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Chapter 25

On the summit of a little knoll, with a pipe between his teeth and his back against a palm-tree, Trent was lounging away an hour of the breathless night. Usually a sound sleeper, the wakefulness, which had pursued him from the instant his head had touched his travelling pillow an hour or so back, was not only an uncommon occurrence, but one which seemed proof against any effort on his part to overcome it. So he had risen and stolen away from the little camp where his companions lay wrapped in heavy slumber. They had closed their eyes in a dense and tropical darkness - so thick indeed that they had lit a fire, notwithstanding the stifling heat, to remove that vague feeling of oppression which chaos so complete seemed to bring with it. Its embers burnt now with a faint and sickly glare in the full flood of yellow moonlight which had fallen upon the country. From this point of vantage Trent could trace backwards their day's march for many miles, the white posts left by the surveyor even were visible, and in the background rose the mountains of Bekwando. It had been a hard week's work for Trent. He had found chaos, discontent, despair. The English agent of the Bekwando Land Company was on the point of cancelling his contract, the surveyors were spending valuable money without making any real attempt to start upon their undoubtedly difficult task. Everywhere the feeling seemed to be that the prosecution of his schemes was an impossibility. The road was altogether in the clouds. Trent was flatly told that the labour they required was absolutely unprocurable. Fortunately Trent knew the country, and he was a man of resource. From the moment when he had appeared upon the spot, things had begun to right themselves. He had found Oom Sam established as a sort of task-master and contractor, and had promptly dismissed him, with the result that the supply of Kru boys was instantly doubled. He had found other sources of labour and started them at once on clearing work, scornfully indifferent to the often-expressed doubts of the English surveyor as to possibility of making the road at all. He had chosen overseers with that swift and intuitive insight into character which in his case amounted almost to genius. With a half-sheet of notepaper and a pencil, he had mapped out a road which had made one, at least, of the two surveyors thoughtful, and had largely increased his respect for the English capitalist. Now he was on his way back from a tour almost to Bekwando itself by the route of the proposed road. Already the work of preparation had begun. Hundreds of natives left in their track were sawing down palm-trees, cutting away the bush, digging and making ready everywhere for that straight, wide thoroughfare which was to lead from Bekwando village to the sea-coast. Cables as to his progress had already been sent back to London. Apart from any other result, Trent knew that he had saved the Syndicate a fortune by his journey here.

The light of the moon grew stronger - the country lay stretched out before him like a map. With folded arms and a freshly-lit pipe Trent leaned with his back against the tree and fixed eyes. At first he saw nothing but that road, broad and white, stretching to the horizon and thronged with oxen-drawn wagons. Then the fancy suddenly left him and a girl's face seemed to be laughing into his - a face which was ever changing, gay and brilliant one moment, calm and seductively beautiful the next. He smoked his pipe furiously, perplexed and uneasy. One moment the face was Ernestine's, the next it was Monty's little girl laughing up at him from the worn and yellow tin-type. The promise of the one - had it been fulfilled in the woman? At least he knew that here was the one great weakness of his life. The curious flood of sentiment, which had led him to gamble for the child's picture, had merged with equal suddenness into passion at the coming of her later presentment. High above all his plans for the accumulation of power and wealth, he set before him now a desire which had become the moving impulse of his life - a desire primitive but overmastering - the desire of a strong man for the woman he loves. In London he had scarcely dared admit so much even to himself. Here, in this vast solitude, he was more master of himself - dreams which seemed to him the most beautiful and the most daring which he had ever conceived, filled his brain and stirred his senses till the blood in his veins seemed flowing to a new and wonderful music. Those were wonderful moments for him.

His pipe was nearly out, and a cooler breeze was stealing over the plain. After all, perhaps an hour or so's sleep would be possible now. He stretched himself and yawned, cast one more glance across the moonlit plain, and then stood suddenly still, stiffened into an attitude of breathless interest. Yonder, between two lines of shrubs, were moving bodies - men, footsore and weary, crawling along with slow, painful movements; one at least of them was a European, and even at that distance Trent could tell that they were in grievous straits. He felt for his revolver, and, finding that it was in his belt, descended the hill quickly towards them.

With every step which he took he could distinguish them more plainly. There were five Kru boys, a native of a tribe which he did not recognise, and a European who walked with reeling footsteps, and who, it was easy to see, was on the point of exhaustion. Soon they saw him, and a feeble shout greeted his approach. Trent was within hailing distance before he recognised the European. Then, with a little exclamation of surprise, he saw that it was Captain Francis.

They met face to face in a moment, but Francis never recognised him. His eyes were bloodshot, a coarse beard disguised his face, and his clothes hung about him in rags. Evidently he was in a terrible plight. When he spoke his voice sounded shrill and cracked.

"We are starving men," he said; "can you help us?"

"Of course we can," Trent answered quickly. "This way. We've plenty of stores."

The little party stumbled eagerly after him. In a few moments they were at the camp. Trent roused his companions, packages were hastily undone and a meal prepared. Scarcely a word was said or a question asked. One or two of the Kru boys seemed on the verge of insanity - Francis himself was hysterical and faint. Trent boiled a kettle and made some beef-tea himself. The first mouthful Francis was unable to swallow. His throat had swollen and his eyes were hideously bloodshot. Trent, who had seen men before in dire straits, fed him from a spoon and forced brandy between his lips. Certainly, at the time, he never stopped to consider that he was helping back to life the man who in all the world was most likely to do him ill.

"Better?" he asked presently.

"Much. What luck to find you. What are you after - gold?"

Trent shook his head.

"Not at present. We're planning out the new road from Attra to Bekwando."

Francis looked up with surprise.

"Never heard of it," he said; "but there's trouble ahead for you. They are dancing the war-dance at Bekwando, and the King has been shut up for three days with the priest and never opened his mouth. We were on our way from the interior, and relied upon them for food and drink. They've always been friendly, but this time we barely escaped with our lives."

Trent's face grew serious. This was bad news for him, and he was thankful that they had not carried out their first plan and commenced their prospecting at Bekwando village.

"We have a charter," he said, "and, if necessary, we must fight. I'm glad to be prepared though."

"A charter!" Francis pulled himself together and looked curiously at the man who was still bending over him.

"Great Heavens!" he exclaimed, "why, you are Scarlett Trent, the man whom I met with poor Villiers in Bekwando years ago."

Trent nodded.

"We waited for you," he said, "to witness our concession. I thought that you would remember."

"I thought," Francis said slowly, "that there was something familiar about you.... I remember it all now. You were gambling with poor old Monty for his daughter's picture against a bottle of brandy."

Trent winced a little.

"You have an excellent memory," he said drily.

Francis raised himself a little, and a fiercer note crept into his tone.

"It is coming back to me," he said. "I remember more about you now, Scarlett Trent. You are the man who left his partner to die in a jungle, that you might rob him of his share in the concession. Oh yes, you see my memory is coming back! I have an account against you, my man."

"It's a lie!" said Trent passionately. "When I left him, I honestly believed him to be a dead man."

"How many people will believe that?" Francis scoffed. "I shall take Monty with me to England. I have finished with this country for awhile - and then - and then -"

He was exhausted, and sank back speechless. Trent sat and watched him, smoking in thoughtful silence. They two were a little apart from the others, and Francis was fainting. A hand upon his throat - a drop from that phial in the medicine-chest - and his faint would carry him into eternity. And still Trent sat and smoked.