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Chapter 39

Scarcely a word passed between the two men until they found themselves in the smoking-room of Trent's house. A servant noiselessly arranged decanters and cigars upon the sideboard, and, in response to an impatient movement of Trent's, withdrew. Francis lit a cigarette. Trent, contrary to his custom, did not smoke. He walked to the door and softly locked it. Then he returned and stood looking down at his companion.

"Francis," he said, "you have been my enemy since the day I saw you first in Bekwando village."

Scarcely that," Francis objected. "I have distrusted you since then if you like."

"Call it what you like," Trent answered. "Only to-night you have served me a scurvy trick. You were a guest at my table and you gave me not the slightest warning. On the contrary, this morning you offered me a week's respite."

"The story I told," Francis answered, "could have had no significance to them."

"I don't know whether you are trying to deceive me or not," Trent said, "only if you do not know, let me tell you - Miss Wendermott is that old man's daughter!"

The man's start was real. There was no doubt about that. "And she knew?"

"She knew that he had been in Africa, but she believed that he had died there. What she believes at this moment I cannot tell. Your story evidently moved her. She will probably try to find out from you the truth."

Francis nodded.

"She has asked me to call upon her to-morrow."

"Exactly. Now, forgive my troubling you with personal details, but you've got to understand. I mean Miss Wendermott to be my wife."

Francis sat up in his chair genuinely surprised. Something like a scowl was on his dark, sallow face.

"Your wife !" he exclaimed, "aren't you joking, Trent?"

"I am not," Trent answered sharply. "From the moment I saw her that has been my fixed intention. Every one thinks of me as simply a speculator with the money fever in my veins. Perhaps that was true once. It isn't now! I must be rich to give her the position she deserves. That's all I care for money."

"I am very much interested," Francis said slowly, "to hear of your intentions. Hasn't it occurred to you, however, that your behaviour toward Miss Wendermott's father will take a great deal of explanation?"

"If there is no interference," Trent said, "I can do it. There is mystery on her part too, for I offered a large reward and news of him through my solicitor, and she actually refused to reply. She has refused any money accruing to her through her father, or to be brought into contact with any one who could tell her about him."

"The fact," Francis remarked drily, "is scarcely to her credit. Monty may have been disreputable enough, I've no doubt he was; but his going away and staying there all these years was a piece of noble unselfishness."

"Monty has been hardly used in some ways," Trent said. "I've done my best by him, though."

"That," Francis said coldly, "is a matter of opinion."

"I know very well," Trent answered, "what yours is. You are welcome to it. You can blackguard me all round London if you like in a week - but I want a week's grace."

"Why should I grant it you?"

Trent shrugged his shoulders.

"I won't threaten," he said, "and I won't offer to bribe you, but I've got to have that week's grace. We're both men, Francis, who've been accustomed to our own way, I think. I want to know on what terms you'll grant it me."

Francis knocked the ash off his cigarette and rose slowly to his feet.

"You want to know," he repeated meditatively, "on what terms I'll hold my tongue for a week. Well, here's my answer! On no terms at all!"

"You don't mean that," Trent said quietly.

"We shall see," Francis answered grimly. "I'll be frank with you, Trent. When we came in here you called me your enemy. Well, in a sense you were right. I distrusted and disliked you from the moment I first met you in Bekwando village with poor old Monty for a partner, and read the agreement you had drawn up and the clause about the death of either making the survivor sole legatee. In a regular fever swamp Monty was drinking poison like water - and you were watching. That may have seemed all right to

you. To me it was very much like murder. It was my mistrust of you which made me send men after you both through the bush, and, sure enough, they found poor Monty abandoned, left to die while you had hastened off to claim your booty. After that I had adventures enough of my own for a bit and I lost sight of you until I came across you and your gang road-making, and I am bound to admit that you saved my life. That's neither here nor there. I asked about Monty and you told me some plausible tale. I went to the place you spoke of - to find him of course spirited away. We have met again in England, Scarlett Trent, and I have asked once more for Monty. Once more I am met with evasions. This morning I granted you a week - now I take back my word. I am going to make public what I know to-morrow morning."

"Since this morning, then," Trent said, "your ill-will toward me has increased."

"Quite true," Francis answered. "We are playing with the cards upon the table, so I will be frank with you. What you told me about your intentions towards Miss Wendermott makes me determined to strike at once!"

"You yourself, I fancy," Trent said quietly, "admired her?"

"More than any woman I have ever met," Francis answered promptly, "and I consider your attitude towards her grossly presumptuous."

Trent stood quite still for a moment - then he unlocked the door.

"You had better go, Francis," he said quietly. "I have a defence prepared but I will reserve it. And listen, when I locked that door it was with a purpose. I had no mind to let you leave as you are leaving. Never mind. You can go - only be quick."

Francis paused upon the threshold. "You understand," he said significantly.

"I understand," Trent answered.

* * * * *

An hour passed, and Trent still remained in the chair before his writing-table, his head upon his hand, his eyes fixed upon vacancy. Afterwards he always thought of that hour as one of the bitterest of his life. A strong and self-reliant man, he had all his life ignored companionship, had been well content to live without friends, self-contained and self-sufficient. To-night the spectre of a great loneliness sat silently by his side! His heart was sore, his pride had been bitterly touched, the desire and the whole fabric of his life was in imminent and serious danger.

The man who had left him was an enemy and a prejudiced man, but Trent knew that he was honest. He was the first human being to whom he had ever betrayed the solitary ambition of his life, and his scornful words seemed still to bite the air. If - he was right! Why not? Trent looked with keen, merciless eyes through his past, and saw never a thing there to make him glad. He had started life a workman, with a few ambitions' all of a material nature - he had lived the life of a cold, scheming money-getter, absolutely selfish, negatively moral, doing little evil perhaps, but less good. There was nothing in his life to make him worthy of a woman's love, most surely there was nothing which could ever make it possible that such a woman as Ernestine Wendermott should ever care for him. All the wealth of Africa could never make him anything different from what he was. And yet, as he sat and realised this, he knew that he was writing down his life a failure. For, beside his desire for her, there were no other things he cared for in life. Already he was weary of financial warfare - the City life had palled upon him. He looked around the magnificent room in the mansion which his agents had bought and furnished for him. He looked at the pile of letters waiting for him upon his desk, little square envelopes many of them, but all telling the same tale, all tributes to his great success, and the mockery of it all smote hard upon the walls of his fortitude. Lower and lower his head drooped until it was buried in his folded arms - and the hour which followed he always reckoned the bitterest of his life.