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Chapter 30

MY DEAR AUNT ERNIE, - At last I have a chance of sending you a letter - and, this time at any rate, you won't have to complain about my sending you no news. I'll promise you that, before I begin, and you needn't get scared either, because it's all good. I've been awfully lucky, and all because that fellow Cathcart turned out such a funk and a bounder. It's the oddest thing in the world too, that old Cis should have written me to pick up all the news I could about Scarlett Trent and send it to you. Why, he's within a few feet of me at this moment, and I've been seeing him continually ever since I came here. But there, I'll try and begin at the beginning.

"You know Cathcart got the post of Consulting Surveyor and Engineer to the Bekwando Syndicate, and he was head man at our London place. Well, they sent me from Capetown to be junior to him, and a jolly good move for me too. I never did see anything in Cathcart! He's a lazy sort of chap, hates work, and I guess he only got the job because his uncle had got a lot of shares in the business. It seems he never wanted to come, hates any place except London, which accounts for a good deal.

"All the time when we were waiting, he wasn't a bit keen and kept on rotting about the good times he might have been having in London, and what a fearful country we were stranded in, till he almost gave me the blues, and if there hadn't been some jolly good shooting and a few nice chaps up at the Fort, I should have been miserable. As it was, I left him to himself a good deal, and he didn't like that either. I think Attra was a jolly place, and the landing in surf boats was no end of fun. Cathcart got beastly wet, and you should have seen what a stew he was in because he'd put on a beautiful white suit and it got spoilt. Well, things weren't very lively at Attra at first, I'm bound to admit. No one seemed to know much about the Bekwando Land Company, and the country that way was very rough. However, we got sent out at last, and Cathcart, he simply scoffed at the whole thing from the first. There was no proper labour, not half enough machinery, and none of the right sort - and the gradients and country between Bekwando and the sea were awful. Cathcart made a few reports and we did nothing but kick our heels about until HE came. You'll see I've written that in big letters, and I tell you if ever a man deserved to have his name written in capitals Scarlett Trent does, and the oddest part of it is he knows you, and he was awfully decent to me all the time.

"Well, out he went prospecting, before he'd been in the country twenty-four hours, and he came back quite cheerful. Then he spoke to Cathcart about starting work, and Cathcart was a perfect beast. He as good as told him that he'd come out under false pretences, that the whole affair was a swindle and that the road could not be made. Trent didn't hesitate, I can tell you. There were no arguments or promises with him. He chucked Cathcart on the spot, turned him out of the place, and swore he'd make the road himself. I asked if I might stop, and I think he was glad, anyhow we've been ever such pals ever since, and I never expect to have such a time again as long as I live! But do you know, Auntie, we've about made that road. When I see what we've done, sometimes I can't believe it. I only wish some of the bigwigs who've never been out of an office could see it. I know I'll hate to come away.

"You'd never believe the time we had - leaving out the fighting, which I am coming to by and by. We were beastly short of all sorts of machinery and our labour was awful. We had scarcely any at first, but Trent found 'em somehow, Kru boys and native Zulus and broken-down Europeans - any one who could hold a pick. More came every day, and we simply cut our way through the country. I think I was pretty useful, for you see I was the only chap there who knew even a bit about engineering or practical surveying, and I'd sit up all night lots of times working the thing out. We had a missionary come over the first Sunday, and wanted to preach, but Trent stopped him. 'We've got to work here,' he said, 'and Sunday or no Sunday I can't let my men stop to listen to you in the cool of the day. If you want to preach, come and take a pick now, and preach when they're resting,' and he did and worked well too, and afterwards when we had to knock off, he preached, and Trent took the chair and made 'em all listen. Well, when we got a bit inland we had the natives to deal with, and if you ask me I believe that's one reason Cathcart hated the whole thing so. He's a beastly coward I think, and he told me once he'd never let off a revolver in his life. Well, they tried to surprise us one night, but Trent was up himself watching, and I tell you we did give 'em beans. Great, ugly-looking, black chaps they were. Aunt Ernie, I shall never forget how I felt when I saw them come creeping through the long, rough grass with their beastly spears all poised ready to throw. And now for my own special adventure. Won't you shiver when you read this! I was taken prisoner by one of those chaps, carried off to their beastly village and very nearly murdered by a chap who seemed to be a cross between an executioner and a high-priest, and who kept dancing round me, singing a lot of rot and pointing a knife at me. You see, I was right on the outside of the fighting and I got a knock on the head with the butt-end of a spear, and was a bit silly for a moment, and a great chap, who'd seen me near Trent and guessed I was somebody, picked me up as though I'd been a baby and carried me off. Of course I kicked up no end of a row as soon as I came to, but what with the firing and the screeching no one heard me, and Trent said it was half an hour before he missed me and an hour before they started in pursuit. Anyhow, there I was, about morning-time when you were thinking of having your cup of tea, trussed up like a fowl in the middle of the village, and all the natives, beastly creatures, promenading round me and making faces and bawling out things - oh, it was beastly I can tell you! Then just as they seemed to have made up their mind to kill me, up strode Scarlett Trent alone, if you please, and he walked up to the whole lot of 'em as bold as brass. He'd got a long way ahead of the rest and thought they meant mischief, so he wouldn't wait for the others but faced a hundred of them with a revolver in his hand, and I can tell you things were lively then. I'd never be able to describe the next few minutes - one man Trent knocked down with his fist, and you could hear his skull crack, then he shot the chap who had been threatening me, and cut my bonds, and then they tried to resist us, and I thought it was all over. They were horribly afraid of Trent though, and while they were closing round us the others came up and the natives chucked it at once. They used to be a very brave race, but since they were able to get rum for their timber and ivory, they're a lazy and drunken lot. Well, I must tell you what Trent did then. He went to the priest's house where the gods were kept - such a beastly hole - and he burned the place before the eyes of all the natives. I believe they thought every moment that we should be struck dead, and they stood round in a ring, making an awful row, but they never dared interfere. He burnt the place to the ground, and then what do you think he did? From the King downward he made every Jack one of them come and work on his road. You'll never believe it, but it's perfectly true. They looked upon him as their conqueror, and they came like lambs when he ordered it. They think they're slaves you know, and don't understand their pay, but they get it every week and same as all the other labourers - and oh, Aunt Ernie, you should see the King work with a pickaxe! He is fat and so clumsy and so furiously angry, but he's too scared of Trent to do anything but obey orders, and there he works hour after hour, groaning, and the perspiration rolls off him as though he were in a Turkish bath. I could go on telling you odd things that happen here for hours, but I must finish soon as the chap is starting with the mail. I am enjoying it. It is something like life I can tell you, and aren't I lucky? Trent made me take Cathcart's place. I am getting 800 pounds a year, and only fancy it, he says he'll see that the directors make me a special grant. Everything looks very different here now, and I do hope the Company will be a success. There's whole heaps of mining machinery landed and waiting for the road to be finished to go up, and people seem to be streaming into the place. I wonder what Cathcart will say when he knows that the road is as good as done, and that I've got his job!

"Chap called for mail. Goodbye. "Ever your affectionate "FRED. "Trent is a brick."

Ernestine read the letter slowly, line by line, word by word. To tell the truth it was absorbingly interesting to her. Already there had come rumours of the daring and blunt, resistless force with which this new-made millionaire had confronted a gigantic task. His terse communications had found their way into the Press, and in them and in the boy's letter she seemed to discover something Caesarian. That night it was more than usually difficult for her to settle down to her own work. She read her nephew's letter more than once and continually she found her thoughts slipping away - traveling across the ocean to a tropical strip of country, where a heterogeneous crowd of men

were toiling and digging under a blazing sun. And, continually too, she seemed to see a man's face looking steadily over the sea to her, as he stood upright for a moment and rested from his toil. She was very fond of the boy - but the face was not his!