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THE BEGINNING OF THE SEARCH

Accordingly, on the next day the great experiment was made. The chain and ancient winding gear had been tested and proved to be amply sufficient to the strain. Therefore, nothing remained save for Meyer to place himself in the wooden seat with an oil-lamp, and in case this should be extinguished, matches and candles, of both of which they had a large supply.

He did so boldly enough, and swung out over the mouth of the pit, while the three of them clutched the handles of the winch. Then they began to lower, and slowly his white face disappeared into the black depth. At every few turns his descent was stopped that he might examine the walls of the well, and when he was about fifty feet down he called to them to hold on, which they did, listening while he struck at the rock with a hammer, for here it sounded very hollow.

At length he shouted to them to lower away again, and they obeyed, until nearly all the chain was out, and they knew he must be near the water. Now Benita, peeping over the edge, saw that the star of light had vanished. His lamp was out, nor did he appear to attempt to re-light it. They shouted down the well to him, but no answer coming, began to wind up as fast as they were able. It was all that their united strength could manage, and very exhausted were they when at length Jacob

reappeared at the top. At first, from the look of him they thought that he was dead, and had he not tied himself to the chain, dead he certainly would have been, for evidently his senses had left him long ago. Indeed, he had fallen almost out of the seat, over which his legs hung limply, his weight being supported by the hide rope beneath his arms which was made fast to the chain.

They swung him in and dashed water over his face, till, to their relief, at last he began to gasp for breath, and revived sufficiently to enable them to half-lead and half-carry him out into the fresh air.

"What happened to you?" asked Clifford.

"Poisoned with gases, I suppose," Meyer answered with a groan, for his head was aching sadly. "The air is often bad at the bottom of deep wells, but I could smell or feel nothing until suddenly my senses left me. It was a near thing--a very near thing."

Afterwards, when he had recovered a little, he told them that at one spot deep down in the well, on the river side of it, he found a place where it looked as though the rock had been cut away for a space of about six feet by four, and afterwards built up again with another sort of stone set in hard mortar or cement. Immediately beneath, too, were socket-holes in which the ends of beams still remained, suggesting that here had been a floor or platform. It was while he was examining these rotted beams that insensibility overcame him. He added that he thought

that this might be the entrance to the place where the gold was hidden.

"If so," said Mr. Clifford, "hidden it must remain, since it can have no better guardian than bad air. Also, floors like that are common in all wells to prevent rubbish from falling into the water, and the stonework you saw probably was only put there by the ancients to mend a fault in the rock and prevent the wall from caving in."

"I hope so," said Meyer, "since unless that atmosphere purifies a good deal I don't think that even I dare go down again, and until one gets there, of that it is difficult to be sure, though of course a lantern on a string will tell one something."

This was the end of their first attempt. The search was not renewed until the following afternoon, when Meyer had recovered a little from

the effects of the poisoning and the chafing of the hide ropes beneath his arms. Indeed, from the former he never did quite recover, since thenceforward Benita, who for her own reasons watched the man closely, discovered a marked and progressive change in his demeanour. Hitherto he had appeared to be a reserved man, one who kept tight hand upon himself, and, if she knew certain things about him, it was rather because she guessed, or deduced them, than because he allowed them to be seen. On two occasions only had he shown his heart before her--when they had spoken together by the shores of Lake Chrissie on the day of the arrival of the messengers, and he declared his ardent desire for wealth and

power; and quite recently, when he killed the Matabele envoy. Yet she felt certain that this heart of his was very passionate and insurgent; that his calm was like the ice that hides the stream, beneath which its currents run fiercely, none can see whither. The fashion in which his dark eyes would flash, even when his pale countenance remained unmoved, told her so, as did other things.

For instance, when he was recovering from his swoon, the first words that passed his lips were in German, of which she understood a little, and she thought that they shaped themselves to her name, coupled with endearing epithets. From that time forward he became less guarded--or, rather, it seemed as though he were gradually losing power to control himself. He would grow excited without apparent cause, and begin to declaim as to what he would do when he had found the gold; how he would pay the world back all it had caused him to suffer--how he would become a "king."

"I am afraid that you will find that exalted position rather lonely," said Benita with a careless laugh, and next minute was sorry that she had spoken, for he answered, looking at her in a way that she did not like:

"Oh, no! There will be a queen--a beautiful queen, whom I shall endow with wealth, and deck with jewels, and surround with love and worship."

"What a fortunate lady!" she said, still laughing, but taking the

opportunity to go away upon some errand.

At other times, especially after dark, he would walk up and down in front of the cave, muttering to himself, or singing wild old German songs in his rich voice. Also, he made a habit of ascending the granite pillar and seating himself there, and more than once called down to her to come up and share his "throne." Still, these outbreaks were so occasional that her father, whose perceptions appeared to Benita to be less keen than formerly, scarcely noticed them, and for the rest his demeanour was what it had always been.

Further researches into the well being out of the question, their next step was to make a thorough inspection of the chapel-cave itself. They examined the walls inch by inch, tapping them with a hammer to hear if they sounded hollow, but without result. They examined the altar, but it proved to be a solid mass of rock. By the help of a little ladder they had made, they examined the crucifix, and discovered that the white figure on the cross had evidently been fashioned out of some heathen statue of soft limestone, for at its back were the remains of draperies, and long hair which the artist had not thought it necessary to cut away. Also, they found that the arms had been added, and were of a slightly different stone, and that the weight of the figure was taken partly by an iron staple which supported the body, and partly by strong copper wire twisted to resemble cord, and painted white, which was passed round the wrists and supported the arms. This wire ran through loops of rock cut in the traverse of the cross, that itself was only raised in relief

by chiselling away the solid stone behind.

Curiously enough, this part of the search was left to Mr. Clifford and Benita, since it was one that Jacob Meyer seemed reluctant to undertake. A Jew by birth, and a man who openly professed his want of belief in that or any other religion, he yet seemed to fear this symbol of the Christian faith, speaking of it as horrible and unlucky; yes, he who, without qualm or remorse, had robbed and desecrated the dead that lay about its feet. Well, the crucifix told them nothing; but as Mr. Clifford, lantern in hand, descended the ladder, which Benita held, Jacob Meyer, who was in front of the altar, called to them excitedly that he had found something.

"Then it is more than we have," said Mr. Clifford, as he laid down the ladder and hurried to him.

Meyer was sounding the floor with a staff of wood--an operation which he had only just began after the walls proved barren.

"Listen now," he said, letting the heavy staff drop a few paces to the right of the altar, where it produced the hard, metallic clang that comes from solid stone when struck. Then he moved to the front of the altar and dropped it again, but now the note was hollow and reverberant. Again and again he repeated the experiment, till they had exactly mapped out where the solid rock ended and that which seemed to be hollow began--a space of about eight feet square.

"We've got it," he said triumphantly. "That's the entrance to the place where the gold is," and the others were inclined to agree with him.

Now it remained to put their theory to the proof--a task of no small difficulty. Indeed, it took them three days of hard, continual work.

It will be remembered that the floor of the cave was cemented over, and first of all this cement, which proved to be of excellent quality, being largely composed of powdered granite, must be broken up. By the help of a steel crowbar, which they had brought with them in the waggon, at length that part of their task was completed, revealing the rock beneath. By this time Benita was confident that, whatever might lie below, it was not the treasure, since it was evident that the poor, dying Portuguese would not have had the time or the strength to cement it over. When she told the others so, however, Meyer, convinced that he was on the right tack, answered that doubtless it was done by the Makalanga after the Portuguese days, as it was well known that they retained a knowledge of the building arts of their forefathers until quite a recent period, when the Matabele began to kill them out.

When at length the cement was cleared away and the area swept, they discovered--for there ran the line of it--that here a great stone was set into the floor; it must have weighed several tons. As it was set in cement, however, to lift it, even if they had the strength to work the necessary levers, proved quite impossible. There remained only one thing to be done--to cut a way through. When they had worked at this task for

several hours, and only succeeded in making a hole six inches deep, Mr. Clifford, whose old bones ached and whose hands were very sore, suggested that perhaps they might break it up with gunpowder. Accordingly, a pound flask of that explosive was poured into the hole, which they closed over with wet clay and a heavy rock, leaving a quill through which ran an extemporized fuse of cotton wick. All being prepared, their fuse was lit, and they left the cave and waited.

Five minutes afterwards the dull sound of an explosion reached their ears, but more than an hour went by before the smoke and fumes would allow them to enter the place, and then it was to find that the results did not equal their expectations. To begin with, the slab was only cracked--not shattered, since the strength of the powder had been expended upwards, not downwards, as would have happened in the case of dynamite, of which they had none. Moreover, either the heavy stone which they had placed upon it, striking the roof of the cave, or the concussion of the air, had brought down many tons of rock, and caused wide and dangerous-looking cracks. Also, though she said nothing of it, it seemed to Benita that the great white statue on the cross was leaning a little further forward than it used to do. So the net result of the experiment was that they were obliged to drag away great fragments of the fallen roof that lay upon the stone, which remained almost as solid and obdurate as before.

So there was nothing for it but to go on working with the crowbar. At length, towards the evening of the third day of their labour, when the

two men were utterly tired out, a hole was broken through, demonstrating the fact that beneath this cover lay a hollow of some sort. Mr. Clifford, to say nothing of Benita, who was heartily weary of the business, wished to postpone proceedings till the morrow, but Jacob Meyer would not. So they toiled on until about eleven o'clock at night, when at length the aperture was of sufficient size to admit a man. Now, as in the case of the well, they let down a stone tied to a string, to find that the place beneath was not more than eight feet deep. Then, to ascertain the condition of the air, a candle was lowered, which at first went out, but presently burnt well enough. This point settled, they brought their ladder, whereby Jacob descended with a lantern.

In another minute they heard the sound of guttural German oaths rising through the hole. Mr. Clifford asked what was the matter, and received the reply that the place was a tomb, with nothing in it but an accursed dead monk, information at which Benita could not help bursting into laughter.

The end of it was that both she and her father went down also, and there, sure enough, lay the remains of the old missionary in his cowl, with an ivory crucifix about his neck, and on his breast a scroll stating that he, Marco, born at Lisbon in 1438, had died at Bambatse in the year 1503, having laboured in the Empire of Monomotapa for seventeen years, and suffered great hardships and brought many souls to Christ. The scroll added that it was he, who before he entered into religion was a sculptor by trade, that had fashioned the figure on the cross in this

chapel out of that of the heathen goddess which had stood in the same place from unknown antiquity. It ended with a request, addressed to all good Christians in Latin, that they who soon must be as he was would pray for his soul and not disturb his bones, which rested here in the hope of a blessed resurrection.

When this pious wish was translated to Jacob Meyer by Mr. Clifford, who still retained some recollection of the classics which he had painfully acquired at Eton and Oxford, the Jew could scarcely contain his wrath. Indeed, looking at his bleeding hands, instead of praying for the soul of that excellent missionary, to reach whose remains he had laboured with such arduous, incessant toil, he cursed it wherever it might be, and unceremoniously swept the bones, which the document asked him not to disturb, into a corner of the tomb, in order to ascertain whether there was not, perhaps, some stair beneath them.

"Really, Mr. Meyer," said Benita, who, in spite of the solemnity of the surroundings, could not control her sense of humour, "if you are not careful the ghosts of all these people will haunt you."

"Let them haunt me if they can," he answered furiously. "I don't believe in ghosts, and defy them all."

At this moment, looking up, Benita saw a figure gliding out of the darkness into the ring of light, so silently that she started, for it

might well have been one of those ghosts in whom Jacob Meyer did not believe. In fact, however, it was the old Molimo, who had a habit of coming upon them thus.

"What says the white man?" he asked of Benita, while his dreamy eyes wandered over the three of them, and the hole in the violated tomb.

"He says that he does not believe in spirits, and that he defies them," she answered.

"The white gold-seeker does not believe in spirits, and he defies them," Mambo repeated in his sing-song voice. "He does not believe in the spirits that I see all around me now, the angry spirits of the dead, who speak together of where he shall lie and of what shall happen to him when he is dead, and of how they will welcome one who disturbs their rest and defies and curses them in his search for the riches which he loves. There is one standing by him now, dressed in a brown robe with a dead man cut in ivory like to that," and he pointed to the crucifix in Jacob's hands, "and he holds the ivory man above him and threatens him with sleepless centuries of sorrow, when he is also one of those spirits in which he does not believe."

Then Meyer's rage blazed out. He turned upon the Molimo and reviled him in his own tongue, saying that he knew well where the treasure was hidden, and that if he did not point it out he would kill him and send him to his friends, the spirits. So savage and evil did he look that

Benita retreated a little way, while Mr. Clifford strove in vain to calm him. But although Meyer laid his hand upon the knife in his belt and advanced upon him, the old Molimo neither budged an inch nor showed the slightest fear.

"Let him rave on," he said, when at length Meyer paused exhausted. "Just so in a time of storm the lightnings flash and the thunder peals, and the water foams down the face of rock; but then comes the sun again, and the hill is as it has ever been, only the storm is spent and lost. I am the rock, he is but the wind, the fire, and the rain. It is not permitted that he should hurt me, and those spirits in whom he does not believe treasure up his curses, to let them fall again like stones upon his head."

Then, with a contemptuous glance at Jacob, the old man turned and glided back into the darkness out of which he had appeared.