had taken their heads and eaten their bodies.

"My word, him bad fella boy any amount," Johnny finished his tale.

"Government House, Tulagi, damn glad give 'm twenty pounds along that fella."

"You blessed Sing Song Silly," Villa, murmured in Jerry's ears. "If it hadn't been for you--"

"Your head and mine would even now be galumping through the bush as Makawao hit the high places for home," Harley concluded for her. "My word, some fella dog that, any amount," he added lightly. "And I gave him merry Ned just the other day for nigger-chasing, and he knew his business better than I did all the time."

"If anybody tries to claim him--" Villa threatened.

Harley confirmed her muttered sentiment with a nod.

"Any way," he said, with a smile, "there would have been one consolation if your head had gone up into the bush."

"Consolation!" she cried, throaty with indignation.

"Why, yes; because in that case my head would have gone along."

"You dear and blessed Husband-Man," she murmured, a quick cloudiness of moisture in her eyes, as with her eyes she embraced him, her arms still around Jerry, who, sensing the ecstasy of the moment, kissed her fragrant cheek with his ribbon-tongue of love.