

IV

MR. CLIFFORD

Although the shock of the blow she had received upon her head was sufficient to make her insensible for so many hours, Benita's injuries were not of a really serious nature, for as it happened the falling block, or whatever it may have been, had hit her forehead slantwise, and not full, to which accident she owed it that, although the skin was torn and the scalp bruised, her skull had escaped fracture. Under proper medical care her senses soon came back to her, but as she was quite dazed and thought herself still on board the Zanzibar, the doctor considered it wise to preserve her in that illusion for a while. So after she had swallowed some broth he gave her a sleeping draught, the effects of which she did not shake off till the following morning.

Then she came to herself completely, and was astonished to feel the pain in her head, which had been bandaged, and to see a strange stewardess sitting by her with a cup of beef-tea in her hand.

"Where am I? Is it a dream?" she asked.

"Drink this and I will tell you," answered the stewardess.

Benita obeyed, for she felt hungry, then repeated her question.

"Your steamer was shipwrecked," said the stewardess, "and a great many poor people were drowned, but you were saved in a boat. Look, there are your clothes; they were never in the water."

"Who carried me into the boat?" asked Benita in a low voice.

"A gentleman, they say, Miss, who had wrapped you in a blanket and put a lifebelt on you."

Now Benita remembered everything that happened before the darkness fell--the question to which she had given no answer, the young couple who stood flirting by her--all came back to her.

"Was Mr. Seymour saved?" she whispered, her face grey with dread.

"I dare say, Miss," answered the stewardess evasively. "But there is no gentleman of that name aboard this ship."

At that moment the doctor came in, and him, too, she plied with questions. But having learned the story of Robert's self-sacrifice from Mr. Thompson and the others, he would give her no answer, for he guessed how matters had stood between them, and feared the effects of the shock. All he could say was that he hoped Mr. Seymour had escaped in some other boat.

It was not until the third morning that Benita was allowed to learn

the truth, which indeed it was impossible to conceal any longer. Mr. Thompson came to her cabin and told her everything, while she listened silently, horrified, amazed.

"Miss Clifford," he said, "I think it was one of the bravest things that a man ever did. On the ship I always thought him rather a head-in-air kind of swell, but he was a splendid fellow, and I pray God that he has lived, as the lady and child for whom he offered himself up have done, for they are both well again."

"Yes," she repeated after him mechanically, "splendid fellow indeed, and," she added, with a strange flash of conviction, "I believe that he is still alive. If he were dead I should know it."

"I am glad to hear you say so," said Mr. Thompson, who believed the exact contrary.

"Listen," she went on. "I will tell you something. When that dreadful accident occurred Mr. Seymour had just asked me to marry him, and I was going to answer that I would--because I love him. I believe that I shall still give him that answer."

Mr. Thompson replied again that he hoped so, which, being as honest and tender-hearted as he was brave and capable, he did most earnestly; but in his heart he reflected that her answer would not be given this side of the grave. Then, as he had been deputed to do, he handed her the note

which had been found in the bosom of her dress, and, able to bear no more of this painful scene, hurried from the cabin. She read it greedily twice, and pressed it to her lips, murmuring:

"Yes, I will think kindly of you, Robert Seymour, kindly as woman can of man, and now or afterwards you shall have your answer, if you still wish for it. Whenever you come or wherever I go, it shall be ready for you."

That afternoon, when she was more composed, Mrs. Jeffreys came to see Benita, bringing her baby with her. The poor woman was still pale and shaken, but the child had taken no hurt at all from its immersion in that warm water.

"What can you think of me?" she said, falling on her knees by Benita. "But oh! I did not know what I was doing. It was terror and my child," and she kissed the sleeping infant passionately. "Also I did not understand at the time--I was too dazed. And--that hero--he gave his life for me when the others wished to beat me off with oars. Yes, his blood is upon my hands--he who died that I and my child might live."

Benita looked at her and answered, very gently:

"Perhaps he did not die after all. Do not grieve, for if he did it was a very glorious death, and I am prouder of him than I could have been had he lived on like the others--who wished to beat you off with oars. Whatever is, is by God's Will, and doubtless for the best. At the least,

you and your child will be restored to your husband, though it cost me one who would have been--my husband."

That evening Benita came upon the deck and spoke with the other ladies who were saved, learning every detail that she could gather. But to none of the men, except to Mr. Thompson, would she say a single word, and soon, seeing how the matter stood, they hid themselves away from her as they had already done from Mrs. Jeffreys.

The Castle had hung about the scene of the shipwreck for thirty hours, and rescued one other boatload of survivors, also a stoker clinging to a piece of wreckage. But with the shore she had been unable to communicate, for the dreaded wind had risen, and the breakers were quite impassable to any boat. To a passing steamer bound for Port Elizabeth, however, she had reported the terrible disaster, which by now was known all over the world, together with the names of those whom she had picked up in the boats.

On the night of the day of Benita's interview with Mrs. Jeffreys, the Castle arrived off Durban and anchored, since she was too big a vessel to cross the bar as it was in those days. At dawn the stewardess awoke Benita from the uneasy sleep in which she lay, to tell her that an old gentleman had come off in the tug and wished to see her; for fear of exciting false hopes she was very careful to add that word "old." With her help Benita dressed herself, and as the sun rose, flooding the Berea, the Point, the white town and fair Natal beyond with light, she

went on to the deck, and there, leaning over the bulwark, saw a thin, grey-bearded man of whom after all these years the aspect was still familiar.

A curious thrill went through her as she looked at him leaning there lost in thought. After all, he was her father, the man to whom she owed her presence upon this bitter earth, this place of terrors and delights, of devastation and hope supernal. Perhaps, too, he had been as much sinned against as sinning. She stepped up to him and touched him on the shoulder.

"Father," she said.

He turned round with all the quickness of a young man, for about him there was a peculiar agility which his daughter had inherited. Like his mind, his body was still nimble.

"My darling," he said, "I should have known your voice anywhere. It has haunted my sleep for years. My darling, thank you for coming back to me, and thank God for preserving you when so many were lost." Then he threw his arms about her and kissed her.

She shrank from him a little, for by inadvertence he had pressed upon the wound in her forehead.

"Forgive me," she said; "it is my head. It was injured, you know."

Then he saw the bandage about her brow, and was very penitent.

"They did not tell me that you had been hurt, Benita," he exclaimed in his light, refined voice, one of the stamps of that gentility of blood and breeding whereof all his rough years and errors had been unable to deprive him. "They only told me that you were saved. It is part of my ill-fortune that at our first moment of greeting I should give you pain, who have caused you so much already."

Benita felt that the words were an apology for the past, and her heart was touched.

"It is nothing," she answered. "You did not know or mean it."

"No, dear, I never knew or meant it. Believe me, I was not a willing sinner, only a weak one. You are beautiful, Benita--far more so than I expected."

"What," she answered smiling, "with this bandage round my head? Well, in your eyes, perhaps." But inwardly she thought to herself that the description would be more applicable to her father, who in truth, notwithstanding his years, was wonderfully handsome, with his quick blue eyes, mobile face, gentle mouth with the wistful droop at the corners so like her own, and grey beard. How, she wondered, could this be the man

who had struck her mother. Then she remembered him as he had been years

before when he was a slave to liquor, and knew that the answer was simple.

"Tell me about your escape, love," he said, patting her hand with his thin fingers. "You don't know what I've suffered. I was waiting at the Royal Hotel here, when the cable came announcing the loss of the Zanzibar and all on board. For the first time for many a year I drank spirits to drown my grief--don't be afraid, dear--for the first time and the last. Then afterwards came another cable giving the names of those who were known to be saved, and--thank God, oh! thank God--yours among them," and he gasped at the recollection of that relief.

"Yes," she said; "I suppose I should thank--Him--and another. Have you heard the story about--how Mr. Seymour saved me, I mean?"

"Some of it. While you were dressing yourself, I have been talking to the officer who was in command of your boat. He was a brave man, Benita, and I am sorry to tell you he is gone."

She grasped a stanchion and clung there, staring at him with a wild, white face.

"How do you know that, Father?"

Mr. Clifford drew a copy of the Natal Mercury of the previous day from the pocket of his ulster, and while she waited in an agony he hunted through the long columns descriptive of the loss of the Zanzibar. Presently he came to the paragraph he sought, and read it aloud to her. It ran:

"The searchers on the coast opposite the scene of the shipwreck report that they met a Kaffir who was travelling along the seashore, who produced a gold watch which he said he had taken from the body of a white man that he found lying on the sand at the mouth of the Umvoli River. Inside the watch is engraved, 'To Seymour Robert Seymour, from his uncle, on his twenty-first birthday.' The name of Mr. Seymour appears as a first-class passenger to Durban by the Zanzibar. He was a member of an old English family in Lincolnshire. This was his second journey to South Africa, which he visited some years ago with his brother on a big-game shooting expedition. All who knew him then will join with us in deploring his loss. Mr. Seymour was a noted shot and an English gentleman of the best stamp. He was last seen by one of the survivors of the catastrophe, carrying Miss Clifford, the daughter of the well-known Natal pioneer of that name, into a boat, but as this young lady is reported to have been saved, and as he entered the boat with her, no explanation is yet forthcoming as to how he came to his sad end."

"I fear that is clear enough," said Mr. Clifford, as he folded up his paper.

"Yes, clear enough," she repeated in a strained voice. "And yet--yet--oh! Father, he had just asked me to marry him, and I can't believe that he is dead before I had time to answer."

"Good Heavens!" said the old man, "they never told me that. It is dreadfully sad. God help you, my poor child! There is nothing more to say except that he was only one among three hundred who have gone with him. Be brave now, before all these people. Look--here comes the tug."

The following week was very much of a blank to Benita. When they reached shore some old friends of her father's took her and him to their house, a quiet place upon the Berea. Here, now that the first excitement of rescue and grief was over, the inevitable reaction set in, bringing with it weakness so distressing that the doctor insisted upon her going to bed, where she remained for the next five days. With the healing up of the wound in her head her strength came back to her at last, but it was a very sad Benita who crept from her room one afternoon on to the verandah and looked out at the cruel sea, peaceful now as the sky above.

Her father, who had nursed her tenderly during these dark days, came and sat by her, taking her hand in his.

"This is capital," he said, glancing at her anxiously. "You are getting quite yourself again."

"I shall never be myself again," she answered. "My old self is dead, although the outside of me has recovered. Father, I suppose that it is wrong, but I wish that I were dead too. I wish that he had taken me with him when he jumped into the sea to lighten the boat."

"Don't speak like that," he broke in hastily. "Of course I know that I am not much to you--how can I be after all that is past? But I love you, dear, and if I were left quite alone again----" And he broke off.

"You shall not be left alone if I can help it," she replied, looking at the old man with her dark and tender eyes. "We have only each other in the world now, have we? The rest have gone, never to return."

He threw his arms about her, and, drawing her to him, kissed her passionately.

"If only you could learn to love me!" he said.

"I do love you," she answered, "who now shall never love any other man upon the earth."

This was the beginning of a deep affection which sprang up between Mr. Clifford and his daughter, and continued to the end.

"Is there any news?" she asked a little later.

"None--none about him. The tide took his body away, no doubt, after the Kaffir had gone. I remember him well now. He was a fine young man, and it comes into my mind that when I said good-bye to him above those old ruins, I wished that I had a son like that. And to think that he went so near to becoming a son to me! Well, the grass must bend when the wind blows, as the natives say."

"I am glad that you knew him," she answered simply.

Then they began talking about other matters. He told her that all the story had become known, and that people spoke of Robert Seymour as "the hero"; also that there was a great deal of curiosity about her.

"Then let us get away as soon as we can," she said nervously. "But, Father, where are we going?"

"That will be for you to decide, love. Listen, now; this is my position. I have been quite steady for years, and worked hard, with the result that I and my partner have a fine farm in the Transvaal, on the high land near Lake Chrissie, out Wakkerstroom way. We breed horses there, and have done very well with them. I have £1,500 saved, and the farm brings us in quite £600 a year beyond the expenses. But it is a lonely place, with only a few Boers about, although they are good fellows enough. You might not care to live there with no company."

"I don't think that I should mind," she answered, smiling.

"Not now, but by-and-by you would when you know what it is like. Now I might sell my share in the farm to my partner, who, I think, would buy it, or I might trust to him to send me a part of the profits, which perhaps he would not. Then, if you wish it, we could live in or near one of the towns, or even, as you have an income of your own, go home to England, if that is your will."

"Is it your will?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No; all my life is here. Also, I have something to find before I die--for your sake, dear."

"Do you mean up among those ruins?" she asked, looking at him curiously.

"Yes. So you know about it?" he answered, with a flash of his blue eyes.

"Oh! of course, Seymour told you. Yes, I mean among the ruins--but I will tell you that story another time--not here, not here. What do you wish to do, Benita? Remember, I am in your hands; I will obey you in all things."

"Not to stop in a town and not to go to England," she replied, while he hung eagerly upon her words, "for this has become my holy land. Father, I will go with you to your farm; there I can be quiet, you and I together."

"Yes," he answered rather uneasily; "but, you see, Benita, we shall not be quite alone there. My partner, Jacob Meyer, lives with me."

"Jacob Meyer? Ah! I remember," and she winced. "He is a German, is he not--and odd?"

"German Jew, I imagine, and very odd. Should have made his fortune a dozen times over, and yet has never done anything. Too unpractical, too visionary, with all his brains and scheming. Not a good man, Benita, although he suits me, and, for the matter of that, under our agreement I cannot get rid of him."

"How did he become your partner?" she asked.

"Oh! a good many years ago he turned up at the place with a doleful story. Said that he had been trading among the Zulus; he was what we call a 'smouse' out here, and got into a row with them, I don't know how. The end of it was that they burned his waggon, looted his trade-goods and oxen, and killed his servants. They would have killed him too, only, according to his own account, he escaped in a very queer fashion."

"How?"

"Well, he says by mesmerising the chief and making the man lead him

through his followers. An odd story enough, but I can quite believe it of Jacob. He worked for me for six months, and showed himself very clever. Then one night, I remember it was a few days after I had told him of the story of the Portuguese treasure in Matabeleland, he produced £500 in Bank of England notes out of the lining of his waistcoat, and offered to buy a half interest in the farm. Yes, £500! Although for all those months I had believed him to be a beggar. Well, as he was so slim, and better than no company in that lonely place, in the end I accepted. We have done well since, except for the expedition after the treasure which we did not get, although we more than paid our expenses out of the ivory we bought. But next time we shall succeed, I am sure," he added with enthusiasm, "that is, if we can persuade those Makalanga to let us search on the mountain."

Benita smiled.

"I think you had better stick to the horsebreeding," she said.

"You shall judge when you hear the story. But you have been brought up in England; will you not be afraid to go to Lake Chrissie?"

"Afraid of what?" she asked.

"Oh! of the loneliness, and of Jacob Meyer."

"I was born on the veld, Father, and I have always hated London. As for

your odd friend, Mr. Meyer, I am not afraid of any man on earth. I have done with men. At the least I will try the place and see how I get on."

"Very well," answered her father with a sigh of relief. "You can always come back, can't you?"

"Yes," she said indifferently. "I suppose that I can always come back."