

VII

THE MESSENGERS

The door opened, and through it came Jacob Meyer, followed by three natives. Benita did not see or hear them; her soul was far away. There at the head of the room, clad all in white, for she wore no mourning save in her heart, illuminated by the rays of the lamp that hung above her, she stood still and upright, for she had risen; on the face and in her wide, dark eyes a look that was very strange to see. Jacob Meyer perceived it and stopped; the three natives perceived it also and stopped. There they stood, all four of them, at the end of the long sitting-room, staring at the white Benita and at her haunted eyes.

One of the natives pointed with his thin finger to her face, and whispered to the others. Meyer, who understood their tongue, caught the whisper. It was:

"Behold the Spirit of the Rock!"

"What spirit, and what rock?" he asked in a low voice.

"She who haunts Bambatse; she whom our eyes have seen," answered the man, still staring at Benita.

Benita heard the whispering, and knew it was about herself, though not

one word of it did she catch. With a sigh she shook herself free from her visions and sat down in a chair close by. Then one by one the messengers drew near to her, and each, as he came, made a profound obeisance, touching the floor with his finger-tips, and staring at her face. But her father they only saluted with an uplifted hand. She looked at them with interest, and indeed they were interesting in their way; tall, spare men, light coloured, with refined, mobile faces. Here was no negro-blood, but rather that of some ancient people such as Egyptians or Phoenicians: men whose forefathers had been wise and civilized thousands of years ago, and perchance had stood in the courts of Pharaoh or of Solomon.

Their salutations finished, the three men squatted in a line upon the floor, drawing their fur karosses, or robes, about them, and waited in silence. Jacob Meyer thought a while, then said:

"Clifford, will you translate to your daughter, so that she may be sure she is told exactly what passes?"

Next he turned and addressed the natives.

"Your names are Tamas, Tamala, and Hoba, and you, Tamas, are the son of the Molimo of Bambatse, who is called Mambo, and you, Tamala and Hoba, are his initiated councillors. Is it so?"

They bowed their heads.

"Good. You, Tamas, tell the story and give again your message that this lady, the lady Benita, may hear it, for she has a part in the matter."

"We understand that she has a part," answered Tamas. "We read in her face that she has the greatest part. Doubtless it is of her that the Spirit told my father. These, spoken by my mouth, are the words of the Molimo, my father, which we have travelled so far to deliver.

"When you two white men visited Bambatse four years ago, you asked of me, Mambo, to be admitted to the holy place, that you might look for the treasure there which the Portuguese hid in the time of my ancestor in the sixth generation. I refused to allow you to look, or even to enter the holy place, because I am by birth the guardian of that treasure, although I know not where it lies. But now I am in a great strait. I have news that Lobengula the usurper, who is king of the Matabele, has taken offence against me for certain reasons, among them that I did not send him a sufficient tribute. It is reported to me that he purposes next summer to despatch an impi to wipe me and my people out, and to make my kraal black as the burnt veld. I have little strength to resist him who is mighty, and my people are not warlike. From generation to generation they have been traders, cultivators of the land, workers in metal, and men of peace, who desire not to kill or be killed. Also they are few. Therefore I have no power to stand against Lobengula.

"I remember the guns that you and your companion brought with you,

which can kill things from far away. If I had a supply of those guns from behind my walls I might defy the impi of Lobengula, whose warriors use the assegai. If you will bring me a hundred good guns and plenty of powder and bullets for them, it is revealed to me that it will be lawful for me to admit you to the secret, holy place, where you may look for the buried gold for as long as you wish, and if you can find it, take it all away without hindrance from me or my people. But I will be honest with you. That gold will never be found save by the one appointed. The white lady said so in the time of my forefather; he heard it with his ears, and I have heard it from his descendants with my ears, and so it shall be. Still, if you bring the guns you can come and see if either of you is that one appointed. But I do not think that any man is so appointed, for the secret is hid in woman. But of this you can learn for yourselves. I do but speak as I am bidden.

"This is my message spoken by my mouth, Tamas, son of my body, and my councillors who go with him will bear witness that he speaks the truth. I, Mambo, the Molimo of Bambatse, send you greeting, and will give you good welcome and fulfil my promise, if you come with the far-shooting guns, ten times ten of them, and the powder, and the bullets wherewith I may drive off the Matabele, but not otherwise. My son, Tamas, and my councillors will drive your waggon into my country but you must bring no strange servants. The Spirit of the white woman who killed herself before the eyes of my forefather has been seen of late standing upon the point of rock; also she has visited me at night in my secret place where her companions died. I do not know all that this portends, but I think

that amongst other things she wished to tell me that the Matabele are about to attack us. I await the decree of the Heavens. I send you two karosses as a gift, and a little ancient gold, since ivory is too heavy for my messengers to carry, and I have no waggon. Farewell."

"We have heard you," said Meyer, when Mr. Clifford had finished translating, "and we wish to ask you a question. What do you mean when you say that the Spirit of the white woman has been seen?"

"I mean what I say, white man," answered Tamas. "She was seen by all three of us, standing upon the pinnacle at the dawn; also my father saw and spoke with her alone in his sleep at night. This is the third time in my father's day that she has appeared thus, and always before some great event."

"What was she like?" asked Meyer.

"Like? Oh! like the lady who sits yonder. Yes, quite the same, or so it seemed to us. But who knows? We have seen no other white women, and we were not very near. Let the lady come and stand side by side with the Spirit, so that we can examine them both, and we shall be able to answer better. Do you accept the offer of the Molimo?"

"We will tell you to-morrow morning," replied Meyer. "A hundred rifles are many to find, and will cost much money. Meanwhile, for you there is food and a sleeping-place."

The three men seemed disappointed at his answer, which they evidently believed to be preliminary to a refusal. For a moment or two they consulted together, then Tamas put his hand into a pouch and drew from it something wrapped in dry leaves, which he undid, revealing a quaint and beautiful necklace, fashioned of twisted gold links, wherein were set white stones, that they had no difficulty in recognising as uncut diamonds of considerable value. From this necklace also hung a crucifix moulded in gold.

"We offer this gift," he said, "on behalf of Mambo, my father, to the lady yonder, to whom the karosses and the rough gold are of no use. The chain has a story. When the Portuguese lady hurled herself into the river she wore it about her neck. As she fell into the river she struck against a little point of rock which tore the chain away from her--see where it is broken and mended with gold wire. It remained upon the point of rock, and my forefather took it thence. It is a gift to the lady if she will promise to wear it."

"Accept it," muttered Mr. Clifford, when he had finished translating this, "or you will give offence."

So Benita said: "I thank the Molimo, and accept his gift."

Then Tamas rose, and, advancing, cast the ancient, tragic thing over her head. As it fell upon her shoulders, Benita knew that it was a chain of

destiny drawing her she knew not where, this ornament that had last been worn by that woman, bereaved and unhappy as herself, who could find no refuge from her sorrow except in death. Had she felt it torn from her breast, she wondered, as she, the living Benita of to-day, felt it fall upon her own?

The three envoys rose, bowed, and went, leaving them alone. Jacob Meyer lifted his head as though to address her, then changed his mind and was silent. Both the men waited for her to speak, but she would not, and in the end it was her father who spoke first.

"What do you say, Benita?" he asked anxiously.

"I? I have nothing to say, except that I have heard a very curious story. This priest's message is to you and Mr. Meyer, father, and must be answered by you. What have I to do with it?"

"A great deal, I think, my dear, or so those men seemed to believe. At any rate, I cannot go up there without you, and I will not take you there against your wish, for it is a long way off, and a queer business. The question is, will you go?"

She thought a space, while the two men watched her anxiously.

"Yes," she answered at length, in a quiet voice. "I will go if you wish to go, not because I want to find treasure, but because the story and

the country where it happened interest me. Indeed, I don't believe much in the treasure. Even if they are superstitious and afraid to look for it themselves, I doubt whether they would allow you to look if they thought it could be found. To me the journey does not seem a good business speculation, also there are risks."

"We think it good enough," broke in Meyer decidedly. "And one does not expect to get millions without trouble."

"Yes, yes," said her father; "but she is right--there are risks, great risks--fever, wild beasts, savages, and others that one cannot foresee. Have I a right to expose her to them? Ought we not to go alone?"

"It would be useless," answered Meyer. "Those messengers have seen your daughter, and mixed her up with their superstitious story of a ghost, of which I, who know that there are no such things, believe nothing. Without her now we shall certainly fail."

"As for the risks, father," said Benita, "personally I take no account of them, for I am sure that what is to happen will happen, and if I knew that I was to die upon the Zambesi, it would make no difference to me who do not care. But as it chances, I think--I cannot tell you why--that you and Mr. Meyer are in more danger than I am. It is for you to consider whether you will take the risks."

Mr. Clifford smiled. "I am old," he said; "that is my answer."

"And I am accustomed to such things," said Meyer, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Who would not run a little danger for the sake of such a glorious chance? Wealth, wealth, more wealth than we can dream of, and with it, power--power to avenge, to reward, to buy position, and pleasure, and all beautiful things which are the heritage of the very rich alone," and he spread out his hands and looked upwards, as though in adoration of this golden god.

"Except such trifles as health and happiness," commented Benita, not without sarcasm, for this man and his material desires disgusted her somewhat, especially when she contrasted him with another man who was lost to her, though it was true that his past had been idle and unproductive enough. Yet they interested her also, for Benita had never met anyone like Mr. Meyer, so talented, so eager, and so soulless.

"Then I understand it is settled?" she said.

Mr. Clifford hesitated, but Meyer answered at once:

"Yes, settled as far as anything can be."

She waited a moment for her father to speak, but he said nothing; his chance had gone by.

"Very well. Now we shall not need to trouble ourselves with further

doubts or argument. We are going to Bambatse on the Zambesi, a distant place, to look for buried gold, and I hope, Mr. Meyer, that if you find it, the results will come up to your expectations, and bring you all sorts of good luck. Good-night, father dear, good-night."

"My daughter thinks it will bring us ill-luck," said Mr. Clifford, when the door had closed behind her. "That is her way of saying so."

"Yes," answered Meyer gloomily; "she thinks that, and she is one of those who have vision. Well, she may be wrong. Also, the question is, shall we seize our opportunity and its dangers, or remain here and breed bad horses all our lives, while she who is not afraid laughs at us? I am going to Bambatse."

Again Mr. Clifford made no direct answer, only asked a question:

"How long will it take to get the guns and ammunition, and what will they cost?"

"About a week from Wakkerstroom," replied Meyer. "Old Potgieter, the trader there, has just imported a hundred Martinis and a hundred Westley-Richards falling-blocks. Fifty of each, with ten thousand rounds of cartridges, will cost about £600, and we have as much as that in the bank; also we have the new waggon, and plenty of good oxen and horses. We can take a dozen of the horses with us, and sell them in the north of the Transvaal for a fine price, before we get into the tetsely

belt. The oxen will probably carry us through, as they are most of them salted."

"You have thought it all out, Jacob, I see; but it means a lot of money one way and another, to say nothing of other things."

"Yes, a lot of money, and those rifles are too good for Kaffirs. Birmingham gas-pipes would have done for them, but there are none to be had. But what is the money, and what are the guns, compared to all they will bring us?"

"I think you had better ask my daughter, Jacob. She seems to have her own ideas upon the subject."

"Miss Clifford has made up her mind, and it will not change. I shall ask her no more," replied Meyer.

Then he, too, left the room, to give orders about the journey to Wakkerstroom that he must take upon the morrow. But Mr. Clifford sat there till past midnight, wondering whether he had done right, and if they would find the treasure of which he had dreamed for years, and what the future had in store for them.

If only he could have seen!

When Benita came to breakfast the next morning, she asked where Mr. Meyer was, and learned that he had already departed for Wakkerstroom.

"Certainly he is in earnest," she said with a laugh.

"Yes," answered her father; "Jacob is always in earnest, though, somehow, his earnestness has not brought him much good so far. If we fail, it will not be want of thought and preparation on his part."

Nearly a week went by before Meyer returned again, and meanwhile Benita made ready for her journey. In the intervals of her simple preparations also she talked a good deal, with the help of her father, to the three sturdy-looking Makalanga, who were resting thankfully after their long journey. Their conversation was general, since by tacit consent no further mention was made of the treasure or of anything to do with it, but it enabled her to form a fair opinion of them and their people. She gathered that although they spoke a dialect of Zulu, they had none of the bravery of the Zulus, and indeed lived in deadly terror of the Matabele, who are bastard Zulus--such terror, in fact, that she greatly doubted whether the hundred rifles would be of much use to them, should they ever be attacked by that tribe.

They were what their fathers had been before them, agriculturists and workers in metals--not fighting men. Also she set herself to learn what she could of their tongue, which she did not find difficult, for Benita had a natural aptitude for languages, and had never forgotten the Dutch

and Zulu she used to prattle as a child, which now came back to her very fast. Indeed, she could already talk fairly in either of those languages, especially as she spent her spare hours in studying their grammar, and reading them.

So the days went on, till one evening Jacob Meyer appeared with two Scotch carts laden with ten long boxes that looked like coffins, and other smaller boxes which were very heavy, to say nothing of a multitude of stores. As Mr. Clifford prophesied, he had forgotten nothing, for he even brought Benita various articles of clothing, and a revolver for which she had not asked.

Three days later they trekked away from Rooi Krantz upon a peculiarly beautiful Sunday morning in the early spring, giving it out that they were going upon a trading and shooting expedition in the north of the Transvaal. Benita looked back at the pretty little stead and the wooded kloof behind it over which she had nearly fallen, and the placid lake in front of it where the nesting wildfowl wheeled, and sighed. For to her, now that she was leaving it, the place seemed like home, and it came into her mind that she would never see it any more.