

CHAPTER XXIV

When the Ariel cleared from Malu, on the north-west coast of Malaita, Malaita sank down beneath the sea-rim astern and, so far as Jerry's life was concerned, remained sunk for ever--another vanished world, that, in his consciousness, partook of the ultimate nothingness that had befallen Skipper. For all Jerry might have known, though he pondered it not, Malaita was a universe, beheaded and resting on the knees of some brooding lesser god, himself vastly mightier than Bashti whose knees bore the brooding weight of Skipper's sun-dried, smoke-cured head, this lesser god vexed and questing, feeling and guessing at the dual twin-mysteries of time and space and of motion and matter, above, beneath, around, and beyond him.

Only, in Jerry's case, there was no pondering of the problem, no awareness of the existence of such mysteries. He merely accepted Malaita as another world that had ceased to be. He remembered it as he remembered dreams. Himself a live thing, solid and substantial, possessed of weight and dimension, a reality incontrovertible, he moved through the space and place of being, concrete, hard, quick, convincing, an absoluteness of something surrounded by the shades and shadows of the fluxing phantasmagoria of nothing.

He took his worlds one by one. One by one his worlds evaporated, rose beyond his vision as vapours in the hot alembic of the sun, sank for ever

beneath sea-levels, themselves unreal and passing as the phantoms of a dream. The totality of the minute, simple world of the humans, microscopic and negligible as it was in the siderial universe, was as far beyond his guessing as is the siderial universe beyond the starriest guesses and most abysmal imaginings of man.

Jerry was never to see the dark island of savagery again, although often in his sleeping dreams it was to return to him in vivid illusion, as he relived his days upon it, from the destruction of the Arangi and the man-eating orgy on the beach to his flight from the shell-scattered house and flesh of Nalasu. These dream episodes constituted for him another land of Otherwhere, mysterious, unreal, and evanescent as clouds drifting across the sky or bubbles taking iridescent form and bursting on the surface of the sea. Froth and foam it was, quick-vanishing as he awoke, non-existent as Skipper, Skipper's head on the withered knees of Bashti in the lofty grass house. Malaita the real, Malaita the concrete and ponderable, vanished and vanished for ever, as Meringe had vanished, as Skipper had vanished, into the nothingness.

From Malaita the Ariel steered west of north to Ongtong Java and to Tasman--great atolls that sweltered under the Line not quite awash in the vast waste of the West South Pacific. After Tasman was another wide sea-stretch to the high island of Bougainville. Thence, bearing generally south-east and making slow progress in the dead beat to windward, the Ariel dropped anchor in nearly every harbour of the Solomons, from Choiseul and Ronongo islands, to the islands of Kulambangra, Vangunu,

Pavuvu, and New Georgia. Even did she ride to anchor, desolately lonely, in the Bay of a Thousand Ships.

Last of all, so far as concerned the Solomons, her anchor rumbled down and bit into the coral-sanded bottom of the harbour of Tulagi, where, ashore on Florida Island, lived and ruled the Resident Commissioner.

To the Commissioner, Harley Kennan duly turned over Makawao, who was committed to a grass-house jail, well guarded, to sit in leg-irons against the time of trial for his many crimes. And Johnny, the pilot, ere he returned to the service of the Commissioner, received a fair portion of the twenty pounds of head money that Kennan divided among the members of the launch crew who had raced through the jungle to the rescue the day Jerry had taken Makawao by the back of the neck and startled him into pulling the trigger of his unaimed rifle.

"I'll tell you his name," the Commissioner said, as they sat on the wide veranda of his bungalow. "It's one of Haggin's terriers--Haggin of Meringe Lagoon. The dog's father is Terrence, the mother is Bidy. The dog's own name is Jerry, for I was present at the christening before ever his eyes were open. Better yet, I'll show you his brother. His brother's name is Michael. He's nigger-chaser on the Eugenie, the two-topmast schooner that rides abreast of you. Captain Kellar is the skipper. I'll have him bring Michael ashore. Beyond all doubt, this Jerry is the sole survivor of the Arangi."

"When I get the time, and a sufficient margin of funds, I shall pay a visit to Chief Bashti--oh, no British cruiser program. I'll charter a couple of trading ketches, take my own black police force and as many white men as I cannot prevent from volunteering. There won't be any shelling of grass houses. I'll land my shore party down the coast and cut in and come down upon Somo from the rear, timing my vessels to arrive on Somo's sea-front at the same time."

"You will answer slaughter with slaughter?" Villa Kennan objected.

"I will answer slaughter with law," the Commissioner replied. "I will teach Somo law. I hope that no accidents will occur. I hope that no life will be lost on either side. I know, however, that I shall recover Captain Van Horn's head, and his mate Borckman's, and bring them back to Tulagi for Christian burial. I know that I shall get old Bashti by the scruff of the neck and sit him down while I pump law and square-dealing into him. Of course . . . "

The Commissioner, ascetic-looking, an Oxford graduate, narrow-shouldered and elderly, tired-eyed and bespectacled like the scholar he was, like the scientist he was, shrugged his shoulders. "Of course, if they are not amenable to reason, there may be trouble, and some of them and some of us will get hurt. But, one way or the other, the conclusion will be the same. Old Bashti will learn that it is expedient to maintain white men's heads on their shoulders."

"But how will he learn?" Villa Kennan asked. "If he is shrewd enough not to fight you, and merely sits and listens to your English law, it will be no more than a huge joke to him. He will no more than pay the price of listening to a lecture for any atrocity he commits."

"On the contrary, my dear Mrs. Kennan. If he listens peaceably to the lecture, I shall fine him only a hundred thousand coconuts, five tons of ivory nut, one hundred fathoms of shell money, and twenty fat pigs. If he refuses to listen to the lecture and goes on the war path, then, unpleasantly for me, I assure you, I shall be compelled to thrash him and his village, first: and, next, I shall triple the fine he must pay and lecture the law into him a trifle more compendiously."

"Suppose he doesn't fight, stops his ears to the lecture, and declines to pay?" Villa Kennan persisted.

"Then he shall be my guest, here in Tulagi, until he changes his mind and heart, and does pay, and listens to an entire course of lectures."

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So it was that Jerry came to hear his old-time name on the lips of Villa and Harley, and saw once again his full-brother Michael.

"Say nothing," Harley muttered to Villa, as they made out, peering over the bow of the shore-coming whaleboat, the rough coat, red-wheaten in

colour, of Michael. "We won't know anything about anything, and we won't even let on we're watching what they do."

Jerry, feigning interest in digging a hole in the sand as if he were on a fresh scent, was unaware of Michael's nearness. In fact, so well had Jerry feigned that he had forgotten it was all a game, and his interest was very real as he sniffed and snorted joyously in the bottom of the hole he had dug. So deep was it, that all he showed of himself was his hind-legs, his rump, and an intelligent and stiffly erect stump of a tail.

Little wonder that he and Michael failed to see each other. And Michael, spilling over with unused vitality from the cramped space of the Eugenie's deck, scampered down the beach in a hurly-burly of joy, scenting a thousand intimate land-scents as he ran, and describing a jerky and eccentric course as he made short dashes and good-natured snaps at the coconut crabs that scuttled across his path to the safety of the water or reared up and menaced him with formidable claws and a spluttering and foaming of the shell-lids of their mouths.

The beach was only so long. The end of it reached where rose the rugged wall of a headland, and while the Commissioner introduced Captain Kellar to Mr. and Mrs. Kennan, Michael came tearing back across the wet-hard sand. So interested was he in everything that he failed to notice the small rear-end portion of Jerry that was visible above the level surface of the beach. Jerry's ears had given him warning, and, the precise

instant that he backed hurriedly up and out of the hole, Michael collided with him. As Jerry was rolled, and as Michael fell clear over him, both erupted into ferocious snarls and growls. They regained their legs, bristled and showed teeth at each other, and stalked stiff-leggedly, in a stately and dignified sort of way, as they drew intimidating semi-circles about each other.

But they were fooling all the while, and were more than a trifle embarrassed. For in each of their brains were bright identification pictures of the plantation house and compound and beach of Meringe. They knew, but they were reticent of recognition. No longer puppies, vaguely proud of the sedateness of maturity, they strove to be proud and sedate while all their impulse was to rush together in a frantic ecstasy.

Michael it was, less travelled in the world than Jerry, by nature not so self-controlled, who threw the play-acting of dignity to the wind, and, with shrill whinings of emotion, with body-wrigglings of delight, flashed out his tongue of love and shouldered his brother roughly in eagerness to get near to him.

Jerry responded as eagerly with kiss of tongue and contact of shoulder; then both, springing apart, looked at each other, alert and querying, almost in half challenge, Jerry's ears pricked into living interrogations, Michael's one good ear similarly questioning, his withered ear retaining its permanent queer and crinkly cock in the tip of it. As one, they sprang away in a wild scurry down the beach, side by

side, laughing to each other and occasionally striking their shoulders together as they ran.

"No doubt of it," said the Commissioner. "The very way their father and mother run. I have watched them often."

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But, after ten days of comradeship, came the parting. It was Michael's first visit on the Ariel, and he and Jerry had spent a frolicking half-hour on her white deck amid the sound and commotion of hoisting in boats, making sail, and heaving out anchor. As the Ariel began to move through the water and heeled to the filling of her canvas by the brisk trade-wind, the Commissioner and Captain Kellar shook last farewells and scrambled down the gang-plank to their waiting whaleboats. At the last moment Captain Kellar had caught Michael up, tucked him under an arm, and with him dropped into the sternsheets of his whaleboat.

Painters were cast off, and in the sternsheets of each boat solitary white men were standing up, heads bared in graciousness of conduct to the furnace-stab of the tropic sun, as they waved additional and final farewells. And Michael, swept by the contagion of excitement, barked and barked again, as if it were a festival of the gods being celebrated.

"Say good-bye to your brother, Jerry," Villa Kennan prompted in Jerry's ear, as she held him, his quivering flanks between her two palms, on the

rail where she had lifted him.

And Jerry, not understanding her speech, torn about with conflicting desires, acknowledged her speech with wriggling body, a quick back-toss of head, and a red flash of kissing tongue, and, the next moment, his head over the rail and lowered to see the swiftly diminishing Michael, was mouthing grief and woe very much akin to the grief and woe his mother, Bidy, had mouthed in the long ago, on the beach of Meringe, when he had sailed away with Skipper.

For Jerry had learned partings, and beyond all peradventure this was a parting, though little he dreamed that he would again meet Michael across the years and across the world, in a fabled valley of far California, where they would live out their days in the hearts and arms of the beloved gods.

Michael, his forefeet on the gunwale, barked to him in a puzzled, questioning sort of way, and Jerry whimpered back incommunicable understanding. The lady-god pressed his two flanks together reassuringly, and he turned to her, his cool nose touched questioningly to her cheek. She gathered his body close against her breast in one encircling arm, her free hand resting on the rail, half-closed, a pink-and-white heart of flower, fragrant and seducing. Jerry's nose quested the way of it. The aperture invited. With snuggling, budging, and nudging-movements he spread the fingers slightly wider as his nose penetrated into the sheer delight and loveliness of her hand.

He came to rest, his golden muzzle soft-enfolded to the eyes, and was very still, all forgetful of the Ariel showing her copper to the sun under the press of the wind, all forgetful of Michael growing small in the distance as the whaleboat grew small astern. No less still was Villa. Both were playing the game, although to her it was new.

As long as he could possibly contain himself, Jerry maintained his stiffness. And then, his love bursting beyond the control of him, he gave a sniff--as prodigious a one as he had sniffed into the tunnel of Skipper's hand in the long ago on the deck of the Arangi. And, as Skipper had relaxed into the laughter of love, so did the lady-god now. She gurgled gleefully. Her fingers tightened, in a caress that almost hurt, on Jerry's muzzle. Her other hand and arm crushed him against her till he gasped. Yet all the while his stump of tail valiantly bobbed back and forth, and, when released from such blissful contact, his silky ears flattened back and down as, with first a scarlet slash of tongue to cheek, he seized her hand between his teeth and dented the soft skin with a love bite that did not hurt.

And so, for Jerry, vanished Tulagi, its Commissioner's bungalow on top of the hill, its vessels riding to anchor in the harbour, and Michael, his full blood-brother. He had grown accustomed to such vanishments. In such way had vanished as in the mirage of a dream, Meringe, Somo, and the Arangi. In such way had vanished all the worlds and harbours and roadsteads and atoll lagoons where the Ariel had lifted her laid anchor

and gone on across and over the erasing sea-rim.