

Tropenkoller: Episodes from German Colonial Life (1896)

Shallow, broad tide-waves struck the coral floor with a soft, whispering splash, slipped back, then surged forward again, gentle and insinuating still, yet relentlessly annexing the shore.

Otherwise, midday lay in stillness. No animal sound. No human.

The mangroves that hemmed in most of the harbour rose like a dense thicket; their stiff, glossy, succulent-green leaves and their razor-sharp outlines in the clear air took on the appearance of painted tinplate. A little farther inland stood the slender, finely proportioned coconut palms, their lower, withered fronds drooping, sun-vanquished, in indolent submission. At their feet sprawled a confusion of lianas and thorny scrub, prickling, shapeless, drained of colour. Only here and there did some grotesque flower or fruit flare briefly from the tangle. Like rock formations, a few massive baobab giants thrust themselves upward: ice-grey, thousand-year-old sentinels of the coast, welcome landmarks to passing sailors.

Only a few steps from the advancing tide, the coastal ground, brittle red clay mixed with sand, rose sharply to a height of some thirty metres. Where trees and shrubs had been cleared from the slope, tropical rains had torn it apart with savage force. Between deep fissures and jagged ridges, something resembling a footpath wound here and there from the shore upward.

Beneath one of the great baobabs at the edge of the plateau, at that hour, sat a human figure on the felled trunk of a palm, so utterly motionless that it seemed no more alive than the stones and plants surrounding it.

The figure was a woman. She wore the loose white suit and white cork helmet that constituted European dress. Her build was slender, youthful. Beyond the helmet, her face was shaded by a large parasol lined in green. Parasol and head rested against the trunk of the baobab. Her gaze wandered across the wide, blue, luminous sea, across that exalted image of solitude, freedom, and immensity.

Suddenly, a strident barracks signal ruptured the midday stillness. From the boma came the call to resume work.

“Fall in!”

With a slight tightening of her brows, the young woman woke from her reverie. The trumpet call rang out like a jarring intrusion in this world of freedom and quiet. Yet the frown dissolved into a light smile when a still harsher echo drifted across from the nearby donkey pasture.

“Ih-a, ih-a, ia, ia, ia!”

A cacophony of dreadful dissonance. The town wits had christened these musicians “the nightingales of Satuta.”

A white dog, a mongrel of terrier, dachshund, and half-wild jackal, which until then had been sitting beside its mistress, solemnly observing a smooth, sluggish millipede as thick as a finger, pricked up one ear, grumbled faintly, and sprang to its feet, tail wagging.

The mistress turned her face inland and looked down the broad road, lined with castor plants and running between ruler-straight thorn hedges.

“Ah, of course. Persante. Punctual as the sun.”

The man thus praised approached with measured steps. He was tall and slender, still young, with a small head held slightly bowed, a narrow yellowish-pale face, high cheekbones, and deep-set, burning eyes. In his gaze and in the line of his mouth lay an obstinate, fanatical rigour.

Six years earlier, when this young man had still been inspecting his potato fields in Prussia and selling rye, he had looked different. Then, northern sun and wind had burned a healthy brown into his full cheeks. He carried his head high, his strong shoulders straight, a rugged, thickset son of the soil much like his neighbours.

Then came poor harvests, while grain prices fell all the same. Persante made a swift decision. He turned his property into cash and emigrated to the young German colony. He meant to work. He meant to earn.

And work he did, for five long years beneath a marrow-drying sun, in the enervating air of a hothouse climate. With northern tenacity and energy, he defied every climatic hardship. He earned nothing.

Persante flicked lightly at his right rubber boot with his hippopotamus-hide whip and hummed to himself:

If only the Rhine were not there,

And the old toll.

He noticed the lady only when he stood directly before her. He lifted his cork helmet slightly, though in such a way that his head remained shaded.

“Does the young lady venture outdoors at this hour?” he asked, with formal, faintly admonishing propriety.

As she looked at him, her thin, brownish, irregular face gleamed with sardonic amusement. Ignoring the reproach in his remark, she said, "Just now, when they blew the signal at the boma, Brumm and I made a bet that Bana Persante would be the most eager of all those heading off to work. Punctual to the minute and straight as a die, as always, you incorrigible pedant."

He smiled mildly, as one smiles at the wilfulness of a spoiled girl.

"Did Brumm truly bet against that?"

"Yes. You know he always sides with his friend Wergentin. With Brumm, the wish was father to the thought. And where are you hurrying off to now?"

"Down to the shore. To have the boriti poles unloaded for the bridge construction."

"Nonsense. I doubt a single one of your people is even in place yet. Sensibly enough, they are extending their siesta a little longer than your restlessness allows."

"All the more reason to rouse them," Persante replied, saluted her, and went on.

The girl watched him as he strode along the edge of the slope, disappearing and reappearing among the towering banana leaves.

The fool, she thought with pity. The fool.

There he stands from sunrise to sunset in the swamp, merely so that the Blacks will not work in their accustomed way, with leisure, but in his way: punctual, restless, rigid, in a word, northern. It is as though he demanded that the palm tree bear grapes. And what does he gain? Workers who run from him daily, punishments without end, and a fever that slowly consumes him. But who has ever converted another by preaching?