A KING IN KHAKI

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

HORSE ISLAND, a place of two or three hundred square miles in the West Indies, was managed by a former newspaper man named Smith with great profit to the shareholders of the Tropical Products Company, its owner. Christopher Beaumont, financier, conceived the idea of eliminating the stockholders and capturing the property for himself, and demanded that Smith falsify his annual report to indicate ultimate failure. Smith, unwilling to comply, planned to block the steal. His loyal assistants stood by him. Beaumont was at Georgetown on a nearby island. It was Smith's scheme to inveigle him to Horse Island and hold him there till the favorable report could be presented at the company's annual meeting in New York.

While waiting at Georgetown for a conference with the magnate, Smith encountered Beaumont's beautiful daughter Christabel exploring a cave, and entertained her with stories of Calico Jack, a pirate of former days, who was credited with having buried a treasure of two million five hundred thousand dollars in Horse Island.

The Beaumonts, at Smith's invitation, visited Horse Island.

CHAPTER V.

THE women, accompanied by the staff, had quitted the brightly lighted dining room for the more attractive moonlit spaces of the veranda. Beaumont, expressing the hope of seeing them all in the morning, had made his farewells to the men, and had detained Smith for a little talk, as he called it.

When the manager slid into the chair that Florence Rogers had just vacated, he was conscious of a premonition that O'Brien might prove to be right in his estimate of the chances for success of the plea he was about to make. Beaumont's air had lost none of its urbanity. When he had detained Smith from joining the general exodus from the dining room, he had laid a hand on the young man's shoulder in a way that might almost have been called affectionate and marked the culmination of the increasing friendliness of manner that he had manifested hour by hour all day.

Yet now that they were left alone,—now as he poured out another thimbleful of the white liqueur that Gregg's wine cellar had unexpectedly yielded for their feast, now as he sipped it, and brushed his lips daintily with his napkin afterward,—he underwent a subtle but very perceptible change. There was something alert in his manner, something curiously compact in his attitude, something that suggested a duelist about to engage an opponent's foil.

"We've been forgetting business for a day, Mr. Smith," he said, "and it has been very pleasant to do so. But I fancy you will agree with me that the time has come to settle down—and—settle up. After all," he went on, taking another sip out of his tiny glass,—"after all, I suppose the last twenty-four hours have not been wasted, even in a business way. I think I can understand why you wanted me to come over here, and I am willing to admit that what you have shown me has a certain bearing on the matter we must dispose of to-night." He shifted a little in his chair to command a more direct view of the young man at his left.

THEN, watching him minutely,—never missing or failing to appraise a single fleeting change of expression in Smith's face, although his eyes seemed chiefly occupied with the contents of the glass he held between his fingers,—then, quite deliberately, quite explicitly, Beaumont began stating the terms of the bargain he had hinted at two days before in Georgetown.

As for Smith, he had laid his cigar on a saucer beside an empty coffee cup and clasped his hands under the table. He had expected an offer like this; but somehow the sound of the pleasant, cynical, heartless voice that stated it aroused a sudden burst of anger in him, not easy to subdue. He wanted to stop Beaumont, without giving him an opportunity to go further. He felt degraded even by listening to the terms the big millionaire was suggesting to him; yet he did not speak; just lowered his eyes and pressed his unsteady lips together. The issue meant too much to let him risk a word until he had first smothered that burst of passion.

Beaumont's eyes had been quick to mark the sign of the struggle: the compressed lips, the high color, and tension of the arms betraying the clenched hands beneath the table. He slipped into an attitude of greater ease, and smiled a little. He knew these symptoms well enough, he thought, and he felt sure that all it needed now to land his fish was a supple wrist and taut line. These chaps all took the hook the same way the first time. They threshed around a good deal, and would not be hurried; but they all came up to the landing net, or, if it happened to be more convenient, to the gaff, at last. That the struggle he watched was with anger, not temptation, was an idea that, in the nature of things, would not have entered into his calculations at all.

AT last Smith spoke. "Before you say anything further about the bargain you propose, I want to talk a little about something else,—something that isn't so irrelevant to the outcome of our talk as you at first will be likely to think it to be. You said a moment ago that you thought you understood why I had brought you over to Horse Island,—why I had shown you the things we have spent the day in seeing. There was a reason for it; so far you were right. But the reason wasn't what you suppose it to be." He pushed the coffee cup in front of him away as he spoke, and leaned forward, his hands, quite steady now, stretched out across the table.

"A little more than four years ago, Mr. Beaumont, I sat in a room up stairs in this very house and watched Mortimer Gregg die. What killed him was a sudden rush of overwhelming despair. He had seen failure, the result of one enthusiastic mistake after another, piling up from the horizon like one of the black hurricane clouds we see down here. He had kept his face averted from it; but finally the thing overtook him. And indeed, as I sat there and watched him die, it seemed to me, just as it did to him, inevitable that the whole enterprise should come down in utter ruin.

"That was four years ago. What you see to-day is partly the result of my work, partly that of the men who have helped me. James and Collinwood are dead. The others, barring O'Brien, sat round this table to-night. We have fought hard; we have endured privations and discouragements; we have worked, on the whole, for utterly inadequate pay. They would tell you, if you were to put the question to them, that I have set them no harder tasks than I have set for myself."

"Believe me, Mr. Smith," Beaumont interrupted suavely, "it isn't necessary for you to review all that. I have known something of this before; and what I have known is amplified by what I have seen to-day. I quite understand."

"Please don't interrupt me," said Smith quietly. "You understand what we have done. Do you understand at all the spirit in which we have done it? Does it occur to you to wonder why we did it? Can you guess why, when Gregg died, I didn't stand from under and let the topheavy structure he had built collapse under its own weight; or why, electing an easier course still, I didn't move up here to Fort House and take up just the life he had laid down, simply stalling off the certain disaster as long as I could?"

His voice, usually so quiet, had risen a little, and though still not loud it had a wire edge of excitement to it. But now he leaned back rather suddenly in his chair and relapsed into his quieter manner.

"Over in Georgetown the other day, Mr. Beaumont, you remarked that I was scarcely a real person at all to the directors of the company in New York, and that you feared, had you not come to Georgetown, you would have failed to do me full justice. Well, I wanted this island to be a real place to you,—wanted it to be something more in your eyes than the equivalent of what you can write down between a dollar sign and a decimal point. I thought that if you could appreciate the reality of that, I might hope to make you appreciate the reality of something else,—something that has been very real to me for four years, something that I have made seem real to the men working here beside me.

"The reason I didn't go away when Gregg died was because the stockholders in this enterprise were something more than a mere abstraction to me. I knew who they were as well as you know to-day. They are not professional investors; they are people of modest means,—poor people, many of them,—clerks, school teachers, small merchants. And the money that was put in here, that was spent so recklessly in one costly mistake after another during those first years, that was real money; it was savings, most of it, and not the paper profits of stock juggling transactions. I don't think I am what would be called a sentimentalist, Mr. Beaumont; but I know, or I can guess, something of the hopes and something of the sacrifices that went along with the money that was put in here. Now I am going to tell you why I stayed."

He thrust back his chair from the table as he spoke, and got to his feet; his speech was coming a little quicker.

"It wasn't for the money; it wasn't for the delight of doing a good job; I could have shown better results, and could have got a bigger income somewhere else. It wasn't to retrieve my credit; my credit wasn't involved. I stayed here and worked, as you know I must have worked, in order that the people who had put their money in here should get it back.

"Well, I have succeeded. I, and these men who have been working with me, have justified all their hopes. This property is as valuable to-day as any of the stockholders ever hoped it would prove to be. Mr. Beaumont, can't you see that they are real too,—real human people,—and that they are the real owners of this island just as truly as you are the owner of your watch? I couldn't believe that you saw it that way. I can't believe that if you see it that way you will go ahead with what you speak of as the reorganization of the company. Put in plain terms, it can be expressed a good deal more simply than that. I won't offend your ears with those terms. But this is a real place, and it is owned by real people, and we, by real work, have made it valuable. That is what I wanted to say, Mr. Beaumont."

IT would have been hard to tell, after watching Beaumont's face awhile, whether Smith's hot, eager appeal was even being heard. Of anything like sympathy or protest, indignation or any touch of shame, he showed no trace whatever. He simply stood there and waited for the young man to finish. He had been surprised, though nothing of that

"She's Over There Under the Silk Cottons," Said Florence.