

THE GOLD COIN

Six weeks had gone by since the eventful evening of Benita's arrival at Rooi Krantz. Now the spring had fully come, the veld was emerald with grass and bright with flowers. In the kloof behind the house trees had put out their leaves, and the mimosas were in bloom, making the air heavy with their scent. Amongst them the ringdoves nested in hundreds, and on the steep rocks of the precipice the red-necked vultures fed their young. Along the banks of the stream and round the borders of the lake the pig-lilies bloomed, a sheet of white. All the place was beautiful and full of life and hope. Nothing seemed dead and hopeless except Benita's heart.

Her health had quite come back to her; indeed, never before had she felt so strong and well. But the very soul had withered in her breast. All day she thought, and all night she dreamed of the man who, in cold blood, had offered up his life to save a helpless woman and her child. She wondered whether he would have done this if he had heard the answer that was upon her lips. Perhaps that was why she had not been given time to speak that answer, which might have made a coward of him. For nothing more had been heard of Robert Seymour; indeed, already the tragedy of the ship Zanzibar was forgotten. The dead had buried their dead, and since then worse disasters had happened in the world.

But Benita could not bury her dead. She rode about the veld, she sat by the lake and watched the wild fowl, or at night heard them flighting over her in flocks. She listened to the cooing of the doves, the booming of the bitterns in the reeds, and the drumming of the snipe high in air. She counted the game trekking along the ridge till her mind grew weary. She sought consolation from the breast of Nature and found none; she sought it in the starlit skies, and oh! they were very far away. Death reigned within her who outwardly was so fair to see.

In the society of her father, indeed, she took pleasure, for he loved her, and love comforted her wounded heart. In that of Jacob Meyer also she found interest, for now her first fear of the man had died away, and undoubtedly he was very interesting; well-bred also after a fashion, although a Jew who had lost his own faith and rejected that of the Christians.

He told her that he was a German by birth, that he had been sent to England as a boy, to avoid the conscription, which Jews dislike, since in soldiering there is little profit. Here he had become a clerk in a house of South African merchants, and, as a consequence--having shown all the ability of his race--was despatched to take charge of a branch business in Cape Colony. What happened to him there Benita never discovered, but probably he had shown too much ability of an oblique nature. At any rate, his connection with the firm terminated, and for years he became a wandering "smouse," or trader, until at length he drifted into partnership with her father.

Whatever might have been his past, however, soon she found that he was an extremely able and agreeable man. It was he and no other who had painted the water-colours that adorned her room, and he could play and sing as well as he painted. Also, as Robert had told her, Mr. Meyer was very well-read in subjects that are not usually studied on the veld of South Africa; indeed, he had quite a library of books, most of them histories or philosophical and scientific works, of which he would lend her volumes. Fiction, however, he never read, for the reason, he told her, that he found life itself and the mysteries and problems which surround it so much more interesting.

One evening, when they were walking together by the lake, watching the long lights of sunset break and quiver upon its surface, Benita's curiosity overcame her, and she asked him boldly how it happened that such a man as he was content to live the life he did.

"In order that I may reach a better," he answered. "Oh! no, not in the skies, Miss Clifford, for of them I know nothing, nor, as I believe, is there anything to know. But here--here."

"What do you mean by a better life, Mr. Meyer?"

"I mean," he answered, with a flash of his dark eyes, "great wealth, and the power that wealth brings. Ah! I see you think me very sordid and materialistic, but money is God in this world, Miss Clifford--money is

God."

She smiled and answered: "I fear, then, that he is likely to prove an invisible god on the high veld, Mr. Meyer. You will scarcely make a great fortune out of horse-breeding, and here there is no one to rule."

"Do you suppose, then, that is why I stop at Rooi Krantz, just to breed horses? Has not your father told you about the great treasure hidden away up there among the Makalanga?"

"I have heard something of it," she answered with a sigh. "Also that both of you went to look for it and were disappointed."

"Ah! The Englishman who was drowned--Mr. Seymour--he spoke of it, did he not? He found us there."

"Yes; and you wished to shoot him--do you remember?"

"God in Heaven! Yes, because I thought he had come to rob us. Well, I did not shoot, and afterwards we were hunted out of the place, which does not much matter, as those fools of natives refused to let us dig in the fortress."

"Then why do you still think about this treasure which probably does not exist?"

"Why, Miss Clifford, do you think about various things that probably do not exist? Perhaps because you feel that here or elsewhere they do exist. Well, that is what I feel about the treasure, and what I have always felt. It exists, and I shall find it--now. I shall live to see more gold than you can even imagine, and that is why I still continue to breed horses on the Transvaal veld. Ah! you laugh; you think it is a nightmare that I breed----"

Then suddenly he became aware of Sally, who had appeared over the fold of the rise behind them, and asked irritably:

"What is it now, old vrouw?"

"The Baas Clifford wants to speak with you, Baas Jacob. Messengers have come to you from far away."

"What messengers?" he asked.

"I know not," answered Sally, fanning her fat face with a yellow pocket-handkerchief. "They are strange people to me, and thin with travelling, but they talk a kind of Zulu. The Baas wishes you to come."

"Will you come also, Miss Clifford? No? Then forgive me if I leave you," and lifting his hat he went.

"A strange man, Misse," said old Sally, when he had vanished, walking

very fast.

"Yes," answered Benita, in an indifferent voice.

"A very strange man," went on the old woman. "Too much in his kop," and she tapped her forehead. "I tink it will burst one day; but if it does not burst, then he will be great. I tell you that before, now I tell it you again, for I tink his time come. Now I go cook dinner."

Benita sat by the lake till the twilight fell, and the wild geese began to flight over her. Then she walked back to the house thinking no more of Heer Meyer, thinking only that she was weary of this place in which there was nothing to occupy her mind and distract it from its ever present sorrow.

At dinner, or rather supper, that night she noticed that both her father and his partner seemed to be suffering from suppressed excitement, of which she thought she could guess the cause.

"Did you find your messengers, Mr. Meyer?" she asked, when the men had lit their pipes, and the square-face--as Hollands was called in those days, from the shape of the bottle--was set upon the rough table of speckled buchenhout wood.

"Yes, I found them," he answered; "they are in the kitchen now." And he looked at Mr. Clifford.

"Benita, my dear," said her father, "rather a curious thing has happened." Her face lit up, but he shook his head. "No, nothing to do with the shipwreck--that is all finished. Still, something that may interest you, if you care to hear a story."

Benita nodded; she was in a mood to hear anything that would occupy her thoughts.

"You know something about this treasure business," went on her father. "Well, this is the tale of it. Years ago, after you and your mother had gone to England, I went on a big game shooting expedition into the interior. My companion was an old fellow called Tom Jackson, a rolling stone, and one of the best elephant hunters in Africa. We did pretty well, but the end of it was that we separated north of the Transvaal, I bringing down the ivory that we had shot, and traded, and Tom stopping to put in another season, the arrangement being that he was to join me afterwards, and take his share of the money. I came here and bought this farm from a Boer who was tired of it--cheap enough, too, for I only gave him £100 for the 6,000 acres. The kitchens behind were his old house, for I built a new one.

"A year had gone by before I saw any more of Tom Jackson, and then he turned up more dead than alive. He had been injured by an elephant, and lay for some months among the Makalanga to the north of Matabeleland, where he got fever badly at a place called Bambatse, on the Zambesi.

These Makalanga are a strange folk. I believe their name means the People of the Sun; at any rate, they are the last of some ancient race. Well, while he was there he cured the old Molimo, or hereditary high-priest of this tribe, of a bad fever by giving him quinine, and naturally they grew friendly. The Molimo lived among ruins of which there are many over all that part of South Africa. No one knows who built them now; probably it was people who lived thousands of years ago. However, this Molimo told Tom Jackson a more recent legend connected with the place.

"He said that six generations before, when his great-great-great grandfather was chief (Mambo, he called it), the natives of all that part of South Africa rose against the white men--Portuguese, I suppose--who still worked the gold there. They massacred them and their slaves by thousands, driving them up from the southward, where Lobengula rules now, to the Zambesi by which the Portuguese hoped to escape to the coast. At length a remnant of them, not more than about two hundred men and women, arrived at the stronghold called Bambatse, where the Molimo now lives in a great ruin built by the ancients upon an impregnable mountain which overhangs the river. With them they brought an enormous quantity of gold, all the stored-up treasure of the land which they were trying to carry off. But although they reached the river they could not escape by it, since the natives, who pursued them in thousands, watched day and night in canoes, and the poor fugitives had no boats. Therefore it came about that they were shut up in this fortress which it was impossible to storm, and there slowly perished of starvation.

"When it was known that they were all dead, the natives who had followed them from the south, and who wanted blood and revenge, not gold, which was of no use to them, went away; but the old priest's forefather who knew the secret entrance to the place, and who had been friendly to the Portuguese, forced his way in and there, amidst the dead, found one woman living, but mad with grief--a young and beautiful girl, the daughter of the Portuguese lord or captain. He gave her food, but in the night, when some strength had returned to her, she left him, and at daybreak he found her standing on the peak that overhangs the river, dressed all in white.

"He called some of his councillors, and they tried to persuade her to come down from the rock, but she answered, 'No, her betrothed and all her family and friends were dead, and it was her will to follow them.' Then they asked where was the gold, for having watched day and night they knew it had not been thrown into the river. She answered that it was where it was, and that, seek as he might, no black man would ever find it. She added that she gave it into his keeping, and that of his descendants, to safeguard until she came again. Also she said that if they were faithless to that trust, then it had been revealed to her from heaven above that those same savages who had killed her father and her people, would kill his people also. When she had spoken thus she stood a while praying on the peak, then suddenly hurled herself into the river, and was seen no more.

"From that day to this the ruin has been held to be haunted, and save the Molimo himself, who retires there to meditate and receive revelations from the spirits, no one is allowed to set a foot in its upper part; indeed, the natives would rather die than do so. Consequently the gold still remains where it was hidden. This place itself Tom Jackson did not see, since, notwithstanding his friendship for him, the Molimo refused to allow him to enter there.

"Well, Tom never recovered; he died here, and is buried in the little graveyard behind the house which the Boers made for some of their people. It was shortly before his death that Mr. Meyer became my partner, for I forgot to say that I had told him the story, and we determined to have a try for that great wealth. You know the rest. We trekked to Bambatse, pretending to be traders, and found the old Molimo who knew of me as having been Tom Jackson's friend. We asked him if the story he had told to Jackson were true, and he answered that, surely as the sun shone in the heavens, it was true--every word of it--for it, and much more than he had spoken of, had been handed down from father to son, and that they even knew the name of the white lady who had killed herself. It was Ferreira--your mother's name, Benita, though a common one enough in South Africa.

"We asked him to allow us to enter the topmost stronghold, which stands upon the hill, but he refused, saying that the curse still lay upon him and his, and that no man should enter until the lady Ferreira came

again. For the rest the place was free to us; we might dig as we would. So we did dig, and found some gold buried with the ancients, beads and bangles and wire--about £100 worth. Also--that was on the day when the young Seymours came upon us, and accounts for Meyer's excitement, for he thought that we were on the track of the treasure--we found a single gold coin, no doubt one that had been dropped by the Portuguese. Here it is." And he threw a thin piece of gold on the table before her. "I have shown it to a man learned in those matters, and he says that it is a ducat struck by one of the doges of Venice.

"Well, we never found any more. The end of it was that the Makalanga caught us trying to get in to the secret stronghold by stealth, and gave us the choice of clearing out or being killed. So we cleared out, for treasure is not of much use to dead men."

Mr. Clifford ceased speaking, and filled his pipe, while Meyer helped himself to squareface in an absent manner. As for Benita, she stared at the quaint old coin, which had a hole in it, wondering with what scenes of terror and of bloodshed it had been connected.

"Keep it," said her father. "It will go on that bracelet of yours."

"Thank you, dear," she answered. "Though I don't know why I should take all the Portuguese treasure since we shall never see any more of it."

"Why not, Miss Clifford?" asked Meyer quickly.

"The story tells you why--because the natives won't even let you look for it; also, looking and finding are different things."

"Natives change their minds sometimes, Miss Clifford. That story is not done, it is only begun, and now you shall hear its second chapter. Clifford, may I call in the messengers?" And without waiting for an answer he rose and left the room.

Neither Mr. Clifford nor his daughter said anything after he had gone. Benita appeared to occupy herself in fixing the broad gold coin to a little swivel on her bracelet, but while she did so once more that sixth sense of hers awoke within her. As she had been afraid at the dinner on the doomed steamer, so again she was afraid. Again death and great fear cast their advancing shadows on to her soul. That piece of gold seemed to speak to her, yet, alas! she could not understand its story. Only she knew that her father and Jacob Meyer and--yes, yes, yes--Robert Seymour, had all a part in that tragedy. Oh! how could that be when he was dead? How could this gold link him to her? She knew not--she cared not. All she knew was that she would follow this treasure to the edge of the world, and if need be, over it, if only it brought her back to him again.