

## CHAPTER II

Dag Daughtry strolled along the beach, Michael at his heels or running circles of delight around him at every repetition of that strange low lip-noise, and paused just outside the circle of lantern light where dusky forms laboured with landing cargo from the whaleboats and where the Commissioner's clerk and the Makambo's super-cargo still wrangled over the bill of lading. When Michael would have gone forward, the man withstrained him with the same inarticulate, almost inaudible kiss.

For Daughtry did not care to be seen on such dog-stealing enterprises and was planning how to get on board the steamer unobserved. He edged around outside the lantern shine and went on along the beach to the native village. As he had foreseen, all the able-bodied men were down at the boat-landing working cargo. The grass houses seemed lifeless, but at last, from one of them, came a challenge in the querulous, high-pitched tones of age:

"What name?"

"Me walk about plenty too much," he replied in the beche-de-mer English of the west South Pacific. "Me belong along steamer. Suppose 'm you take 'm me along canoe, washee-washee, me give 'm you fella boy two stick tobacco."

"Suppose 'm you give 'm me ten stick, all right along me," came the reply.

"Me give 'm five stick," the six-quart steward bargained. "Suppose 'm you no like 'm five stick then you fella boy go to hell close up."

There was a silence.

"You like 'm five stick?" Daughtry insisted of the dark interior.

"Me like 'm," the darkness answered, and through the darkness the body that owned the voice approached with such strange sounds that the steward lighted a match to see.

A blar-eyed ancient stood before him, balancing on a single crutch. His eyes were half-filmed over by a growth of morbid membrane, and what was not yet covered shone red and irritated. His hair was mangy, standing out in isolated patches of wispy grey. His skin was scarred and wrinkled and mottled, and in colour was a purplish blue surfaced with a grey coating that might have been painted there had it not indubitably grown there and been part and parcel of him.

A blighted leper--was Daughtry's thought as his quick eyes leapt from hands to feet in quest of missing toe- and finger-joints. But in those items the ancient was intact, although one leg ceased midway between knee and thigh.

"My word! What place stop 'm that fella leg?" quoth Daughtry, pointing to the space which the member would have occupied had it not been absent.

"Big fella shark-fish, that fella leg stop 'm along him," the ancient grinned, exposing a horrible aperture of toothlessness for a mouth.

"Me old fella boy too much," the one-legged Methuselah quavered. "Long time too much no smoke 'm tobacco. Suppose 'm you big fella white marster give 'm me one fella stick, close up me washee-washee you that fella steamer."

"Suppose 'm me no give?" the steward impatiently temporized.

For reply, the old man half-turned, and, on his crutch, swinging his stump of leg in the air, began sidling hippity-hop into the grass hut.

"All right," Daughtry cried hastily. "Me give 'm you smoke 'm quick fella."

He dipped into a side coat-pocket for the mintage of the Solomons and stripped off a stick from the handful of pressed sticks. The old man was transfigured as he reached avidly for the stick and received it. He uttered little crooning noises, alternating with sharp cries akin to pain, half-ecstatic, half-petulant, as he drew a black clay pipe from a hole in his ear-lobe, and into the bowl of it, with trembling fingers,

untwisted and crumbled the cheap leaf of spoiled Virginia crop.

Pressing down the contents of the full bowl with his thumb, he suddenly plumped upon the ground, the crutch beside him, the one limb under him so that he had the seeming of a legless torso. From a small bag of twisted coconut hanging from his neck upon his withered and sunken chest, he drew out flint and steel and tinder, and, even while the impatient steward was proffering him a box of matches, struck a spark, caught it in the tinder, blew it into strength and quantity, and lighted his pipe from it.

With the first full puff of the smoke he gave over his moans and yelps, the agitation began to fade out of him, and Daughtry, appreciatively waiting, saw the trembling go out of his hands, the pendulous lip-quivering cease, the saliva stop flowing from the corners of his mouth, and placidity come into the fiery remnants of his eyes.

What the old man visioned in the silence that fell, Daughtry did not try to guess. He was too occupied with his own vision, and vividly burned before him the sordid barrenness of a poor-house ward, where an ancient, very like what he himself would become, maundered and gibbered and drooled for a crumb of tobacco for his old clay pipe, and where, of all horrors, no sip of beer ever obtained, much less six quarts of it.

And Michael, by the dim glows of the pipe surveying the scene of the two old men, one squatted in the dark, the other standing, knew naught of the tragedy of age, and was only aware, and overwhelmingly aware, of the

immense likableness of this two-legged white god, who, with fingers of magic, through ear-roots and tail-roots and spinal column, had won to the heart of him.

The clay pipe smoked utterly out, the old black, by aid of the crutch, with amazing celerity raised himself upstanding on his one leg and hobbled, with his hippity-hop, to the beach. Daughtry was compelled to lend his strength to the hauling down from the sand into the water of the tiny canoe. It was a dug-out, as ancient and dilapidated as its owner, and, in order to get into it without capsizing, Daughtry wet one leg to the ankle and the other leg to the knee. The old man contorted himself aboard, rolling his body across the gunwale so quickly, that, even while it started to capsize, his weight was across the danger-point and counterbalancing the canoe to its proper equilibrium.

Michael remained on the beach, waiting invitation, his mind not quite made up, but so nearly so that all that was required was that lip-noise. Dag Daughtry made the lip-noise so low that the old man did not hear, and Michael, springing clear from sand to canoe, was on board without wetting his feet. Using Daughtry's shoulder for a stepping-place, he passed over him and down into the bottom of the canoe. Daughtry kissed with his lips again, and Michael turned around so as to face him, sat down, and rested his head on the steward's knees.

"I reckon I can take my affydavy on a stack of Bibles that the dog just up an' followed me," he grinned in Michael's ear.

"Washee-washee quick fella," he commanded.

The ancient obediently dipped his paddle and started pottering an erratic course in the general direction of the cluster of lights that marked the Makambo. But he was too feeble, panting and wheezing continually from the exertion and pausing to rest off strokes between strokes. The steward impatiently took the paddle away from him and bent to the work.

Half-way to the steamer the ancient ceased wheezing and spoke, nodding his head at Michael.

"That fella dog he belong big white marster along schooner . . . You give 'm me ten stick tobacco," he added after due pause to let the information sink in.

"I give 'm you bang alongside head," Daughtry assured him cheerfully.

"White marster along schooner plenty friend along me too much. Just now he stop 'm along Makambo. Me take 'm dog along him along Makambo."

There was no further conversation from the ancient, and though he lived long years after, he never mentioned the midnight passenger in the canoe who carried Michael away with him. When he saw and heard the confusion and uproar on the beach later that night when Captain Kellar turned Tulagi upside-down in his search for Michael, the old one-legged one remained discreetly silent. Who was he to seek trouble with the strange

ones, the white masters who came and went and roved and ruled?

In this the ancient was in nowise unlike the rest of his dark-skinned Melanesian race. The whites were possessed of unguessed and unthinkable ways and purposes. They constituted another world and were as a play of superior beings on an exalted stage where was no reality such as black men might know as reality, where, like the phantoms of a dream, the white men moved and were as shadows cast upon the vast and mysterious curtain of the Cosmos.

The gang-plank being on the port side, Dag Daughtry paddled around to the starboard and brought the canoe to a stop under a certain open port.

"Kwaque!" he called softly, once, and twice.

At the second call the light of the port was obscured apparently by a head that piped down in a thin squeak.

"Me stop 'm, marster."

"One fella dog stop 'm along you," the steward whispered up. "Keep 'm door shut. You wait along me. Stand by! Now!"

With a quick catch and lift, he passed Michael up and into unseen hands outstretched from the iron wall of the ship, and paddled ahead to an open cargo port. Dipping into his tobacco pocket, he thrust a loose handful

of sticks into the ancient's hand and shoved the canoe adrift with no thought of how its helpless occupant would ever reach shore.

The old man did not touch the paddle, and he was unregardless of the lofty-sided steamer as the canoe slipped down the length of it into the darkness astern. He was too occupied in counting the wealth of tobacco showered upon him. No easy task, his counting. Five was the limit of his numerals. When he had counted five, he began over again and counted a second five. Three fives he found in all, and two sticks over; and thus, at the end of it, he possessed as definite a knowledge of the number of sticks as would be possessed by the average white man by means of the single number seventeen.

More it was, far more, than his avarice had demanded. Yet he was unsurprised. Nothing white men did could surprise. Had it been two sticks instead of seventeen, he would have been equally unsurprised. Since all acts of white men were surprises, the only surprise of action they could achieve for a black man would be the doing of an unsurprising thing.

Paddling, wheezing, resting, oblivious of the shadow-world of the white men, knowing only the reality of Tulagi Mountain cutting its crest-line blackly across the dim radiance of the star-sprinkled sky, the reality of the sea and of the canoe he so feebly urged across it, and the reality of his fading strength and of the death into which he would surely end, the ancient black man slowly made his shoreward way.