

## IX

### THE OATH OF MADUNA

Mr. Clifford and Meyer rose to return to the waggon in order to superintend the unyoking of the oxen and to give directions as to their herding, and the off-saddling of the horses. Benita rose also, wondering when the food that had been promised would be ready, for she was hungry. Meanwhile, the Molimo was greeting his son Tamas, patting his hand affectionately and talking to him, when suddenly Benita, who watched this domestic scene with interest, heard a commotion behind her. Turning to discover its cause, she perceived three great men clad in full war panoply, shields on their left arms, spears in their right hands, black ostrich plumes rising from the polished rings woven in their hair, black moochas about their middles, and black oxtails tied beneath their knees, who marched through the throng of Makalanga as though they saw them not.

"The Matabele! The Matabele are on us!" cried a voice; while other voices shouted, "Fly to your walls!" and yet others, "Kill them! They are few."

But the three men marched on unheeding till they stood before Mambo.

"Who are you, and what do you seek?" the old man asked boldly, though the fear that had taken hold of him at the sight of these strangers was

evident enough, for his whole body shook.

"Surely you should know, chief of Bambatse," answered their spokesman with a laugh, "for you have seen the like of us before. We are the children of Lobengula, the Great Elephant, the King, the Black Bull, the Father of the Amandabele, and we have a message for your ear, little Old Man, which, finding that you leave your gate open, we have walked in to deliver."

"Speak your message then, envoys of Lobengula, in my ear and in those of my people," said the Molimo.

"Your people! Are these all your people?" the spokesman replied contemptuously. "Why then, what need was there for the indunas of the King to send so large an impi under a great general against you, when a company of lads armed with sticks would have served the turn? We thought that these were but the sons of your house, the men of your own family, whom you had called together to eat with the white strangers."

"Close the entrance in the wall," cried the Molimo, stung to fury by the insult; and a voice answered:

"Father, it is already done."

But the Matabele, who should have been frightened, only laughed again, and their spokesman said:

"See, my brothers, he thinks to trap us who are but three. Well, kill on, Old Wizard, if you will, but know that if a hand is lifted, this spear of mine goes through your heart, and that the children of Lobengula die hard. Know also that then the impi which waits not far away will destroy you every one, man and woman, youth and maiden, little ones who hold the hand and infants at the breast; none shall be left--none at all, to say, 'Here once lived the cowardly Makalanga of Bambatse.' Nay, be not foolish, but talk softly with us, so that perhaps we may spare your lives."

Then the three men placed themselves back to back, in such fashion that they faced every way, and could not be smitten down from behind, and waited.

"I do not kill envoys," said the Molimo, "but if they are foul-mouthed, I throw them out of my walls. Your message, men of the Amandabele."

"I hear you. Hearken now to the word of Lobengula."

Then the envoy began to speak, using the pronoun I as though it were the Matabele king himself who spoke to his vassal, the Makalanga chief: "I sent to you last year, you slave, who dare to call yourself Mambo of the Makalanga, demanding a tribute of cattle and women, and warning you that if they did not come, I would take them. They did not come, but that time I spared you. Now I send again. Hand over to my messengers fifty

cows and fifty oxen, with herds to drive them, and twelve maidens to be approved by them, or I wipe you out, who have troubled the earth too long, and that before another moon has waned.

"Those are the words of Lobengula," he concluded, and taking the horn snuff-box from the slit in his ear, helped himself, then insolently passed it to the Molimo.

So great was the old chief's rage that, forgetting his self-control, he struck the box from the hand of his tormentor to the ground, where the snuff lay spilled.

"Just so shall the blood of your people be spilled through your rash foolishness," said the messenger calmly, as he picked up the box, and as much of the snuff as he could save.

"Hearken," said the Molimo, in a thin, trembling voice. "Your king demands cattle, knowing that all the cattle are gone, that scarce a cow is left to give drink to a motherless babe. He asks for maidens also, but if he took those he seeks we should have none left for our young men to marry. And why is this so? It is because the vulture, Lobengula, has picked us to the bone; yes, while we are yet alive he has torn the flesh from us. Year by year his soldiers have stolen and killed, till at last nothing is left of us. And now he seeks what we have not got to give, in order that he may force a quarrel upon us and murder us. There is nought left for us to give Lobengula. You have your answer."

"Indeed!" replied the envoy with a sneer. "How comes it, then, that yonder I see a waggon laden with goods, and oxen in the yokes? Yes," he repeated with meaning, "with goods whereof we have known the like at Buluwayo; for Lobengula also sometimes buys guns from white men, O! little Makalanga. Come now, give us the waggon with its load and the oxen and the horses, and though it be but a small gift, we will take it away and ask nothing more this year."

"How can I give you the property of my guests, the white men?" asked the Molimo. "Get you gone, and do your worst, or you shall be thrown from the walls of the fortress."

"Good, but know that very soon we shall return and make an end of you, who are tired of these long and troublesome journeys to gather so little. Go, tend your corn, dwellers in Bambatse, for this I swear in the name of Lobengula, never shall you see it ripen more."

Now the crowd of listening Makalanga trembled at his words, but in the old Molimo they seemed only to rouse a storm of prophetic fury. For a moment he stood staring up at the blue sky, his arms outstretched as though in prayer. Then he spoke in a new voice--a clear, quiet voice, that did not seem to be his own.

"Who am I?" he said. "I am the Molimo of the Bambatse Makalanga; I am the ladder between them and Heaven; I sit on the topmost bough of

the tree under which they shelter, and there in the crest of the tree Munwali speaks with me. What to you are winds, to me are voices whispering in my spirit's ears. Once my forefathers were great kings, they were Mambos of all the land, and that is still my name and dignity. We lived in peace; we laboured, we did wrong to no man. Then you Zulu savages came upon us from the south-east and your path was red with blood. Year after year you robbed and you destroyed; you raided our cattle, you murdered our men, you took our maidens and our children to be your women and your slaves, until at length, of all this pit filled with the corn of life, there is left but a little handful. And this you say you will eat up also, lest it should fall into good ground and grow again. I tell you that I think it will not be so; but whether or no that happens, I have words for the ear of your king--a message for a message. Say to him that thus speaks the wise old Molimo of Bambatse.

"I see him hunted like a wounded hyena through the rivers, in the deep bush, and over the mountain. I see him die in pain and misery; but his grave I see not, for no man shall know it. I see the white man take his land and all his wealth; yea, to them and to no son of his shall his people give the Bayéte, the royal salute. Of his greatness and his power, this alone shall remain to him--a name accursed from generation to generation. And last of all I see peace upon the land and upon my children's children." He paused, then added: "For you, cruel dog that you are, this message also from the Munwali, by the lips of his Molimo. I lift no hand against you, but you shall not live to look again upon your king's face. Begone now, and do your worst."

For a moment the three Matabele seemed to be frightened, and Benita heard one of them say to his companions:

"The Wizard has bewitched us! He has bewitched the Great Elephant and all his people! Shall we kill him?"

But quickly shaking off his fears their spokesman laughed, and answered:

"So that is what you have brought the white people here for, old traitor--to plot against the throne of Lobengula."

He wheeled round and stared at Mr. Clifford and Jacob Meyer; then added:

"Good, Grey-beard and Black-Beard: I myself will put you both to such a death as you have never heard of, and as for the girl, since she is well favoured, she shall brew the king's beer, and be numbered amongst the king's wives--unless, indeed, he is pleased to give her to me."

In an instant the thing was done! At the man's words about Benita, Meyer, who had been listening to his threats and bombast unconcerned, suddenly seemed to awake. His dark eyes flashed, his pale face turned cruel. Snatching the revolver from his belt he seemed to point and fire it with one movement, and down--dead or dying--went the Matabele.

Men did not stir, they only stared. Accustomed as they were to death in

that wild land, the suddenness of this deed surprised them. The contrast between the splendid, brutal savage who had stood before them a moment ago, and the limp, black thing going to sleep upon the ground, was strange enough to move their imaginations. There he lay, and there, over him, the smoking pistol in his hand, Meyer stood and laughed.

Benita felt that the act was just, and the awful punishment deserved. Yet that laugh of Jacob's jarred upon her, for in it she thought she heard the man's heart speaking; and oh, its voice was merciless! Surely Justice should not laugh when her sword falls!

"Behold, now," said the Molimo in his still voice, pointing at the dead Matabele with his finger; "do I speak lies, or is it true that this man shall not look more upon his king's face? Well, as it was with the servant, so it shall be with the lord, only more slowly. It is the decree of the Munwali, spoken by the voice of his Mouth, the Molimo of Bambatse. Go, children of Lobengula, and bear with you as an offering this first-fruit of the harvest that the white men shall reap among the warriors of his people."

The thin voice died away, and there was silence so intense that Benita thought she heard the scraping of the feet of a green lizard which crept across a stone a yard or two away.

Then of a sudden it ended. Of a sudden the two remaining Matabele turned and fled for their lives, and as, when dogs run, a flock of sheep will



wheel about and pursue them, so did the Makalanga. They grabbed at the messengers with their hands, tearing their finery from them; they struck them with sticks, they pounded them with stones, till at length two bruised and bleeding men, finding all escape cut off, and led perhaps by some instinct, staggered back to where Benita stood horrified at this dreadful scene, and throwing themselves upon the ground, clutched at her dress and prayed for mercy.

"Move a little, Miss Clifford," said Meyer. "Three of those brutes will not weigh heavier than one upon my conscience."

"No, no, you shall not," she answered. "Mambo, these men are messengers; spare them."

"Hearken to the voice of pity," said the old prophet, "spoken in a place where pity never was, and not in vain. Let them go. Give mercy to the merciless, for she buys their lives with a prayer."

"They will bring the others on us," muttered Tamas, and even old Mr. Clifford shook his head sadly. But the Molimo only said:

"I have spoken. Let them go. That which will befall must befall, and from this deed no ill shall come that would not have come otherwise."

"You hear? Depart swiftly," said Benita, in Zulu.

With difficulty the two men dragged themselves to their feet, and supporting each other, stood before her. One of them, a clever, powerful-faced man, whose black hair was tinged with grey, addressing himself to Benita, gasped:

"Hear me. That fool there," and he pointed to his dead companion, "whose boasting brought his death upon him, was but a low fellow. I, who kept silence and let him talk, am Maduna, a prince of the royal house who justly deserve to die because I turned my back upon these dogs. Yet I and my brother here take life at your hands, Lady, who, now that I have had time to think, would refuse it at theirs. For, whether I stay or go does not matter. The impi waits; the slayers are beneath the walls. Those things which are decreed will happen; there, yonder old Wizard speaks true. Listen, Lady: should it chance that you have cause to demand two lives at the hands of Maduna, in his own name and the name of his king he promises them to you. In safety shall they pass, they and all that is theirs, without toll taken. Remember the oath of Maduna, Lady, in the hour of your need, and do you, my brother, bear witness to it among our people."

Then, straightening themselves as well as they were able, these two sorely hurt men lifted their right arms and gave Benita the salute due to a chieftainess. This done, taking no note of any other creature there, they limped away to the gate that had been opened for them, and vanished beyond the wall.

All this while Meyer had stood silent; now he spoke with a bitter smile.

"Charity, Miss Clifford, said a certain Paul, as reported in your New Testament, covers a multitude of sins. I hope very much that it will serve to cover our remains from the aasvogels, after we have met our deaths in some such fashion as that brute promised us," and he pointed to the dead man.

Benita looked at her father in question.

"Mr. Meyer means, my dear, that you have done a foolish thing in begging the lives of those Matabele. It would have been safer for us if they were dead, who, as it is, have gone off burning for revenge. Of course, I understand it was natural enough, but----" and he hesitated and stopped.

"The chief did not say so," broke in Benita with agitation; "besides, if he had, I should not have cared. It was bad enough to see one man killed like that," and she shivered; "I could not bear any more."

"You should not be angry at the fellow's death, seeing that it was what he said of you which brought it upon him," Meyer replied with meaning. "Otherwise he might have gone unharmed as far as I was concerned. For the rest, I did not interfere because I saw it was useless; also I am a fatalist like our friend, the Molimo, and believe in what is decreed. The truth is," he added sharply, "among savages ladies are not in

place."

"Why did you not say that down at Rooi Krantz, Jacob?" asked Mr. Clifford. "You know I thought so all the while, but somehow I was over-ruled. Now what I suggest is, that we had better get out of this place as fast as we can--instantly, as soon as we have eaten, before our retreat is cut off."

Meyer looked at the oxen which had been outspanned: nine were wandering about picking up what food they could, but the five which were supposed to have been bitten by tsetsefly had lain down.

"Nine worn-out and footsore oxen will not draw the waggon," he said; "also in all probability the place is already surrounded by Matabele, who merely let us in to be sure of the guns which their spies must have told them we were carrying. Lastly, having spent so much and come so far, I do not mean to go without what we seek. Still, if you think that your daughter's danger is greater within these walls than outside of them, you might try, if we can hire servants, which I doubt. Or possibly, if any rowers are to be had, you could go down the Zambesi in a canoe, risking the fever. You and she must settle it, Clifford."

"Difficulties and dangers every way one looks. Benita, what do you say?" asked her father distractedly.

Benita thought a moment. She wished to escape from Mr. Meyer, of whom

she was weary and afraid, and would have endured much to do so. On the other hand, her father was tired out, and needed rest; also to turn his back upon this venture now would have been a bitter blow to him. Moreover, lacking cattle and men, how was it to be done? Lastly, something within her, that same voice which had bidden her to come, seemed to bid her to stay. Very soon she had made up her mind.

"Father, dear," she said, "thank you for thinking of me, but as far as I can see, we should run more risks trying to get away than we do in stopping here. I wanted to come, though you warned me against it, and now I must take my chance and trust to God to bring us safe through all dangers. Surely with all those rifles the Makalanga ought to be able to hold such a place as this against the Matabele."

"I hope so," answered her father; "but they are a timid folk. Still, though it would have been far better never to have come, I think with you that it is best to stay where we are, and trust to God."

X

## THE MOUNTAIN TOP

If our adventurers, or any of them, hoped that they were going to be