

THE SLEEPERS IN THE CAVE

Like every other passage in this old fortress, the approach to the cave was narrow and winding; presumably the ancients had arranged them thus to facilitate their defence. After the third bend, however, Benita saw a light ahead which flowed from a native lamp lit in the arched entrance. At the side of this arch was a shell-shaped hollow, cut in the rock about three feet above the floor. Its appearance seemed familiar to her; why, she was soon to learn, although at the moment she did not connect it with anything in particular. The cave beyond was large, lofty, and not altogether natural, for its walls had evidently been shaped, or at any rate trimmed, by man. Probably here the old Priests had established their oracle, or place of offering.

At first Benita could not see much, since in that great cavern two lamps of hippopotamus oil gave but little light. Presently, however, her eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and as they advanced up its length she perceived that save for a skin rug upon which she guessed the Molimo sat at his solitary devotions, and some gourds and platters for water and food, all the front part of the place appeared to be empty. Beyond, in its centre, stood an object of some gleaming metal, that from its double handles and roller borne upon supports of rock she took to be some kind of winch, and rightly, for beneath it was the mouth of a great well, the water supply of the topmost fortification.

Beyond the well was a stone altar, shaped like a truncated cone or pyramid, and at some distance away against the far wall, as she dimly discovered by the lamp that stood upon the altar, cut in relief upon that wall indeed, a colossal cross to which, vigorously if rudely executed in white stone, hung the image of Christ crucified, the crown of thorns upon His drooping head. Now she understood. Whatever may have been the first worship to which this place was dedicated, Christians had usurped it, and set up here the sacred symbol of their faith, awful enough to look upon in such surroundings. Doubtless, also, the shell-shaped basin at the entrance had served the worshippers in this underground chapel as a stoup for holy water.

The Molimo lifted the lamp from the altar, and having adjusted its wick, held it up in front of the rood before which, although she was no Catholic, Benita bowed her head and crossed herself, while he watched her curiously. Then he lowered it, and she perceived that on the cemented floor lay great numbers of shrouded forms that at first looked to her like folk asleep. He stepped to one of them and touched it with his foot, whereon the cloth which with it was covered crumbled into dust, revealing beneath a white skeleton.

All those sleepers rested well indeed, for they had been dead at least two hundred years. There they lay--men, women, and children, though of the last but few. Some of them had ornaments on their bones, some were clad in armour, and by all the men were swords, or spears, or knives,

and here and there what she took to be primitive fire-arms. Certain of them also had turned into mummies in that dry air--grotesque and dreadful objects from which she gladly averted her eyes.

The Molimo led her forward to the foot of the crucifix, where, upon its lowest step and upon the cemented floor immediately beneath it respectively, lay two shapes decorously covered with shawls of some heavy material interwoven with gold wire, for the manufacture of which the Makalanga were famous when first the Portuguese came into contact with them. The Molimo took hold of the cloths that seemed almost as good now as on the day when they were woven, and lifted them, revealing beneath the figures of a man and woman. The features were unrecognizable, although the hair, white in the man's case and raven black in that of the woman, remained perfect. They had been great people, for orders glittered upon the man's breast, and his sword was gold hilted, whilst the woman's bones were adorned with costly necklaces and jewels, and in her hand was still a book bound in sheets of silver. Benita took it up and looked at it. It was a missal beautifully illuminated, which doubtless the poor lady had been reading when at length she sank exhausted into the sleep of death.

"See the Lord Ferreira and his wife," said the Molimo, "whom their daughter laid thus before she went to join them." Then, at a motion from Benita, he covered them up again with their golden cloths.

"Here they sleep," he went on in his chanting voice, "a hundred and

fifty and three of them--a hundred and fifty and three; and when I dream in this place at night, I have seen the ghosts of every one of them arise from beside their forms and come gliding down the cave--the husband with the wife, the child with the mother--to look at me, and ask when the maiden returns again to take her heritage and give them burial."

Benita shuddered; the solemn awfulness of the place and scene oppressed her. She began to think that she, too, saw those ghosts.

"It is enough," she said. "Let us be going."

So they went, and the pitiful, agonized Christ upon the cross, at which she glanced from time to time over her shoulder, faded to a white blot, then vanished away in the darkness, through which, from generation to generation, it kept its watch above the dead, those dead that in their despair once had cried to it for mercy, and bedewed its feet with tears.

Glad, oh! glad was she when she had left that haunted place behind her, and saw the wholesome light again.

"What have you seen?" asked her father and Meyer, in one breath, as they noted her white and frightened face.

She sank upon a stone seat at the entrance of the cave, and before she could open her lips the Molimo answered for her:

"The maiden has seen the dead. The Spirit who goes with her has given greeting to its dead that it left so long ago. The maiden has done reverence to the White One who hangs upon the cross, and asked a blessing and a pardon of Him, as she whose Spirit goes with her did reverence before the eyes of my forefathers, and asked a blessing and a pardon ere she cast herself away." And he pointed to the little golden crucifix which hung upon Benita's bosom, attached to the necklace which Tamas, the messenger, had given her at Rooi Krantz.

"Now," he went on, "now the spell is broken, and the sleepers must depart to sleep elsewhere. Enter, white men; enter, if you dare, and ask for pardon and for blessing if it may be found, and gather up the dry bones and take the treasure that was theirs, if it may be found, and conquer the curse that goes with the treasure for all save one, if you can, if you can, if you can! Rest you here, maiden, in the sweet sunshine, and follow me, white men; follow me into the dark of the dead to seek for that which the white men love." And once more he vanished down the passage, turning now and again to beckon to them, while they went after him as though drawn against their wish. For now, at the last moment, some superstitious fear spread from him to them, and showed itself in their eyes.

To Benita, half fainting upon the stone seat, for this experience had shaken her to the heart, it seemed but a few minutes, though really the best part of an hour had gone by, when her father reappeared as

white-faced as she had been.

"Where is Mr. Meyer?" she asked.

"Oh!" he answered. "He is collecting all the golden ornaments off those poor bodies, and tumbling their bones together in a corner of the cave."

Benita uttered an exclamation of horror.

"I know what you mean," said her father. "But, curse the fellow! he has no reverence, although at first he seemed almost as scared as I was myself. He said that as we could not begin our search with all those corpses about, they had best be got out of the way as soon as possible. Or perhaps it was because he is really afraid of them, and wanted to prove to himself that they are nothing more than dust. Benita," went on the old man, "to tell you the truth, I wish heartily that we had left this business alone. I don't believe that any good will come of it, and certainly it has brought enough trouble already. That old prophet of a Molimo has the second sight, or something like it, and he does not hide his opinion, but keeps chuckling away in that dreadful place, and piping out his promises of ill to be."

"He promised me nothing but good," said Benita with a little smile.

"Though I don't see how it can happen. But if you dislike the thing, father, why not give it up and try to escape?"

"It is too late, dear," he replied passionately. "Meyer would never come, and I can't in honour leave him. Also, I should laugh at myself for the rest of my life; and, after all, why should we not have the gold if it can be found? It belongs to nobody. We do not get it by robbery, or murder; nuggets are of no use to Portuguese who have been dead two hundred years, and whose heirs, if they have any, it is impossible to discover. Nor can it matter to them whether they lie about singly as they died or were placed after death, or piled together in a corner. Our fears were mere churchyard superstitions, which we have caught from that ghoul of a Molimo. Don't you agree with me?"

"Yes, I suppose so," answered Benita, "though a fate may cling to certain things or places, perhaps. At any rate, I think that it is of no use turning back now, even if we had anywhere to turn, so we may as well go through with the venture and await its end. Give me the water-bottle, please. I am thirsty."

A while later Jacob Meyer appeared, carrying a great bundle of precious objects wrapped in one of the gold cere-cloths, which bundle he hid away behind a stone.

"The cave is much tidier now," he said, as he flicked the thick dust which had collected on them during his unhallowed task from his hands, and hair, and garments. Then he drank greedily, and asked:

"Have you two made any plans for our future researches?"

They shook their heads.

"Well, then, I have. I thought them out while I was bone-carting, and here they are. It is no use our going down below again; for one thing, the journey is too dangerous, and takes too long; and for another, we are safer up above, where we have plenty to do."

"But," said Benita, "how about things to eat and sleep on, and the rest?"

"Simple enough, Miss Clifford; we must get them up. The Kaffirs will bring them to the foot of the third wall, and we will haul them to its top with a rope. Of water it seems there is plenty in that well, which is fed by a spring a hundred and fifty feet down, and the old chain is still on the roller, so we only need a couple of buckets from the waggon. Of wood for cooking there is plenty also, growing on the spot; and we can camp in the cave or outside of it, as we like, according to the state of the weather. Now, do you rest here while I go down. I will be back in an hour with some of the gear, and then you must help me."

So he went, and the end of it was that before nightfall they had enough things for their immediate needs, and by the second night, working very hard, were more or less comfortably established in their strange habitation. The canvas flap from the waggon was arranged as a tent for Benita, the men sleeping beneath a thick-leaved tree near by. Close at

hand, under another tree, was their cooking place. The provisions of all sorts, including a couple of cases of square-face and a large supply of biltong from the slaughtered cattle, they stored with a quantity of ammunition in the mouth of the cave. Fresh meat also was brought to them daily, and hauled up in baskets--that is, until there was none to bring--and with it grain for bread, and green mealies to serve as vegetables. Therefore, as the water from the well proved to be excellent and quite accessible, they were soon set up in all things necessary, and to these they added from time to time as opportunity offered.

In all these preparations the old Molimo took a part, nor, when they were completed, did he show any inclination to leave them. In the morning he would descend to his people below, but before nightfall he always returned to the cave, where for many years it had been his custom to sleep--at any rate several times a week, in the gruesome company of the dead Portuguese. Jacob Meyer persuaded Mr. Clifford that his object was to spy upon them, and talked of turning him out; but Benita, between whom and the old man had sprung up a curious friendship and sympathy, prevented it, pointing out that they were much safer with the Molimo, as a kind of hostage, than they could be without him; also, that his knowledge of the place, and of other things, might prove of great help to them. So in the end he was allowed to remain, as indeed he had a perfect right to do.

All this while there was no sign of any attack by the Matabele. Indeed, the fear of such a thing was to some extent dying away, and Benita,

watching from the top of the wall, could see that their nine remaining oxen, together with the two horses--for that belonging to Jacob Meyer had died--and the Makalanga goats and sheep, were daily driven out to graze; also, that the women were working in the crops upon the fertile soil around the lowest wall. Still, a strict watch was kept, and at night everyone slept within the fortifications; moreover, the drilling of the men and their instruction in the use of firearms went on continually under Tamas, who now, in his father's old age, was the virtual chief of the people.

It was on the fourth morning that at length, all their preparations being completed, the actual search for the treasure began. First, the Molimo was closely interrogated as to its whereabouts, since they thought that even if he did not know this exactly, some traditions of the fact might have descended to him from his ancestors. But he declared with earnestness that he knew nothing, save that the Portuguese maiden had said that it was hidden; nor, he added, had any dream or vision come to him concerning this matter, in which he took no interest. If it was there, it was there; if it was not there, it was not there--it remained for the white men to search and see.

For no very good reason Meyer had concluded that the gold must have been concealed in or about the cave, so here it was that they began their investigations.

First, they bethought them of the well into which it might possibly

have been thrown, but the fact of this matter proved very difficult to ascertain. Tying a piece of metal--it was an old Portuguese sword-hilt--to a string, they let it down and found that it touched water at a depth of one hundred and twenty feet, and bottom at a depth of one hundred and forty-seven feet. Therefore there were twenty-seven feet of water. Weighting a bucket they sank it until it rested upon this bottom, then wound it up again several times. On the third occasion it brought up a human bone and a wire anklet of pure gold. But this proved nothing, except that some ancient, perhaps thousands of years ago, had been thrown, or had fallen, into the well.

Still unsatisfied, Jacob Meyer, who was a most intrepid person, determined to investigate the place himself, a task of no little difficulty and danger, since proper ladders were wanting, nor, had they existed, was there anything to stand them on. Therefore it came to this: a seat must be rigged on to the end of the old copper chain, and be lowered into the pit after the fashion of the bucket. But, as Benita pointed out, although they might let him down, it was possible that they would not be able to draw him up again, in which case his plight must prove unfortunate. So, when the seat had been prepared, an experiment was made with a stone weighing approximately as much as a man. This Benita and her father let down easily enough, but, as they anticipated, when it came to winding it up again, their strength was barely sufficient to the task. Three people could do it well, but with two the thing was risky. Now Meyer asked--or, rather, commanded--the Molimo to order some of his men to help him, but this the old chief refused point

blank to do.

First, he made a number of excuses. They were all employed in drilling, and in watching for the Matabele; they were afraid to venture here, and so forth. At last Meyer grew furious; his eyes flashed, he ground his teeth, and began to threaten.

"White man," said the Molimo, when he had done, "it cannot be. I have fulfilled my bargain with you. Search for the gold; find it and take it away if you can. But this place is holy. None of my tribe, save he who holds the office of Molimo for the time, may set a foot therein. Kill me if you will--I care not; but so it is, and if you kill me, afterwards they will kill you."

Now Meyer, seeing that nothing was to be gained by violence, changed his tone, and asked if he himself would help them.

"I am old, my strength is small," he replied; "yet I will put my hand to the chain and do my best. But, if I were you, I would not descend that pit."

"Still, I will descend it, and to-morrow," said Meyer.