

## VIII

### BAMBATSE

Nearly four months had gone by when at length the waggon with which were Mr. Clifford, Benita, and Jacob Meyer camped one night within the country of the Molimo of Bambatse, whose name was Mambo. Or perhaps that was his title, since (according to Tamas his son) every chief in succession was called Mambo, though not all of them were Molimos, or representatives and prophets of God, or the Great Spirit whom they knew as Munwali. Thus sometimes the Molimo, or priest of Munwali, and the Mambo or chief were different persons. For instance, he said that he, Tamas, would be Mambo on his father's death, but no visions were given to him; therefore as yet, at any rate, he was not called to be Molimo.

In the course of this long journey they had met with many adventures, such as were common to African travellers before the days of railroads; adventures with wild beasts and native tribes, adventures with swollen rivers also, and one that was worst, with thirst, since for three days (owing to the failure of a pit or pan, where they expected to find water) they were obliged to go without drink. Still, none of these were very serious, nor had any of the three of them ever been in better health than they were at this moment, for by good luck they had escaped all fever. Indeed, their rough, wild life had agreed with Benita extraordinarily well, so well that any who had known her in the streets of London would scarcely have recognized her as the sunburnt, active and

well-formed young woman who sat that night by the camp fire.

All the horses they had brought with them had been sold, except some which had died, and three that were "salted," or proof against the deadly horse sickness, which they took on with them. Their own servants also had been sent back to Rooi Krantz in charge of a Scotch cart laden with ivory, purchased from Boer hunters who had brought it down from the north of the Transvaal. Therefore, for this was part of the bargain, the three Makalanga were now their only attendants who drove and herded the cattle, while Benita cooked the food which the two white men shot, or sometimes bought from natives.

For days they had been passing through a country that was practically deserted, and now, having crossed a high nek, the same on which Robert Seymour had left his waggon, they were camped in low land which, as they could see by the remains of walls that appeared everywhere, had once been extensively enclosed and cultivated. To their right was a rising mountainous ground, beyond which, said the Makalanga, ran the Zambesi, and in front of them, not more than ten miles away, a great isolated hill, none other than that place that they had journeyed so far to reach, Bambatse, round which flowed the great river. Indeed, thither one of the three Makalanga, he who was named Hoba, had gone on to announce their approach.

They had outspanned amongst ruins, most of them circular in shape, and Benita, studying them in the bright moonlight, guessed that once these

had been houses. That place now so solitary, hundreds or thousands of years ago was undoubtedly the home of a great population. Thousands, rather than hundreds, she thought, since close at hand in the middle of one of these round houses, grew a mighty baobab tree, that could not have seen less than ten or fifteen centuries since the seed whence it sprang pierced the cement floor which was still visible about its giant bole.

Tamas, the Molimo's son, saw her studying these evidences of antiquity, and, approaching, saluted her.

"Lady," he said in his own language, which by now she spoke very well, "lady"--and he waved his hand with a fine gesture--"behold the city of my people."

"How do you know that it was their city?" she asked.

"I do not know, lady. Stones cannot speak, the spirits are silent, and we have forgotten. Still, I think so, and our fathers have told us that but six or eight generations ago many folk lived here, though it was not they who built these walls. Even fifty years ago there were many, but now the Matabele have killed them, and we are few; to-morrow you will see how few. Come here and look," and he led her through the entrance of a square cattle kraal which stood close by. Within were tufts of rank grass, and a few bushes, and among these scores of skulls and other bones.

"The Matabele killed these in the time of Moselikatse," he said. "Now do you wonder that we who remain fear the Matabele, and desire guns to defend ourselves from them, even if we must sell our secrets, in order to buy those guns, who have no money to pay for them?"

"No," she answered, looking at the tall, dignified man, into whose soul the irons of fear and slavery had burnt so deep. "No, I do not wonder."

Next morning at daybreak they trekked on, always through these evidences of dead, forgotten people. They had not more than ten miles to cover to reach their long journey's end, but the road, if so it could be called, ran up-hill, and the oxen, whereof only fourteen were now left to drag the heavy-laden waggon, were thin and footsore, so that their progress was very slow. Indeed, it was past midday when at length they began to enter what by apology might be called the town of Bambatse.

"When we go away from this, it will have to be by water, I think, unless we can buy trek-cattle," said Meyer, looking at the labouring oxen with a doubtful eye.

"Why?" asked Mr. Clifford anxiously.

"Because several of those beasts have been bitten by tetsefly, like my horse, and the poison is beginning to work. I thought so last night, but now I am sure. Look at their eyes. It was down in that bit of bush veld

eight days ago. I said that we ought not to camp there."

At this moment they came to the crest of the ridge, and on its further side saw the wonderful ruins of Bambatse close at hand. In front of them stood a hill jutting out, as it were into the broad waters of the Zambesi river, which, to a great extent, protected it upon three sides. The fourth, that opposite to them, except at one place where a kind of natural causeway led into the town, was also defended by Nature, since here for more than fifty feet in height the granite rock of the base of the hill rose sheer and unclimbable. On the mount itself, that in all may have covered eight or ten acres of ground, and surrounded by a deep donga or ditch, were three rings of fortifications, set one above the other, mighty walls which, it was evident, had been built by no modern hand. Looking at them Benita could well understand how it came about that the poor fugitive Portuguese had chosen this as their last place of refuge, and were overcome at length, not by the thousands of savages who followed and surrounded them, but by hunger. Indeed, the place seemed impregnable to any force that was not armed with siege guns.

On the hither side of this natural fosse, which, doubtless, in ancient times had been filled with water led from the Zambesi, stood the village of the Bambatse Makalanga, a collection of seventy or eighty wretched huts, round, like those of their forefathers, but built of mud and thatch. About them lay the gardens, or square fields, that were well cultivated, and at this season rich with ripening corn. Benita, however, could see no cattle, and concluded, therefore, that these must be kept

on the hill for safety, and within its walls.

Down the rough road they lumbered, and through the village, where the few women and children stared at them in a frightened way. Then they came to the causeway, which, on its further side, was blocked with thorns and rough stones taken from the ruins. While they waited for these to be removed by some men who now appeared, Benita looked at the massive, circular wall still thirty or forty feet in height, by perhaps twenty through its base, built of granite blocks without mortar, and ornamented with quaint patterns of other coloured stones. In its thickness she could see grooves, where evidently had once been portcullises, but these had disappeared long ago.

"It is a wonderful place," she said to her father. "I am glad that I came. Have you been all over it?"

"No; only between the first and second walls, and once between the second and third. The old temple, or whatever it is, is on the top, and into that they would never admit us. It is there that the treasure lies."

"That the treasure is supposed to lie," she answered with a smile. "But, Father, what guarantee have you that they will do so now? Perhaps they will take the guns and show us the door--or rather the gate."

"Your daughter is right, there is none; and before a box is taken off

the waggon we must get one," said Meyer. "Oh! I know it is risky, and it would have been better to make sure first, but it is too late to talk of that now. Look, the stones are cleared. Trek on--trek!"

The long waggon-whip cracked, the poor, tired-out oxen strained at the yokes, and on they went through the entrance of that fateful fortress that was but just wide enough to admit them. Inside lay a great open space, which, as they could see from the numerous ruins, had once been filled with buildings that now were half hidden by grass, trees, and creepers. This was the outer ring of the temple where, in ancient days, the priests and captains had their home. Travelling across it for perhaps a hundred and fifty yards, they came near the second wall, which was like the first, only not quite so solid, and saw that on a stretch of beaten ground, and seated in the shadow, for the day was hot, the people of Bambatse were gathered to greet them.

When within fifty yards they dismounted from the horses, which were left with the waggon in the charge of the Makalanga, Tamala. Then Benita taking her position between her father and Jacob Meyer, they advanced towards the ring of natives, of whom there may have been two hundred--all of them adult men.

As they came, except one figure who remained seated with his back against the wall, the human circle stood up as a token of respect, and Benita saw that they were of the same stamp as the messengers--tall and good-looking, with melancholy eyes and a cowed expression, wearing the

appearance of people who from day to day live in dread of slavery and death. Opposite to them was a break in the circle, through which Tamas led them, and as they crossed it Benita felt that all those people were staring at her with their sad eyes. A few paces from where the man crouched against the wall, his head hidden by a beautifully worked blanket that was thrown over it, were placed three well-carved stools. Upon these, at a motion from Tamas, they sat themselves down, and, as it was not dignified for them to speak first, remained silent.

"Be patient and forgive," said Tamas at length. "My father, Mambo, prays to the Munwali and the spirits of his fathers that this coming of yours may be fortunate, and that a vision of those things that are to be may descend upon him."

Benita, feeling nearly two hundred pairs of eyes concentrated upon her, wished that the vision might come quickly, but after a minute or two fell into tune with the thing, and almost enjoyed this strange experience. Those mighty ancient walls built by hands unknown, which had seen so much history and so much death; the silent, triple ring of patient, solemn men, the last descendants of a cultured race, the crouching figure hidden beneath the blanket, who imagined himself to be communicating with his god--it was all very strange, very well worth the seeing to one who had wearied of the monotony of civilization.

Look, the man stirred, and threw back his blanket, revealing a head white with age, a spiritual, ascetic face, so thin that every bone

showed in it, and dark eyes which stared upwards unseeingly, like those of a person in a trance. Thrice he sighed, while his tribesmen watched him. Then he let his eyes fall upon the three white people seated in front of him. First he looked at Mr. Clifford, and his face grew troubled; then at Jacob Meyer, and it was anxious and alarmed. Lastly, he stared at Benita, and while he did so the dark eyes became calm and happy.

"White maiden," he said in a soft, low voice, "for you, at least, I have good tidings. Though Death come near to you, though you see him on your right hand and your left, and in front of you and behind you, I say, fear not. Here you, who have known deep sorrow, shall find happiness and rest, O maiden, with whom goes the spirit of one pure and fair as you, who died so long ago."

Then, while Benita wondered at his words, spoken with such sweet earnestness that although she believed nothing of them, they brought a kind of comfort to her, he looked once more at her father and Jacob Meyer, and, as it were with an effort, was silent.

"Have you no pleasant prophecy for me, old friend," said Jacob, "who have come so far to hear it?"

At once the aged face grew inscrutable, all expression vanished behind a hundred wrinkles, and he answered:

"None, white man--none that I am charged to deliver. Search the skies for yourself, you who are so wise, and read them if you can. Lords," he went on in another voice, "I greet you in the name and presence of my children. Son Tamas, I greet you also; you have done your mission well. Listen, now--you are weary and would rest and eat; still, bear with me, for I have a word to say. Look around you. You see all my tribe, not twenty times ten above the age of boys, we who once were countless as the leaves on yonder trees in spring. Why are we dead? Because of the Amandabele, those fierce dogs whom, two generations ago, Moselikatse, the general of Chaka, brought up to the south of us, who ravish us and kill us year by year.

"We are not warlike, we who have outlived war and the lust of slaying. We are men of peace, who desire to cultivate the land, and to follow our arts which have descended to us from our ancestors, and to worship the Heavens above us, whither we depart to join the spirits of our forefathers. But they are fierce and strong and savage, and they come up and murder our children and old people, and take away the young women and the maidens to be slaves, and with them all our cattle. Where are our cattle? Lobengula, chief of the Amandabele, has them; scarce a cow is left to give milk to the sick or to the motherless babe. And yet he sends for cattle. Tribute, say his messengers, deliver tribute, or my impi will come and take it with your lives. But we have no cattle--all are gone. We have nothing left to us but this ancient mountain and the works built thereon, and a little corn on which we live. Yes, I say

it--I, the Molimo--I whose ancestors were great kings--I who have still more wisdom in me than all the hosts of the Amandabele," and as he spoke the old man's grey head sank upon his breast and the tears ran down his withered cheeks, while his people answered:

"Mambo, it is true."

"Now listen again," he went on. "Lobengula threatens us, therefore I sent to these white men who were here before, saying that if they would bring me a hundred guns, and powder and ball, to enable us to beat off the Amandabele from behind these strong walls of ours, I would take them into the secret holy place where for six generations no white man has set a foot, and there suffer them to search for the treasure which is hid therein, no man knows where, that treasure which they asked leave to find four winters gone. We refused it then and drove them hence, because of the curse laid upon us by the white maid who died, the last of the Portuguese, who foretold her people's fate for us if we gave up the buried gold save to one appointed. My children, the Spirit of Bambatse has visited me; I have seen her and others have seen her, and in my sleep she said to me: 'Suffer the men to come and search, for with them is one of the blood to whom my people's wealth is given; and great is your danger, for many spears draw nigh.' My children, I sent my son and other messengers on a far journey to where I knew the men dwelt, and they have returned after many months bringing those men with them, bringing with them also another of whom I knew nothing--yes, her who is appointed, her of whom the Spirit spoke."

Then he lifted his withered hand and held it towards Benita, saying: "I tell you that yonder she sits for whom the generations have waited."

"It is so," answered the Makalanga. "It is the White Lady come again to take her own."

"Friends," asked the Molimo, while they wondered at his strange speech, "tell me, have you brought the guns?"

"Surely," answered Mr. Clifford, "they are there in the waggon, every one of them, the best that can be made, and with them ten thousand cartridges, bought at a great cost. We have fulfilled our share of the bargain; now will you fulfil yours, or shall we go away again with the guns and leave you to meet the Matabele with your assegais?"

"Say you the agreement while we listen," answered the Molimo.

"Good," said Mr. Clifford. "It is this: That you shall find us food and shelter while we are with you. That you shall lead us into the secret place at the head of the hill, where the Portuguese died, and the gold is hidden. That you shall allow us to search for that gold when and where we will. That if we discover the gold, or anything else of value to us, you shall suffer us to take it away, and assist us upon our journey, either by giving us boats and manning them to travel down the Zambesi, or in whatever fashion may be most easy. That you shall permit

none to hurt, molest, or annoy us during our sojourn among you. Is that our contract?"

"Not quite all of it," said the Molimo. "There is this to add: first that you shall teach us how to use the guns; secondly, that you shall search for and find the treasure, if so it is appointed, without our help, since in this matter it is not lawful for us to meddle; thirdly, that if the Amandabele should chance to attack us while you are here, you shall do your best to assist us against their power."

"Do you, then, expect attack?" asked Meyer suspiciously.

"White man, we always expect attack. Is it a bargain?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Clifford and Jacob Meyer in one voice, the latter adding: "the guns and the cartridges are yours. Lead us now to the hidden place. We have fulfilled our part; we trust to the honour of you and all your people to fulfil yours."

"White Maiden," asked the Molimo, addressing Benita, "do you also say that it is a bargain?"

"What my father says, I say."

"Good," said the Molimo. "Then, in the presence of my people, and in the name of the Munwali, I, Mambo, who am his prophet, declare that it is so

agreed between us, and may the vengeance of the heavens fall upon those who break our pact! Let the oxen of the white men be outspanned, their horses fed, their waggon unloaded, that we may count the guns. Let food be brought into the guest-house also, and after they have eaten, I, who alone of all of you have ever entered it, will lead them to the holy place, that there they may begin to search for that which the white men desire from age to age--to find it if they can; if not, to depart satisfied and at peace."