BENITA--AN AFRICAN ROMANCE

I

CONFIDENCES

Beautiful, beautiful was that night! No air that stirred; the black smoke from the funnels of the mail steamer Zanzibar lay low over the surface of the sea like vast, floating ostrich plumes that vanished one by one in the starlight. Benita Beatrix Clifford, for that was her full name, who had been christened Benita after her mother and Beatrix after her father's only sister, leaning idly over the bulwark rail, thought to herself that a child might have sailed that sea in a boat of bark and come safely into port.

Then a tall man of about thirty years of age, who was smoking a cigar, strolled up to her. At his coming she moved a little as though to make room for him beside her, and there was something in the motion which, had anyone been there to observe it, might have suggested that these two were upon terms of friendship, or still greater intimacy. For a moment he hesitated, and while he did so an expression of doubt, of distress even, gathered on his face. It was as though he understood that a great deal depended on whether he accepted or declined that gentle invitation,

and knew not which to do.

Indeed, much did depend upon it, no less than the destinies of both of them. If Robert Seymour had gone by to finish his cigar in solitude, why then this story would have had a very different ending; or, rather, who can say how it might have ended? The dread, foredoomed event with which that night was big would have come to its awful birth leaving certain words unspoken. Violent separation must have ensued, and even if both of them had survived the terror, what prospect was there that their lives would again have crossed each other in that wide Africa?

But it was not so fated, for just as he put his foot forward to continue his march Benita spoke in her low and pleasant voice.

"Are you going to the smoking-room or to the saloon to dance, Mr. Seymour? One of the officers just told me that there is to be a dance," she added, in explanation, "because it is so calm that we might fancy ourselves ashore."

"Neither," he answered. "The smoking-room is stuffy, and my dancing days are over. No; I proposed to take exercise after that big dinner, and then to sit in a chair and fall asleep. But," he added, and his voice grew interested, "how did you know that it was I? You never turned your head."

"I have ears in my head as well as eyes," she answered with a little

laugh, "and after we have been nearly a month together on this ship I ought to know your step."

"I never remember that anyone ever recognized it before," he said, more to himself than to her, then came and leaned over the rail at her side. His doubts were gone. Fate had spoken.

For a while there was silence between them, then he asked her if she were not going to the dance.

Benita shook her head.

"Why not? You are fond of dancing, and you dance very well. Also there are plenty of officers for partners, especially Captain----" and he checked himself.

"I know," she said; "it would be pleasant, but--Mr. Seymour, will you think me foolish if I tell you something?"

"I have never thought you foolish yet, Miss Clifford, so I don't know why I should begin now. What is it?"

"I am not going to the dance because I am afraid, yes, horribly afraid."

"Afraid! Afraid of what?"

"I don't quite know, but, Mr. Seymour, I feel as though we were all of us upon the edge of some dreadful catastrophe--as though there were about to be a mighty change, and beyond it another life, something new and unfamiliar. It came over me at dinner--that was why I left the table. Quite suddenly I looked, and all the people were different, yes, all except a few."

"Was I different?" he asked curiously.

"No, you were not," and he thought he heard her add "Thank God!" beneath her breath.

"And were you different?"

"I don't know. I never looked at myself; I was the seer, not the seen. I have always been like that."

"Indigestion," he said reflectively. "We eat too much on board ship, and the dinner was very long and heavy. I told you so, that's why I'm taking--I mean why I wanted to take exercise."

"And to go to sleep afterwards."

"Yes, first the exercise, then the sleep. Miss Clifford, that is the rule of life--and death. With sleep thought ends, therefore for some of us your catastrophe is much to be desired, for it would mean long sleep

and no thought."

"I said that they were changed, not that they had ceased to think. Perhaps they thought the more."

"Then let us pray that your catastrophe may be averted. I prescribe for you bismuth and carbonate of soda. Also in this weather it seems difficult to imagine such a thing. Look now, Miss Clifford," he added, with a note of enthusiasm in his voice, pointing towards the east, "look."

Her eyes followed his outstretched hand, and there, above the level ocean, rose the great orb of the African moon. Lo! of a sudden all that ocean turned to silver, a wide path of rippling silver stretched from it to them. It might have been the road of angels. The sweet soft light beat upon their ship, showing its tapering masts and every detail of the rigging. It passed on beyond them, and revealed the low, foam-fringed coast-line rising here and there, dotted with kloofs and their clinging bush. Even the round huts of Kaffir kraals became faintly visible in that radiance. Other things became visible also--for instance, the features of this pair.

The man was light in his colouring, fair-skinned, with fair hair which already showed a tendency towards greyness, especially in the moustache, for he wore no beard. His face was clean cut, not particularly handsome, since, their fineness notwithstanding, his features lacked regularity;

the cheekbones were too high and the chin was too small, small faults redeemed to some extent by the steady and cheerful grey eyes. For the rest, he was broad-shouldered and well-set-up, sealed with the indescribable stamp of the English gentleman. Such was the appearance of Robert Seymour.

In that light the girl at his side looked lovely, though, in fact, she had no real claims to loveliness, except perhaps as regards her figure, which was agile, rounded, and peculiarly graceful. Her foreign-looking face was unusual, dark-eyed, a somewhat large and very mobile mouth, fair and waving hair, a broad forehead, a sweet and at times wistful face, thoughtful for the most part, but apt to be irradiated by sudden smiles. Not a beautiful woman at all, but exceedingly attractive, one possessing magnetism.

She gazed, first at the moon and the silver road beneath it, then, turning, at the land beyond.

"We are very near to Africa, at last," she said.

"Too near, I think," he answered. "If I were the captain I should stand out a point or two. It is a strange country, full of surprises. Miss Clifford, will you think me rude if I ask you why you are going there? You have never told me--quite."

"No, because the story is rather a sad one; but you shall hear it if you

wish. Do you?"

He nodded, and drew up two deck chairs, in which they settled themselves in a corner made by one of the inboard boats, their faces still towards the sea.

"You know I was born in Africa," she said, "and lived there till I was thirteen years old--why, I find I can still speak Zulu; I did so this afternoon. My father was one of the early settlers in Natal. His father was a clergyman, a younger son of the Lincolnshire Cliffords. They are great people there still, though I don't suppose that they are aware of my existence."

"I know them," answered Robert Seymour. "Indeed, I was shooting at their place last November--when the smash came," and he sighed; "but go on."

"Well, my father quarrelled with his father, I don't know what about, and emigrated. In Natal he married my mother, a Miss Ferreira, whose name--like mine and her mother's--was Benita. She was one of two sisters, and her father, Andreas Ferreira, who married an English lady, was half Dutch and half Portuguese. I remember him well, a fine old man with dark eyes and an iron-grey beard. He was wealthy as things went in those days--that is to say, he had lots of land in Natal and the Transvaal, and great herds of stock. So you see I am half English, some Dutch, and more than a quarter Portuguese--quite a mixture of races. My father and mother did not get on well together. Mr. Seymour, I may as

well tell you all the truth: he drank, and although he was passionately fond of her, she was jealous of him. Also he gambled away most of her patrimony, and after old Andreas Ferreira's death they grew poor. One night there was a dreadful scene between them, and in his madness he struck her.

"Well, she was a very proud woman, determined, too, and she turned on him and said--for I heard her--'I will never forgive you; we have done with each other.' Next morning, when my father was sober, he begged her pardon, but she made no answer, although he was starting somewhere on a fortnight's trek. When he had gone my mother ordered the Cape cart, packed up her clothes, took some money that she had put away, drove to Durban, and after making arrangements at the bank about a small private income of her own, sailed with me for England, leaving a letter for my father in which she said that she would never see him again, and if he tried to interfere with me she would put me under the protection of the English court, which would not allow me to be taken to the home of a drunkard.

"In England we went to live in London with my aunt, who had married a Major King, but was a widow with five children. My father often wrote to persuade my mother to go back to him, but she never would, which I think was wrong of her. So things went on for twelve years or more, till one day my mother suddenly died, and I came into her little fortune of between £200 and £300 a year, which she had tied up so that nobody can touch it. That was about a year ago. I wrote to tell my father of her

death, and received a pitiful letter; indeed, I have had several of them. He implored me to come out to him and not to leave him to die in his loneliness, as he soon would do of a broken heart, if I did not. He said that he had long ago given up drinking, which was the cause of the ruin of his life, and sent a certificate signed by a magistrate and a doctor to that effect. Well, in the end, although all my cousins and their mother advised me against it, I consented, and here I am. He is to meet me at Durban, but how we shall get on together is more than I can say, though I long to see him, for after all he is my father."

"It was good of you to come, under all the circumstances. You must have a brave heart," said Robert reflectively.

"It is my duty," she answered. "And for the rest, I am not afraid who was born to Africa. Indeed, often and often have I wished to be back there again, out on the veld, far away from the London streets and fog. I am young and strong, and I want to see things, natural things--not those made by man, you know--the things I remember as a child. One can always go back to London."

"Yes, or at least some people can. It is a curious thing, Miss Clifford, but as it happens I have met your father. You always reminded me of the man, but I had forgotten his name. Now it comes back to me; it was Clifford."

"Where on earth?" she asked, astonished.

"In a queer place. As I told you, I have visited South Africa before, under different circumstances. Four years ago I was out here big-game shooting. Going in from the East coast my brother and I--he is dead now, poor fellow--got up somewhere in the Matabele country, on the banks of the Zambesi. As we didn't find much game there we were going to strike south, when some natives told us of a wonderful ruin that stood on a hill overhanging the river a few miles farther on. So, leaving the waggon on the hither side of the steep nek, over which it would have been difficult to drag it, my brother and I took our rifles and a bag of food and started. The place was farther off than we thought, although from the top of the nek we could see it clearly enough, and before we reached it dark had fallen.

"Now we had observed a waggon and a tent outside the wall which we thought must belong to white men, and headed for them. There was a light in the tent, and the flap was open, the night being very hot. Inside two men were seated, one old, with a grey beard, and the other, a good-looking fellow--under forty, I should say--with a Jewish face, dark, piercing eyes, and a black, pointed beard. They were engaged in examining a heap of gold beads and bangles, which lay on the table between them. As I was about to speak, the black-bearded man heard or caught sight of us, and seizing a rifle that leaned against the table, swung round and covered me.

"'For God's sake don't shoot, Jacob,' said the old man; 'they are

English.'

"'Best dead, any way,' answered the other, in a soft voice, with a slight foreign accent, 'we don't want spies or thieves here.'

"'We are neither, but I can shoot as well as you, friend,' I remarked, for by this time my rifle was on him.

"Then he thought better of it, and dropped his gun, and we explained that we were merely on an archæological expedition. The end of it was that we became capital friends, though neither of us could cotton much to Mr. Jacob--I forget his other name. He struck me as too handy with his rifle, and was, I gathered, an individual with a mysterious and rather lurid past. To cut a long story short, when he found out that we had no intention of poaching, your father, for it was he, told us frankly that they were treasure-hunting, having got hold of some story about a vast store of gold which had been hidden away there by Portuguese two or three centuries before. Their trouble was, however, that the Makalanga, who lived in the fortress, which was called Bambatse, would not allow them to dig, because they said the place was haunted, and if they did so it would bring bad luck to their tribe."

"And did they ever get in?" asked Benita.

"I am sure I don't know, for we went next day, though before we left we called on the Makalanga, who admitted us all readily enough so long as

we brought no spades with us. By the way, the gold we saw your father and his friend examining was found in some ancient graves outside the walls, but had nothing to do with the big and mythical treasure."

"What was the place like? I love old ruins," broke in Benita again.

"Oh! wonderful. A gigantic, circular wall built by heaven knows who, then half-way up the hill another wall, and near the top a third wall which, I understood, surrounded a sort of holy of holies, and above everything, on the brink of the precipice, a great cone of granite."

"Artificial or natural?"

"I don't know. They would not let us up there, but we were introduced to their chief and high priest, Church and State in one, and a wonderful old man he was, very wise and very gentle. I remember he told me he believed we should meet again, which seemed an odd thing for him to say. I asked him about the treasure and why he would not let the other white men look for it. He answered that it would never be found by any man, white or black, that only a woman would find it at the appointed time, when it pleased the Spirit of Bambatse, under whose guardianship it was."

"Who was the Spirit of Bambatse, Mr. Seymour?"

"I can't tell you, couldn't make out anything definite about her, except

that she was said to be white, and to appear sometimes at sunrise, or in the moonlight, standing upon the tall point of rock of which I told you. I remember that I got up before the dawn to look for her--like an idiot, for of course I saw nothing--and that's all I know about the matter."

"Did you have any talk with my father, Mr. Seymour--alone, I mean?"

"Yes, a little. The next day he walked back to our waggon with us, being glad, I fancy, of a change from the perpetual society of his partner Jacob. That wasn't wonderful in a man who had been brought up at Eton and Oxford, as I found out he had, like myself, and whatever his failings may have been--although we saw no sign of them, for he would not touch a drop of spirits--was a gentleman, which Jacob wasn't. Still, he--Jacob--had read a lot, especially on out-of-the-way subjects, and could talk every language under the sun--a clever and agreeable scoundrel in short."

"Did my father say anything about himself?"

"Yes; he told me that he had been an unsuccessful man all his life, and had much to reproach himself with, for we got quite confidential at last. He added that he had a family in England--what family he didn't say--whom he was anxious to make wealthy by way of reparation for past misdeeds, and that was why he was treasure-hunting. However, from what you tell me, I fear he never found anything."

"No, Mr. Seymour, he never found it and never will, but all the same I am glad to hear that he was thinking of us. Also I should like to explore that place, Bambatse."

"So should I, Miss Clifford, in your company, and your father's, but not in that of Jacob. If ever you should go there with him, I say:--'Beware of Jacob.'"

"Oh! I am not afraid of Jacob," she answered with a laugh, "although I believe that my father still has something to do with him--at least in one of his letters he mentioned his partner, who was a German."

"A German! I think that he must have meant a German Jew."

After this there was silence between them for a time, then he said suddenly, "You have told me your story, would you like to hear mine?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Well, it won't take you long to listen to it, for, Miss Clifford, like Canning's needy knife-grinder, I have really none to tell. You see before you one of the most useless persons in the world, an undistinguished member of what is called in England the 'leisured class,' who can do absolutely nothing that is worth doing, except shoot straight."

"Indeed," said Benita.

"You do not seem impressed with that accomplishment," he went on, "yet it is an honest fact that for the last fifteen years--I was thirty-two this month--practically my whole time has been given up to it, with a little fishing thrown in in the spring. As I want to make the most of myself, I will add that I am supposed to be among the six best shots in England, and that my ambition--yes, great Heavens! my ambition--was to become better than the other five. By that sin fell the poor man who speaks to you. I was supposed to have abilities, but I neglected them all to pursue this form of idleness. I entered no profession, I did no work, with the result that at thirty-two I am ruined and almost hopeless."

"Why ruined and hopeless?" she asked anxiously, for the way in which they were spoken grieved her more than the words themselves.

"Ruined because my old uncle, the Honourable John Seymour Seymour, whose heir I was, committed the indiscretion of marrying a young lady who has presented him with thriving twins. With the appearance of those twins my prospects disappeared, as did the allowance of £1,500 a year that he was good enough to make me on which to keep up a position as his next-of-kin. I had something of my own, but also I had debts, and at the present moment a draft in my pocket for £2,163 14s. 5d., and a little loose cash, represents the total of my worldly goods, just about the sum

I have been accustomed to spend per annum."

"I don't call that ruin, I call that riches," said Benita, relieved. "With £2,000 to begin on you may make a fortune in Africa. But how about the hopelessness?"

"I am hopeless because I have absolutely nothing to which to look forward. Really, when that £2,000 is gone I do not know how to earn a sixpence. In this dilemma it occurred to me that the only thing I could do was to turn my shooting to practical account, and become a hunter of big game. Therefore I propose to kill elephants until an elephant kills me. At least," he added in a changed voice, "I did so propose until half an hour ago."