

Chapter 18

Meanwhile the months slipped by, the south-east trade blew itself out, the monsoon had begun to breathe, and Jerry added to himself six months of time, weight, stature, and thickness of bone. An easy time his half-year with the blind man had been, despite the fact that Nalasu was a rigid disciplinarian who insisted on training Jerry for longer hours, day in and day out, than falls to the lot of most dogs. Never did Jerry receive from him a blow, never a harsh word. This man, who had slain four of the Annos, three of them after he had gone blind, who had slain still more men in his savage youth, never raised his voice in anger to Jerry and ruled him by nothing severer than the gentlest of chidings.

Mentally, the persistent education Jerry received, in this period of late puppyhood, fixed in him increased brain power for all his life. Possibly no dog in all the world had ever been so vocal as he, and for three reasons: his own intelligence, the genius for teaching that was Nalasu's, and the long hours devoted to the teaching.

His shorthand vocabulary, for a dog, was prodigious. Almost might it be said that he and the man could talk by the hour, although few and simple were the abstractions they could talk; very little of the immediate concrete past, and scarcely anything of the immediate concrete future, entered into their conversations. Jerry could no more tell him of Meringe, nor of the Arangi, than could he tell him of the great love he had borne Skipper, or of his reason for hating Bashti. By the same token, Nalasu could not tell Jerry of the blood-feud with the Annos, nor of how he had lost his eyesight.

Practically all their conversation was confined to the instant present, although they could compass a little of the very immediate past. Nalasu would give Jerry a series of instructions, such as, going on a scout by himself, to go to the nest, then circle about it widely, to continue to the other clearing where were the fruit trees, to cross the jungle to the main path, to proceed down the main path toward the village till he came to the great banyan tree, and then to return along the small path to Nalasu and Nalasu's house. All of which Jerry would carry out to the letter, and, arrived back, would make report. As, thus: at the nest nothing unusual save that a buzzard was near it; in the other clearing three coconuts had fallen to the ground--for Jerry could count unerringly up to five; between the other clearing and the main path were four pigs; along the main path he had passed a dog, more than five women, and two children; and on the small path home he had noted a cockatoo and two boys.

But he could not tell Nalasu his states of mind and heart that prevented him from being fully contented in his present situation. For Nalasu was not a white-god, but only a mere nigger god. And Jerry hated and despised all niggers save for the two exceptions of Lamai and Nalasu. He tolerated them, and, for Nalasu, had even developed a placid and sweet affection. Love him he did not and could not.

At the best, they were only second-rate gods, and he could not forget the great white-gods such as Skipper and Mister Haggin, and, of the same breed, Derby and Bob. They were something else, something other, something better than all this black savagery in which he lived. They were above and beyond, in an unattainable paradise which he vividly remembered, for which he yearned, but to which he did not know the way, and which, dimly sensing the ending that comes to all things, might have passed into the ultimate nothingness which had already overtaken Skipper and the Arangi.

In vain did the old man play to gain Jerry's heart of love. He could not bid against Jerry's many reservations and memories, although he did win absolute faithfulness and loyalty. Not passionately, as he would have fought to the death for Skipper, but devotedly would he have fought to the death for Nalasu. And the old man never dreamed but what he had won all of Jerry's heart.

Came the day of the Annos, when one of them made the invention, which was thick-plaited sandals to armour the soles of their feet against the poisoned thorns with which Nalasu had taken three of their lives. The day, in truth, was the night, a black night, a night so black under a cloud-palled sky that a tree-trunk could not be seen an eighth of an inch beyond one's nose. And the Annos descended on Nalasu's clearing, a dozen of them, armed with Sniders, horse pistols, tomahawks and war clubs, walking gingerly, despite their thick sandals, because of fear of the thorns which Nalasu no longer planted.

Jerry, sitting between Nalasu's knees and nodding sleepily, gave the first warning to Nalasu, who sat outside his door, wide-eyed, ear-strung, as he had sat through all the nights of the many years. He listened still more tensely through long minutes in which he heard nothing, at the same time whispering to Jerry for information and commanding him to be soft-spoken; and Jerry, with whuffs and whiffs and all the short-hand breath-exhalations of speech he had been taught, told him that men approached, many men, more men than five.

Nalasu reached the bow beside him, strung an arrow, and waited. At last his own ears caught the slightest of rustlings, now here, now there, advancing upon him in the circle of the compass. Still speaking for softness, he demanded verification from Jerry, whose neck hair rose bristling under Nalasu's sensitive fingers, and who, by this time, was reading the night air with his nose as well as his ears. And Jerry, as softly as Nalasu, informed him again that it was men, many men, more men than five.

With the patience of age Nalasu sat on without movement, until, close at hand, on the very edge of the jungle, sixty feet away, he located a particular noise of a particular man. He stretched his bow, loosed the arrow, and was rewarded by a gasp and a groan strangely commingled. First he restrained Jerry from retrieving the arrow, which he knew had gone home; and next he fitted a fresh arrow to the bow string.

Fifteen minutes of silence passed, the blind man as if carven of stone, the dog, trembling with eagerness under the articulate touch of his fingers, obeying the bidding to make no sound. For Jerry, as well as Nalasu, knew that death rustled and lurked in the encircling dark. Again came a softness of movement, nearer than before; but the sped arrow missed. They heard its impact against a tree trunk beyond and a confusion of small sounds caused by the target's hasty retreat. Next, after a time of silence, Nalasu told Jerry silently to retrieve the arrow. He had been well trained and long trained, for with no sound even to Nalasu's ears keener than seeing men's ears, he followed the direction of the arrow's impact against the tree and brought the arrow back in his mouth.

Again Nalasu waited, until the rustlings of a fresh drawing-in of the circle could be heard, whereupon Nalasu, Jerry accompanying him, picked up all his arrows and moved soundlessly half-way around the circle. Even as they moved, a Snider exploded that was aimed in the general direction of the spot just vacated.

And the blind man and the dog, from midnight to dawn, successfully fought off twelve men equipped with the thunder of gunpowder and the wide-spreading, deep-penetrating, mushroom bullets of soft lead. And the blind man defended himself only with a bow and a hundred arrows. He discharged many hundreds of arrows which Jerry retrieved for him and which he discharged over and over. But Jerry aided valiantly and well, adding to Nalasu's acute hearing his own acuter hearing, circling noiselessly about the house and reporting where the attack pressed closest.

Much of their precious powder the Annos wasted, for the affair was like a game of invisible ghosts. Never was anything seen save the flashes of the rifles. Never did they see Jerry, although they became quickly aware of his movements close to them as he searched out the arrows. Once, as one of them felt for an arrow which had narrowly missed him, he encountered Jerry's back with his hand and acknowledged the sharp slash of Jerry's teeth with a wild yell of terror. They tried firing at the twang of Nalasu's bowstring, but every time Nalasu fired he instantly changed position. Several times, warned of Jerry's nearness, they fired at him, and, once even, was his nose slightly powder burned.

When day broke, in the quick tropic grey that marks the leap from dark to sun, the Annos retreated, while Nalasu, withdrawn from the light into his house, still possessed eighty arrows, thanks to Jerry. The net result to Nalasu was one dead man and no telling how many arrow-pricked wounded men who dragged themselves away.

And half the day Nalasu crouched over Jerry, fondling and caressing him for what he had done. Then he went abroad, Jerry with him, and told of the battle. Bashti paid him a visit ere the day was done, and talked with him earnestly.

"As an old man to an old man, I talk," was Bashti's beginning. "I am older than you, O Nalasu; I have ever been unafraid. Yet never have I been braver than you. I would that every man of the tribe were as brave as you. Yet do you give me great sorrow. Of what worth are your courage and cunning, when you have no seed to make your courage and cunning live again?"

"I am an old man," Nalasu began.

"Not so old as I am," Bashti interrupted. "Not too old to marry so that your seed will add strength to the tribe."

"I was married, and long married, and I fathered three brave sons. But they are dead. I shall not live so long as you. I think of my young days as pleasant dreams remembered after sleep. More I think of death, and the end. Of marriage I think not at all. I am too old to marry. I am old enough to make ready to die, and a great curiousness have I about what will happen to me when I am dead. Will I be for ever dead? Will I live again in a land of dreams--a shadow of a dream myself that will still remember the days when I lived in the warm world, the quick juices of hunger in my mouth, in the chest of the body of me the love of woman?"

Bashti shrugged his shoulders.

"I too, have thought much on the matter," he said. "Yet do I arrive nowhere. I do not know. You do not know. We will not know until we are dead, if it happens that we know anything when what we are we no longer are. But this we know, you and I: the tribe lives. The tribe never dies. Wherefore, if there be meaning at all to our living, we must make the tribe strong. Your work in the tribe is not done. You must marry so that your cunning and your courage live after you. I have a wife for you--nay, two wives, for your days are short and I shall surely live to see you hang with my fathers from the canoe-house ridgepole."

"I will not pay for a wife," Nalasu protested. "I will not pay for any wife. I would not pay a stick of tobacco or a cracked coconut for the best woman in Somo."

"Worry not," Bashti went on placidly. "I shall pay you for the price of the wife, of the two wives. There is Bubus. For half a case of tobacco shall I buy her for you. She is broad and square, round-legged, broad-hipped, with generous breasts of richness. There is Nena. Her father sets a stiff price upon her--a whole case of tobacco. I will buy her for you as well. Your time is short. We must hurry."

"I will not marry," the old blind man proclaimed hysterically.

"You will. I have spoken."

"No, I say, and say again, no, no, no, no. Wives are nuisances. They are young things, and their heads are filled with foolishness. Their tongues are loose with idleness of speech. I am old, I am quiet in my ways, the fires of life have departed from me, I prefer to sit alone in the dark and think. Chattering young things about me, with nothing but foam and spume in their heads, on their tongues, would drive me mad. Of a surety they would drive me mad-- so mad that I will spit into every clam shell, make faces at the moon, and bite my veins and howl."

"And if you do, what of it? So long as your seed does not perish. I shall pay for the wives to their fathers and send them to you in three days."

"I will have nothing to do with them," Nalasu asserted wildly.

"You will," Bashti insisted calmly. "Because if you do not you will have to pay me. It will be a sore, hard debt. I will have every joint of you unhinged so that you will be like a jelly-fish, like a fat pig with the bones removed, and I will then stake you out in the midmost centre of the dog-killing ground to swell in pain under the sun. And what is left of you I shall fling to the dogs to eat. Your seed shall not perish out of Somo. I, Bashti, so tell you. In three days I shall send to you your two wives. . . ."

He paused, and a long silence fell upon them.

"Well?" Bashti reiterated. "It is wives or staking out unhinged in the sun. You choose, but think well before you choose the unhinging."

"At my age, with all the vexations of youngness so far behind me!" Nalasu complained.

"Choose. You will find there is vexation, and liveliness and much of it, in the centre of the dog-killing yard when the sun cooks your sore joints till the grease of the leanness of you bubbles like the tender fat of a cooked sucking-pig."

"Then send me the wives," Nalasu managed to utter after a long pause. "But send them in three days, not in two, nor to-morrow."

"It is well," Bashti nodded gravely. "You have lived at all only because of those before you, now long in the dark, who worked so that the tribe might live and you might come to be. You are. They paid the price for you. It is your debt. You came into being with this debt upon you. You will pay the debt before you pass out of being. It is the law. It is very well."