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## Chapter 26

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It was Trent himself who kept watch through that last long hour of moonlit darkness till the wan morning broke. With its faint, grey streaks came the savages of Bekwando, crawling up in a semicircle through the long, rough grass, then suddenly, at a signal, bounding upright with spears poised in their hands - an ugly sight in the dim dawn for men chilled with the moist, damp air and only half-awake. But Trent had not been caught napping. His stealthy call to arms had aroused them in time at least to crawl behind some shelter and grip their rifles. The war-cry of the savages was met with a death-like quiet - there were no signs of confusion nor terror. A Kru boy, who called out with fright, was felled to the ground by Trent with a blow which would have staggered an ox. With their rifles in hand, and every man stretched flat upon the ground, Trent's little party lay waiting. Barely a hundred yards separated them, yet there was no sign of life from the camp. The long line of savages advanced a few steps more, their spears poised above their heads, their half-naked forms showing more distinctly as they peered forward through the grey gloom, savage and ferocious. The white men were surely sleeping still. They were as near now as they could get. There was a signal and then a wild chorus of yells. They threw aside all disguise and darted forward, the still morning air hideous with their cry of battle. Then, with an awful suddenness, their cry became the cry of death, for out from the bushes belched a yellow line of fire as the rifles of Trent and his men rang out their welcome. A dozen at least of the men of Bekwando looked never again upon the faces of their wives, the rest hesitated. Trent, in whom was the love of fighting, made then his first mistake. He called for a sally, and rushed out, revolver in hand, upon the broken line. Half the blacks ran away like rabbits; the remainder, greatly outnumbering Trent and his party, stood firm. In a moment it was hand-to-hand fighting, and Trent was cursing already the bravado which had brought him out to the open.

For a while it was a doubtful combat. Then, with a shout of triumph, the chief, a swarthy, thick-set man of herculean strength, recognised Francis and sprang upon him. The blow which he aimed would most surely have killed him, but that Trent, with the butt-end of a rifle, broke its force a little. Then, turning round, he blew out the man's brains as Francis sank backwards. A dismal yell from his followers was the chief's requiem; then they turned and fled, followed by a storm of bullets as Trent's men found time to reload. More than one leaped into the air and fell forward upon their faces. The fight was over, and, when they came to look round, Francis was the only man who had suffered.

Morning had dawned even whilst they had been fighting. Little wreaths of mist were curling upwards, and the sun shone down with a cloudless, golden light, every moment more clear as the vapours melted away. Francis was lying upon his face groaning heavily; the Kru boys, to whom he was well known, were gathered in a little circle around him. Trent brushed them on one side and made a brief examination. Then he had him carried carefully into one of the tents while he went for his medicine-chest.

Preparations for a start were made, but Trent was thoughtful. For the second time within a few hours this man, in whose power it was to ruin him, lay at his mercy. That he had saved his life went for nothing. In the heat of battle there had been no time for thought or calculation. Trent had simply obeyed the generous instinct of a brave man whose blood was warm with the joy of fighting. Now it was different. Trent was seldom sentimental, but from the first he had had an uneasy presentiment concerning this man who lay now within his power and so near to death. A mutual antipathy seemed to have been born between them from the first moment when they had met in the village of Bekwando. As though it were yesterday, he remembered that leave-taking and Francis's threatening words. Trent had always felt that the man was his enemy - certainly the power to do him incalculable harm, if not to altogether ruin him, was his now. And he would not hesitate about it. Trent knew that, although broadly speaking he was innocent of any desire to harm or desert Monty, no power on earth would ever convince Francis of that. Appearances were, and always must be, overwhelmingly against him. Without interference from any one he had already formulated plans for quietly putting Monty in his rightful position, and making over to him his share in the Bekwando Syndicate. But to arrange this without catastrophe would need skill and tact; interference from any outside source would be fatal, and Francis meant to interfere - nothing would stop him. Trent walked backwards and forwards with knitted brows, glancing every now and then at the unconscious man. Francis would certainly interfere if he were allowed to recover!