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Chapter 18

Dinner at the Lodge that night was not a very lively affair. Trent had great matters in his brain and was not in the least disposed to make conversation for the sake of his unbidden guests. Da Souza's few remarks he treated with silent contempt, and Mrs. Da Souza he answered only in monosyllables. Julie, nervous and depressed, stole away before dessert, and Mrs. Da Souza soon followed her, very massive, and frowning with an air of offended dignity. Da Souza, who opened the door for them, returned to his seat, moodily flicking the crumbs from his trousers with his serviette.

"Hang it all, Trent," he remarked in an aggrieved tone, "you might be a bit more amiable! Nice lively dinner for the women I must say."

"One isn't usually amiable to guests who stay when they're not asked," Trent answered gruffly. "However, if I hadn't much to say to your wife and daughter, I have a word or two to say to you, so fill up your glass and listen."

Da Souza obeyed, but without heartiness. He stretched himself out in his chair and looked down thoughtfully at the large expanse of shirt-front, in the centre of which flashed an enormous diamond.

"I've been into the City to-day as you know," Trent continued, "and I found as I expected that you have been making efforts to dispose of your share in the Bekwando Syndicate."

"I can assure you - "

"Oh rot!" Trent interrupted. "I know what I'm talking about. I won't have you sell out. Do you hear? If you try it on I'll queer the market for you at any risk. I won't marry your daughter, I won't be blackmailed, and I won't be bullied. We're in this together, sink or swim. If you pull me down you've got to come too. I'll admit that if Monty were to present himself in London to-morrow and demand his full pound of flesh we should be ruined, but he isn't going to do it. By your own showing there is no immediate risk, and you've got to leave the thing in my hands to do what I think best. If you play any hanky-panky tricks - look here, Da Souza, I'll kill you, sure! Do you hear? I could do it, and no one would be the wiser so far as I was concerned. You take notice of what I say, Da Souza. You've made a fortune, and be satisfied. That's all!"

"You won't marry Julie, then?" Da Souza said gloomily.

"No, I'm shot if I will!" Trent answered. "And look here, Da Souza, I'm leaving here for town to-morrow - taken a furnished flat in Dover Street - you can stay here if you want, but there'll only be a caretaker in the place. That's all I've got to say. Make yourself at home with the port and cigars. Last night, you know! You'll excuse me! I want a breath of fresh air."

Trent strolled through the open window into the garden, and breathed a deep sigh of relief. He was a free man again now. He had created new dangers - a new enemy to face - but what did he care? All his life had been spent in facing dangers and conquering enemies. What he had done before he could do again! As he lit a pipe and walked to and fro, he felt that this new state of things lent a certain savour to life - took from it a certain sensation of finality not altogether agreeable, which his recent great achievements in the financial world seemed to have inspired. After all, what could Da Souza do? His prosperity was altogether bound up in the success of the Bekwando Syndicate - he was never the man to kill the goose which was laying such a magnificent stock of golden eggs. The affair, so far as he was concerned, troubled him scarcely at all on cool reflection. As he drew near the little plantation he even forgot all about it. Something else was filling his thoughts!

The change in him became physical as well as mental. The hard face of the man softened, what there was of coarseness in its rugged outline became altogether toned down. He pushed open the gate with fingers which were almost reverent; he came at last to a halt in the exact spot where he had seen her first. Perhaps it was at that moment he realised most completely and clearly the curious thing which had come to him - to him of all men, hard-hearted, material, an utter stranger in the world of feminine things. With a pleasant sense of self-abandonment he groped about, searching for its meaning. He was a man who liked to understand thoroughly everything he saw and felt, and this new atmosphere in which he found himself was a curious source of excitement to him. Only he knew that the central figure of it all was this girl, that he had come out here to think about her, and that henceforth she had become to him the standard of those things which were worth having in life. Everything about her had been a revelation to him. The women whom he had come across in his battle upwards, barmaids and their fellows, fifth-rate actresses, occasionally the suburban wife of a prosperous City man, had impressed him only with a sort of coarse contempt. It was marvellous how thoroughly and clearly he had recognised Ernestine at once as a type of that other world of womenkind, of which he admittedly knew nothing. Yet it was so short a time since she had wandered into his life, so short a time that he was even a little uneasy at the wonderful strength of this new passion, a thing which had leaped up like a forest tree in a world of magic, a live, fully-grown thing, mighty and immovable in a single night. He found himself thinking of all the other things in life from a changed standpoint. His sense of proportions was altered, his financial triumphs were no longer omnipotent. He was inclined even to brush them aside, to consider them more as an incident in his career. He associated her now with all those plans concerning the future which he had been dimly formulating since the climax of his successes had come. She was of the world which he sought to enter - at once the stimulus and the object of his desires. He forgot all about Da Souza and his threats, about the broken-down, half-witted old man who was gazing with wistful eyes across the ocean which kept him there, an exile - he remembered nothing save the wonderful, new thing which had come into his life. A month ago he would have scoffed at the idea of there being anything worth considering outside the courts and alleys of the money-changers' market. To-night he knew of other things. To-night he knew that all he had done so far was as nothing - that as yet his foot was planted only on the threshold of life, and in the path along which he must hew his way lay many fresh worlds to conquer. To-night he told himself that he was equal to them all. There was something out here in the dim moonlight, something suggested by the shadows, the rose-perfumed air, the delicate and languid stillness, which crept into his veins and coursed through his blood like magic.

* * * * * Yet every now and then the same thought came; it lay like a small but threatening black shadow across all those brilliant hopes and dreams which were filling his brain. So far he had played the game of life as a hard man, perhaps, and a selfish one, but always honestly. Now, for the first time, he had stepped aside from the beaten track. He told himself that he was not bound to believe Da Souza's story, that he had left Monty with the honest conviction that he was past all human help. Yet he knew that such consolation was the merest sophistry. Through the twilight, as he passed to and fro, he fancied more than once that the wan face of an old man, with wistful, sorrowing eyes, was floating somewhere before him - and he stopped to listen with bated breath to the wind rustling in the elm-trees, fancying he could bear that same passionate cry ringing still in his ears - the cry of an old man parted from his kin and waiting for death in a lonely land.

