

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

led to the secret places of the fortress that day, they were destined to disappointment. Indeed, the remainder of it was employed arduously enough in unpacking rifles, and a supply of ammunition; also in giving to a few of the leading Makalanga preliminary lessons in the method of their use, a matter as to which their ideas were of the vaguest. The rest of the tribe, having brought their women and children into the outer enclosure of the ancient stronghold, and with them their sheep and goats and the few cattle which remained to them, were employed in building up the entrance permanently with stones, a zigzag secret path upon the river side, that could be stopped in a few minutes, being now their only method of ingress and egress through the thickness of the walls. A certain number of men were also sent out as spies to discover, if possible, the whereabouts of the Matabele impi.

That there was some impi they were almost sure, for a woman who had followed them reported that the injured captain, Maduna, and his companion had been met at a distance of about three miles from Bambatse by a small party of Matabele, who were hiding in some bushes, and that these men had made litters for them, and carried them away; whither she did not know, for she had not dared to pursue them further.

That night Benita passed in the guesthouse, which was only a hut rather larger than the others, while the two men slept in the waggon just outside. She was so tired that for a long while she could not rest. Her mind kept flying back to all the events of the day: the strange words of that mystic old Molimo, concerning herself; the arrival of the brutal

messengers and the indaba that followed; then the sudden and awful destruction of their spokesman at the hand of Jacob Meyer. The scene would not leave her eyes, she saw it again and yet again: the quick transformation of Meyer's indifferent face when the soldier began to insult and threaten her, the lightning-like movement of his hand, the flash, the report, the change from life to death, and the slayer's cruel laugh. He could be very terrible, Jacob Meyer, when his passions were roused!

And what had roused them then? She could not doubt that it was herself--not mere chivalry towards a woman. Even if he were capable of chivalry, merely for that he would never have taken such risk of future trouble and revenge. No; it was something deeper. He had never said anything or done anything, yet long ago instinct or insight had caused Benita to suspect the workings of his mind, and now she was sure of them. The thought was terrible--worse than all her other dangers put together. True, she had her father to rely on, but he had been somewhat ailing of late; age and these arduous journeys and anxieties had told upon him. Supposing that anything were to happen to him--if he died, for instance, how dreadful her position might become, left alone far from the reach of help, with savages--and Jacob Meyer.

Oh! if it had not been for that dreadful shipwreck, how different might be her lot to-day! Well, it was the thought of the shipwreck and of him whom she had lost therein, which had driven her on to this adventure, that in it perhaps her suffering mind might be numbed to rest; and now

she must face its issues. God still remained above her, and she would put her trust in Him. After all, if she died, what did it matter?

But that old Molimo had promised her that she was safe from death, that she should find here happiness and rest, though not that of the grave. He promised this, speaking as one who knew of all her grief, and a very little while afterwards, in the case of the Matabele soldier, he had proved himself a prophet of awful power. Also--she knew not how, she knew not why--now, as before, her inmost heart seemed to bear witness that this old dreamer's words were true, and that for her, in some strange manner unforeseen, there still remained a rest.

Comforted a little by this intuition, at length Benita fell asleep.

Next morning, when she came out of the hut, Benita was met by her father, who with a cheerful countenance informed her that at any rate as yet there was no sign of the Matabele. A few hours later, too, some spies came in who said that for miles round nothing could be seen or heard of them. Still the preparations for defence went on, and the hundred best men having been furnished with the rifles, were being drilled in the use of them by Tamas and his two companions, Tamala and Hoba, who had learned how to handle a gun very well in the course of their long journey. The shooting of these raw recruits, however, proved to be execrable; indeed, so dangerous were they that when one of them fired at a mark set upon the wall, it was found necessary to order all the rest to lie down. As it was, a poor trek ox--luckily it was

sick--and two sheep were killed.

Foreseeing a scarcity of provisions in the event of a siege, Meyer, provident as ever, had already decreed the death of the tsetse-bitten cattle. These were accordingly despatched, and having been skinned and cut up, their flesh was severed into long strips to be dried in the burning sun as biltong, which secretly Benita hoped she might never be called upon to eat. Yet the time was to come when she would swallow that hard, tsetse-poisoned flesh with thankfulness.

At midday, after they had eaten, Mr. Clifford and Meyer went to the Molimo, where he sat against the second wall, and, pointing to the men with the guns, said:

"We have fulfilled our bargain. Now fulfil yours. Lead us to the holy place that we may begin our search."

"So be it," he answered. "Follow me, white people."

Then, quite unattended, he guided them round the inner wall till they came to a path of rock not more than a yard wide, beneath which was a precipice fifty feet or so in depth that almost overhung the river. This giddy path they followed for about twenty paces, to find that it ended in a cleft in the wall so narrow that only one person could walk through it at a time. That it must have been the approach to the second stronghold was evident, however, since it was faced on either side with

dressed stones, and even the foundation granite had been worn by the human feet which had passed here for ages upon ages. This path zigzagged to and fro in the thickness of the wall till it brought them finally within its circle, a broad belt of steeply-rising ground, covered like that below with the tumbled ruins of buildings amidst which grew bush and trees.

"Heaven send that the gold is not buried here," said Mr. Clifford, surveying the scene; "for if it is, we shall never find it."

The Molimo seemed to guess the meaning of his words from his face, for he answered:

"I think not here. The besiegers won this place and camped in it for many weeks. I could show you where they built their fires and tried to undermine the last wall within which the Portuguese sat about until hunger killed them, for they could not eat their gold. Follow me again."

So on they went up the slope till they came to the base of the third wall, and as before, passed round it, and reached a point above the river. But now there was no passage, only some shallow and almost precipitous steps cut from single stones leading from the foot of the wall to its summit, more than thirty feet above.

"Really," said Benita, contemplating this perilous ascent with dismay, "the ways of treasure seekers are hard. I don't think I can," while her

father also looked at them and shook his head.

"We must get a rope," said Meyer to the Molimo angrily. "How can we climb that place without one, with such a gulf below?"

"I am old, but I climb it," said the aged man in mild surprise, since to him, who had trodden it all his life, it seemed not difficult. "Still," he added, "I have a rope above which I use upon dark nights. I will ascend and let it down."

Ascend he did accordingly; indeed, it was a wondrous sight to see his withered legs scrambling from step to step as unconcernedly as though he were going upstairs. No monkey could have been more agile, or more absolutely impervious to the effects of height. Soon he vanished in--or, rather, through--the crest of the wall, and presently appeared again on the top step, whence he let down a stout hide rope, remarking that it was securely tied. So anxious was Meyer to enter the hidden place of which he had dreamed so long that he scarcely waited for it to reach his hand before he began the climb, which he accomplished safely. Then, sitting on the top of the wall, he directed Mr. Clifford to fasten the end of the rope round Benita's waist, and her turn came.

It was not so bad as she expected, for she was agile, and the knowledge that the rope would prevent disaster gave her confidence. In a very little while she had grasped Meyer's outstretched hand, and been drawn into safety through a kind of aperture above the top step. Then the rope

was let down again for her father, who tied it about his middle. Well was it that he did so, since when he was about half-way up, awkwardness, or perhaps loss of nerve--neither of them wonderful in an old man--caused his foot to slip, and had it not been for the rope which Meyer and the Molimo held, he would certainly have fallen into the river some hundreds of feet below. As it was, he recovered himself, and presently arrived panting and very pale. In her relief Benita kissed him, and even as she did so thought again that she had been very near to being left alone with Jacob Meyer.

"All's well that ends well, my dear," he said. "But upon my word I am beginning to wish that I had been content with the humble profits of horse-breeding."

Benita made no answer; it seemed too late for any useful consideration of the point.

"Clever men, those ancients," said Meyer. "See," and he pointed out to her how, by drawing a heavy stone which still lay close by over the aperture through which they had crept, the ascent of the wall could be made absolutely impossible to any enemy, since at its crest it was battened outwards, not inwards, as is usual in these ancient ruins.

"Yes," she answered, "we ought to feel safe enough inside here, and that's as well since I do not feel inclined to go out again at present."

Then they paused to look about them, and this was what they saw:

The wall, built like those below, of unmortared blocks of stone, remained in a wonderfully good state of preservation, for its only enemies had been time, the tropical rains, and the growth of shrubs and trees which here and there had cracked and displaced the stones. It enclosed all the top of the hill, perhaps three acres of ground, and on it at intervals were planted soap-stone pillars, each of them about twelve feet in height, and fashioned at the top to a rude resemblance of a vulture. Many of these columns, however had been blown down, or perhaps struck by lightning, and lay broken upon the wall, or if they had fallen inward, at its foot; but some, six or eight perhaps, were still standing.

Benita learned afterwards that they must have been placed there by the ancient Phoenicians, or whatever people constructed this gigantic fortification, and had something to do with the exact recordings of the different seasons of the year, and their sub-divisions, by means of the shadows which they cast. As yet, however, she did not pay much attention to them, for she was engaged in considering a more remarkable relic of antiquity which stood upon the very verge of the precipice, the wall, indeed, being built up to its base on either side.

It was the great cone of which Richard Seymour had told her, fifty feet high or more, such as once was found in the Phoenician temples. But in this case it was not built of masonry, but shaped by the hand of man out

of a single gigantic granite monolith of the sort that are sometimes to be met with in Africa, that thousands or millions of years ago had been left standing thus when the softer rock around it was worn away by time and weather. On the inner side of this cone were easy steps whereby it could be ascended, and its top, which might have been six feet in diameter, was fashioned in the shape of a cup, probably for the purposes of acts of worship and of sacrifice. This extraordinary monument, which, except on the river side, could not be seen from below on account of the slope of the hill, leaned slightly outwards, so that a stone dropped from its crest would fall into the waters of the stream.

"Thence it was," said the Molimo, "that my forefathers saw the last of the Portuguese, the fair daughter of the great Captain Ferreira, hurl herself to death after she had given the gold into our keeping, and laid the curse upon it, until she came again. So in my dreams have I seen and heard her also, ay, and others have seen her, but these only from by the river far below."

He paused awhile, looking at Benita with his queer, dreamy eyes; then said suddenly:

"Say, Lady, do you remember nothing of that matter?"

Now Benita grew vexed, for the whole thing was uncanny and jarred upon her.

"How can I remember," she asked, "who was born not five and twenty years ago?"

"I do not know," he answered. "How should I know, who am but an ignorant old black man, who was born not much more than eighty years ago? Yet, Lady, tell me, for I seek your wisdom, where were you born from? Out of the earth, or out of the heavens? What? You shake your head, you who do not remember? Well, neither do I remember. Yet it is true that all circles meet somewhere, and it is true that the Portuguese maiden said she would come again; and lastly it is true that she was such an one as you are, for she haunts this place, and I, who have seen her sitting yonder in the moonlight, know her beauty well. Yet mayhap she comes no more in flesh, but still her spirit comes; for, Lady, out of those eyes of yours I see it gaze at me. Come," he added abruptly, "let us descend the wall, for as you cannot remember, there is more to show you. Have no fear--the steps are easy."

So they went down without much difficulty, since, from the accumulation of rubbish and other causes, the wall was a great deal lower on this side, and found themselves in the usual dense growth of vegetation and brushwood through which ran a little path. It led them past the ruins of buildings whereof the use and purpose were long since forgotten, for their roofs had fallen in hundreds or thousands of years ago, to the entrance of a cave which was placed almost at the foot of the monolithic cone, but thirty or forty yards further from the circle of the wall.

Here the Molimo bade them stay while he lit the lamps within. Five

minutes passed and he returned, saying that all was ready.

"Be not afraid of what you may see," he added, "for know, white people, that save my forefathers and myself, none have entered this place since the Portuguese perished here, nor have we, who do but come hither to pray and receive the word of the Munwali, ever ventured to disturb it. As it was, so it is. Come, Lady, come; she whose spirit goes with you was the last of your white race to pass this door. It is therefore fitting that your feet and her spirit should be the first to enter it again."

Benita hung back a little, for the adventure was eerie, then, determined that she would show no fear in the presence of this old priest, took the thin hand he stretched out to her, and walked forward with head erect. The two men began to follow her, but the Molimo stopped them, saying:

"Not so. The maiden enters first alone with me; it is her house, and should it please her to ask you to dwell therein, so be it. But first she must visit her house alone."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Clifford angrily. "I will not have it. It will frighten her."

"Lady, do you trust me?" asked the Molimo.

"Yes," she answered; adding, "Father, I think you had better let me go

alone. I am not afraid now, and it may be wisest not to thwart him. This is a very strange business--not like anything else--and really I think that I had better go alone. If I do not come back presently, you can follow."

"Those who break in upon the sleep of the dead should walk gently, gently," piped the old Molimo in a sing-song voice. "The maiden's breath is pure; the maiden's foot is light; her breath will not offend the dead; her step will not disturb the dead. White men, white men, anger not the dead, for the dead are mighty, and will be revenged upon you when you are dead; soon, very soon, when you are dead--dead in your sorrows, dead in your sins, dead, gathered to that company of the dead who await us here."

And, still chanting his mystic song, he led Benita by the hand out of the light, onward into darkness, away from life, onward into the place of death.