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Chapter 29

The attack was a fiasco, the fighting was all over in ten minutes. A hundred years ago the men of Bekwando, who went naked and knew no drink more subtle than palm wine had one virtue - bravery. But civilisation pressing upon their frontiers had brought Oom Sam greedy for ivory and gold, and Oom Sam had bought rum and strong waters. The nerve of the savage had gone, and his muscle had become a flaccid thing. When they had risen from the long grass with a horrid yell and had rushed in upon the hated intruders with couched spears only to be met by a blinding fire of Lee-Metford and revolver bullets their bravery vanished like breath from the face of a looking-glass. They hesitated, and a rain of bullets wrought terrible havoc amongst their ranks. On every side the fighting-men of Bekwando went down like ninepins - about half a dozen only sprang forward for a hand-to-hand fight, the remainder, with shrieks of despair, fled back to the shelter of the forest, and not one of them again ever showed a bold front to the white man. Trent, for a moment or two, was busy, for a burly savage, who had marked him out by the light of the gleaming flames, had sprung upon him spear in hand, and behind him came others. The first one dodged Trent's bullet and was upon him, when the boy shot him through the cheek and he went rolling over into the fire, with a death-cry which rang through the camp high above the din of fighting, another behind him Trent shot himself, but the third was upon him before he could draw his revolver and the two rolled over struggling fiercely, at too close quarters for weapons, yet with the thirst for blood fiercely kindled in both of them. For a moment Trent had the worst of it - a blow fell upon his forehead (the scar of which he never lost) and the wooden club was brandished in the air for a second and more deadly stroke. But at that moment Trent leaped up, dashed his unloaded revolver full in the man's face and, while he staggered with the shock, a soldier from behind shot him through the heart. Trent saw him go staggering backwards and then himself sank down, giddy with the blow he had received. Afterwards he knew that he must have fainted, for when he opened his eyes the sun was up and the men were strolling about looking at the dead savages who lay thick in the grass. Trent sat up and called for water.

"Any one hurt?" he asked the boy who brought him some. The boy grinned, but shook his head.

"Plenty savages killed," he said, "no white man or Kru boy."

"Where's Mr. Davenant," Trent asked suddenly.

The boy looked round and shook his head.

"No seen Mr. Dav'nant," he said. "Him fight well though! Him not hurt!"

Trent stood up with a sickening fear at his heart. He knew very well that if the boy was about and unhurt he would have been at his side. Up and down the camp he strode in vain. At last one of the Kru boys thought he remembered seeing a great savage bounding away with some one on his back. He had thought that it was one of their wounded - it might have been the boy. Trent, with a sickening sense of horror, realised the truth. The boy had been taken prisoner.

Even then he preserved his self-control to a marvellous degree. First of all he gave directions for the day's work - then he called for volunteers to accompany him to the village. There was no great enthusiasm. To fight in trenches against a foe who had no cover nor any firearms was rather a different thing from bearding them in their own lair. Nevertheless, about twenty men came forward, including a guide, and Trent was satisfied.

They started directly after breakfast and for five hours fought their way through dense undergrowth and shrubs with never a sign of a path, though here and there were footsteps and broken boughs. By noon some of the party were exhausted and lagged behind, an hour later a long line of exhausted stragglers were following Trent and the native guide. Yet to all their petitions for a rest Trent was adamant. Every minute's delay might lessen the chance of saving the boy, even now they might have begun their horrible tortures. The thought inspired him with fresh vigour. He plunged on with long, reckless strides which soon placed a widening gap between him and the rest of the party.

By degrees he began to recollect his whereabouts. The way grew less difficult - occasionally there were signs of a path. Every moment the soft, damp heat grew more intense and clammy. Every time he touched his forehead he found it dripping. But of these things he recked very little, for every step now brought him nearer to the end of his journey. Faintly, through the midday silence he could hear the clanging of copper instruments and the weird mourning cry of the defeated natives. A few more steps and he was almost within sight of them. He slackened his pace and approached more stealthily until only a little screen of bushes separated him from the village and, peering through them, he saw a sight which made his blood run cold within him.

They had the boy! He was there, in that fantastic circle bound hand and foot, but so far as he could see, at present unhurt. His face was turned to Trent, white and a little scared, but his lips were close-set and he uttered no sound. By his side stood a man with a native knife dancing around and singing - all through the place were sounds of wailing and lamentation, and in front of his hut the King was lying, with an empty bottle by his side, drunk and motionless. Trent's anger grew fiercer as he watched. Was this a people to stand in his way, to claim the protection and sympathy of foreign governments against their own bond, that they might keep their land for misuse and their bodies for debauchery? He looked backwards and listened. As yet there was no sign of any of his followers and there was no telling how long these antics were to continue. Trent looked to his revolver and set his teeth. There must be no risk of evil happening to the boy. He walked boldly out into the little space and called to them in a loud voice.

There was a wild chorus of fear. The women fled to the huts - the men ran like rats to shelter. But the executioner of Bekwando, who was a fetish man and holy, stood his ground and pointed his knife at Trent. Two others, seeing him firm, also remained. The moment was critical.

"Cut those bonds!" Trent ordered, pointing to the boy.

The fetish man waved his hands and drew a step nearer to Trent, his knife outstretched. The other two backed him up. Already a spear was couched.

Trent's revolver flashed out in the sunlight.

"Cut that cord!" he ordered again.

The fetish man poised his knife. Trent hesitated no longer, but shot him deliberately through the heart. He jumped into the air and fell forward upon his face with a death-cry which seemed to find an echo from every hut and from behind every tree of Bekwando. It was like the knell of their last hope, for had he not told them that he was a fetish, that his body was proof against those wicked fires and that if the white men came, he himself would slay them! And now he was dead! The last barrier of their superstitious hope was broken down. Even the drunken King sat up and made strange noises.

Trent stooped down and, picking up the knife, cut the bonds which had bound the boy. He staggered up to his feet with a weak, little laugh.

"I knew you'd find me," he said. "Did I look awfully frightened?"

Trent patted him on the shoulder. "If I hadn't been in time," he said, "I'd have shot every man here and burned their huts over their heads. Pick up the knife, old chap, quick. I think those fellows mean mischief."

The two warriors who had stood by the priest were approaching, but when they came within a few yards of Trent's revolver they dropped on their knees. It was their token of submission. Trent nodded, and a moment afterwards the reason for their non-resistance was made evident. The remainder of the expedition came filling into the little enclosure.

Trent lit a cigar and sat down on a block of wood to consider what further was best to be done. In the meantime the natives were bringing yams to the white men with timid gestures. After a brief rest Trent called them to follow him. He walked across to the dwelling of the fetish man and tore down the curtain of dried grass which hung before the opening. Even then it was so dark inside that they had to light a torch before they could see the walls, and the stench was horrible.

A little chorus of murmurs escaped the lips of the Europeans as the interior became revealed to them. Opposite the door was a life-size and hideous effigy of a grinning god, made of wood and painted in many colours. By its side were other more horrible images and a row of human skulls hung from the roof. The hand of a white man, blackened with age, was stuck to the wall by a spear-head, the stench and filth of the whole place were pestilential. Yet outside a number of women and several of the men were on their knees hoping still against hope for aid from their ancient gods. There was a cry of horror when Trent unceremoniously kicked over the nearest idol - a yell of panic when the boy, with a gleam of mischief in his eyes, threw out amongst them a worm-eaten, hideous effigy and with a hearty kick stove in its hollow side. It lay there bald and ugly in the streaming sunshine, a block of misshapen wood ill-painted in flaring daubs, the thing which they had worshipped in gloom and secret, they and a generation before them - all the mystery of its shrouded existence, the terrible fetish words of the dead priest, the reverence which an all-powerful and inherited superstition had kept alive within them, came into their minds as they stood there trembling, and then fled away to be out of the reach of the empty, staring eyes - out of the reach of the vengeance which must surely fall from the skies upon these white savages. So they watched, the women beating their bosoms and uttering strange cries, the men stolid but scared. Trent and the boy came out coughing, and half-stupefied with the rank odour, and a little murmur went up from them. It was a device of the gods - a sort of madness with which they were afflicted. But soon their murmurs turned again into lamentation when they saw what was to come. Men were running backwards and forwards, piling up dried wood and branches against the idol-house, a single spark and the thing was done. A tongue of flame leaped up, a thick column of smoke stole straight up in the breathless air. Amazed, the people stood and saw the home of dreadful mystery, whence came the sentence of life and death, the voice of the King-maker, the omens of war and fortune, enveloped in flames, already a ruined and shapeless mass. Trent stood and watched it, smoking fiercely and felt himself a civiliser. But the boy seemed to feel some of the pathos of the moment and he looked curiously at the little crowd of wailing natives.

"And the people?" he asked.

"They are going to help me make my road," Trent said firmly. "I am going to teach them to work!"