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Chapter 27

A fortnight afterwards Trent rode into Attra, pale, gaunt, and hollow-eyed. The whole history of those days would never be known by another man! Upon Trent they had left their mark for ever. Every hour of his time in this country he reckoned of great value - yet he had devoted fourteen days to saving the life of John Francis. Such days too - and such nights! They had carried him sometimes in a dead stupor, sometimes a raving madman, along a wild bush-track across rivers and swamps into the town of Garba, where years ago a Congo trader, who had made a fortune, had built a little white-washed hospital! He was safe now, but surely never a man before had walked so near the "Valley of the Shadow of Death." A single moment's vigilance relaxed, a blanket displaced, a dose of brandy forgotten, and Trent might have walked this life a multi-millionaire, a peer, a little god amongst his fellows, freed for ever from all anxiety. But Francis was tended as never a man was tended before. Trent himself had done his share of the carrying, ever keeping his eyes fixed upon the death-lit face of their burden, every ready to fight off the progress of the fever and ague, as the twitching lips or shivering limbs gave warning of a change. For fourteen days he had not slept; until they had reached Garba his clothes had never been changed since they had started upon their perilous journey. As he rode into Attra he reeled a little in his saddle, and he walked into the office of the Agent more like a ghost than a man.

Two men, Cathcart and his assistant, who was only a boy, were lounging in low chairs. As he entered they looked up, exchanging quick, startled glances. Then Cathcart gave vent to a little exclamation.

"Great Heavens, Trent, what have you been doing?" Trent sank into a chair. "Get me some wine," he said. "I am all right but over-tired."

Cathcart poured champagne into a tumbler. Trent emptied it at a gulp and asked for biscuits. The man's recuperative powers were wonderful. Already the deathly whiteness was passing from his cheeks.

"Where is Da Souza?" he asked.

"Gone back to England," Cathcart answered, looking out of the open casement shaded from the sun by the sloping roof. "His steamer started yesterday."

Trent was puzzled. He scarcely understood this move.

"Did he give any reason?"

Cathcart smoked for a moment in silence. After all though a disclosure would be unpleasant, it was inevitable and as well now as any time. "I think," Cathcart said, "that he has gone to try and sell his shares in the Bekwando concessions."

"Gone - to - sell - his - shares!" Trent repeated slowly. "You mean to say that he has gone straight from here to put a hundred thousand Bekwando shares upon the market?"

Cathcart nodded.

He said so!

"And why? Did he tell you that?"

"He has come to the conclusion," Cathcart said, "that the scheme is impracticable altogether and the concessions worthless. He is going to get what he can for his shares while he has the chance."

Trent drained his tumbler and lit a cigar. "So much for Da Souza," he said. "And now I should like to know, Mr. Stanley Cathcart, what the devil you and your assistant are doing shacking here in the cool of the day when you are the servants of the Bekwando Company and there's work to be done of the utmost importance? The whole place seems to be asleep. Where's your labour? There's not a soul at work. We planned exactly when to start the road. What the mischief do you mean by wasting a fortnight?"

Cathcart coughed and was obviously ill-at-ease, but he answered with some show of dignity.

"I have come to the conclusion, Mr. Trent, that the making of the road is impracticable and useless. There is insufficient labour and poor tools, no satisfactory method of draining the swampy country, and further, I don't think any one would work with the constant fear of an attack from those savages."

"So that's your opinion, is it?" Trent said grimly.

"That is my opinion," Cathcart answered. "I have embodied it in a report which I despatched to the secretary of the Company by Mr. Da Souza."

Trent rose and opened the door which swung into the little room.

"Out you go!" he said fiercely.

Cathcart looked at him in blank astonishment.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed. "These are my quarters!"

"They're nothing of the sort," Trent answered. "They are the headquarters in this country of the Bekwando Company, with which you have nothing to do! Out you go!"

"Don't talk rubbish!" Cathcart said angrily. "I'm the authorised and properly appointed surveyor here!"

"You're a liar!" Trent answered, "you've no connection at all with the Company! you're dismissed, sir, for incompetence and cowardice, and if you're not off the premises in three minutes it'll be the worse for you!"

"You - you - haven't the power to do this," Cathcart stuttered.

Trent laughed.

"We'll see about that," he said. "I never had much faith in you, sir, and I guess you only got the job by a rig. But out you go now, sharp. If there's anything owing you, you can claim it in London.

"There are all my clothes - " Cathcart began.

Trent laid his hands upon his shoulders and threw him softly outside.

"I'll send your clothes to the hotel," he said. "Take my advice, young man, and keep out of my sight till you can find a steamer to take you where they'll pay you for doing nothing. You're the sort of man who irritates me and it's a nasty climate for getting angry in!"

Cathcart picked himself up. "Well, I should like to know who's going to make your road," he said spitefully.

"I'll make it myself," Trent roared. "Don't you think a little thing like some stupid laws of science will stand in my way, or the way of a man who knows his own mind. I tell you I'll level that road from the tree there which we marked as the starting-point to the very centre of Bekwando."

He slammed the door and re-entered the room. The boy was there, sitting upon the office stool hard at work with a pair of compasses.

"What the devil are you doing there?" Trent asked. "Out you go with your master!"

The boy looked up. He had a fair, smooth face, but lips like Trent's own.

"I'm just thinking about that first bend by Kurru corner, sir," he said, "I'm not sure about the level."

Trent's face relaxed. He held out his hand.

"My boy," he said, "I'll make your fortune as sure as my name is Scarlett Trent!"

"We'll make that road anyway," the boy answered, with a smile.

* * * * *

After a rest Trent climbed the hill to the Basle Mission House. There was no sign of Monty on the potato patch, and the woman who opened the door started when she saw him.

"How is he?" Trent asked quickly.

The woman looked at him in wonder.

"Why, he's gone, sir - gone with the Jewish gentleman who said that you had sent him."

"Where to?" Trent asked quickly.

"Why, to England in the Ophir!" the woman answered. Then Trent began to feel that, after all, the struggle of his life was only beginning.