

## XIII

### BENITA PLANS ESCAPE

The next morning, while she was cooking breakfast, Benita saw Jacob Meyer seated upon a rock at a little distance, sullen and disconsolate. His chin was resting on his hand, and he watched her intently, never taking his eyes from her face. She felt that he was concentrating his will upon her; that some new idea concerning her had come into his mind; for it was one of her miseries that she possessed the power of interpreting the drift of this man's thoughts. Much as she detested him, there existed that curious link between them.

It may be remembered that, on the night when they first met at the crest of Leopard's Kloof, Jacob had called her a "thought-sender," and some knowledge of their mental intimacy had come home to Benita. From that day forward her chief desire had been to shut a door between their natures, to isolate herself from him and him from her. Yet the attempt was never entirely successful.

Fear and disgust took hold of her, bending there above the fire, all the while aware of the Jew's dark eyes that searched her through and through. Benita formed a sudden determination. She would implore her father to come away with her.

Of course, such an attempt would be terribly dangerous. Of the Matabele

nothing had been seen; but they might be about, and even if enough cattle could be collected to draw the waggon, it belonged to Meyer as much as to her father, and must therefore be left for him. Still, there remained the two horses, which the Molimo had told her were well and getting fat.

At this moment Meyer rose and began to speak to her.

"What are you thinking of, Miss Clifford?" he asked in his soft foreign voice.

She started, but answered readily enough:

"Of the wood which is green, and the kid cutlets which are getting smoked. Are you not tired of kid, Mr. Meyer?" she went on.

He waved the question aside. "You are so good--oh! I mean it--so really good that you should not tell stories even about small things. The wood is not green; I cut it myself from a dead tree; and the meat is not smoked; nor were you thinking of either. You were thinking of me, as I was thinking of you; but what exactly was in your mind, this time I do not know, and that is why I ask you to tell me."

"Really, Mr. Meyer," she answered flushing; "my mind is my own property."

"Ah! do you say so? Now I hold otherwise--that it is my property, as mine is yours, a gift that Nature has given to each of us."

"I seek no such gift," she answered; but even then, much as she would have wished to do so, she could not utter a falsehood, and deny this horrible and secret intimacy.

"I am sorry for that, as I think it very precious; more precious even than the gold which we cannot find; for Miss Clifford, it brings me nearer you."

She turned upon him, but he held up his hand, and went on:

"Oh! do not be angry with me, and do not fear that I am going to trouble you with soft speeches, for I shall not, unless a time should come, as I think that perhaps it will, when you may wish to listen to them. But I want to point out something to you, Miss Clifford. Is it not a wonderful thing that our minds should be so in tune, and is there not an object in all this? Did I believe as you do, I should say that it was Heaven working in us--no: do not answer that the working comes from lower down. I take no credit for reading that upon your lips; the retort is too easy and obvious. I am content to say, however, that the work is that of instinct and nature, or, if you will, of fate, pointing out a road by which together we might travel to great ends."

"I travel my road alone, Mr. Meyer."

"I know, I know, and that is the pity of it. The trouble between man and woman is that not in one case out of a million, even if they be lovers, do they understand each other. Their eyes may seek one another, their hands and lips may meet, and yet they remain distinct, apart, and often antagonistic. There is no communication of the soul. But when it chances to be hewn from the same rock as it were--oh! then what happiness may be theirs, and what opportunities!"

"Possibly, Mr. Meyer; but, to be frank, the question does not interest me."

"Not yet; but I am sure that one day it will. Meanwhile, I owe you an apology. I lost my temper before you last night. Well, do not judge me hardly, for I was utterly worn out, and that old idiot vexed me with his talk about ghosts, in which I do not believe."

"Then why did it make you so angry? Surely you could have afforded to treat it with contempt, instead of doing--as you did."

"Upon my word! I don't know, but I suppose most of us are afraid lest we should be forced to accept that which we refuse. This ancient place gets upon the nerves, Miss Clifford; yours as well as mine. I can afford to be open about it, because I know that you know. Think of its associations: all the crime that has been committed here for ages and ages, all the suffering that has been endured here. Doubtless human

sacrifices were offered in this cave or outside of it; that great burnt ring in the rock there may have been where they built the fires. And then those Portuguese starving to death, slowly starving to death while thousands of savages watched them die. Have you ever thought what it means? But of course you have, for like myself you are cursed with imagination. God in heaven! is it wonderful that it gets upon the nerves? especially when one cannot find what one is looking for, that vast treasure"--and his face became ecstatic--"that shall yet be yours and mine, and make us great and happy."

"But which at present only makes me a scullery-maid and most unhappy," replied Benita cheerfully, for she heard her father's footstep. "Don't talk any more of the treasure, Mr. Meyer, or we shall quarrel. We have enough of that during business hours, when we are hunting for it, you know. Give me the dish, will you? This meat is cooked at last."

Still Benita could not be rid of that treasure, since after breakfast the endless, unprofitable search began again. Once more the cave was sounded, and other hollow places were discovered upon which the two men got to work. With infinite labour three of them were broken into in as many days, and like the first, found to be graves, only this time of ancients who, perhaps, had died before Christ was born. There they lay upon their sides, their bones burnt by the hot cement that had been poured over them, their gold-headed and gold-ferruled rods of office in their hands, their gold-covered pillows of wood, such as the Egyptians used, beneath their skulls, gold bracelets upon their arms and ankles,

cakes of gold beneath them which had fallen from the rotted pouches that once hung about their waists, vases of fine glazed pottery that had been filled with offerings, or in some cases with gold dust to pay the expenses of their journey in the other world, standing round them, and so forth.

In their way these discoveries were rich enough--from one tomb alone they took over a hundred and thirty ounces of gold--to say nothing of their surpassing archæological interest. Still they were not what they sought: all that gathered wealth of Monomotapa which the fleeing Portuguese had brought with them and buried in this, their last stronghold.

Benita ceased to take the slightest interest in the matter; she would not even be at the pains to go to look at the third skeleton, although it was that of a man who had been almost a giant, and, to judge from the amount of bullion which he took to the tomb with him, a person of great importance in his day. She felt as though she wished never to see another human bone or ancient bead or bangle; the sight of a street in Bayswater in a London fog--yes, or a toy-shop window in Westbourne Grove--would have pleased her a hundred times better than these unique remains that, had they known of them in those days, would have sent half the learned societies of Europe crazy with delight. She wished to escape from Bambatse, its wondrous fortifications, its mysterious cone, its cave, its dead, and--from Jacob Meyer.

Benita stood upon the top of her prison wall and looked with longing at the wide, open lands below. She even dared to climb the stairs which ran up the mighty cone of granite, and seated herself in the cup-like depression on its crest, whence Jacob Meyer had called to her to come and share his throne. It was a dizzy place, for the pillar leaning outwards, its point stood almost clear of the water-scarped rock, so that beneath her was a sheer drop of about four hundred feet to the Zambesi bed. At first the great height made her feel faint. Her eyes swam, and unpleasant tremors crept along her spine, so that she was glad to sink to the floor, whence she knew she could not fall. By degrees, however, she recovered her nerve, and was able to study the glorious view of stream and marshes and hills beyond.

For she had come here with a purpose, to see whether it would not be possible to escape down the river in a canoe, or in native boats such as the Makalanga owned and used for fishing, or to cross from bank to bank. Apparently it was impossible, for although the river beneath and above them was still enough, about a mile below began a cataract that stretched as far as she could see, and was bordered on either side by rocky hills covered with forest, over which, even if they could obtain porters, a canoe could not be carried. This, indeed, she had already heard from the Molimo, but knowing his timid nature, she wished to judge of the matter for herself. It came to this then: if they were to go, it must be on the horses.

Descending the cone Benita went to find her father, to whom as yet she

had said nothing of her plans. The opportunity was good, for she knew that he would be alone. As it chanced, on that afternoon Meyer had gone down the hill in order to try to persuade the Makalanga to give them ten or twenty men to help them in their excavations. In this, it will be remembered, he had already failed so far as the Molimo was concerned, but he was not a man easily turned from his purpose, and he thought that if he could see Tamas and some of the other captains he might be able by bribery, threats, or otherwise, to induce them to forget their superstitious fears, and help in the search. As a matter of fact, he was utterly unsuccessful, since one and all they declared that for them to enter that sacred place would mean their deaths, and that the vengeance of Heaven would fall upon their tribe and destroy it root and branch.

Mr. Clifford, on whom all this heavy labour had begun to tell, was taking advantage of the absence of his taskmaster, Jacob, to sleep awhile in the hut which they had now built for themselves beneath the shadow of the baobab-tree. As she reached it he came out yawning, and asked her where she had been. Benita told him.

"A giddy place," he said. "I have never ventured to try it myself. What did you go up there for, dear?"

"To look at the river while Mr. Meyer was away, father; for if he had seen me do so he would have guessed my reason; indeed, I dare say that he will guess it now."



"What reason, Benita?"

"To see whether it would not be possible to escape down it in a boat. But there is no chance. It is all rapids below, with hills and rocks and trees on either bank."

"What need have you to escape at present?" he asked eyeing her curiously.

"Every need," she answered with passion. "I hate this place; it is a prison, and I loathe the very name of treasure. Also," and she paused.

"Also what, dear?"

"Also," and her voice sank to a whisper, as though she feared that he should overhear her even at the bottom of the hill; "also, I am afraid of Mr. Meyer."

This confession did not seem to surprise her father, who merely nodded his head and said:

"Go on."

"Father, I think that he is going mad, and it is not pleasant for us to be cooped up here alone with a madman, especially when he has begun to speak to me as he does now."

"You don't mean that he has been impertinent to you," said the old man, flushing up, "for if so----"

"No, not impertinent--as yet," and she told him what had passed between Meyer and herself, adding, "You see, father, I detest this man; indeed, I want to have nothing to do with any man; for me all that is over and done with," and she gave a dry little sob which appeared to come from her very heart. "And yet, he seems to be getting some kind of power over me. He follows me about with his eyes, prying into my mind, and I feel that he is beginning to be able to read it. I can bear no more. Father, father, for God's sake, take me away from this hateful hill and its gold and its dead, and let us get out into the veld again together."

"I should be glad enough, dearest," he answered. "I have had plenty of this wildgoose chase, which I was so mad as to be led into by the love of wealth. Indeed, I am beginning to believe that if it goes on much longer I shall leave my bones here."

"And if such a dreadful thing as that were to happen, what would become of me, alone with Jacob Meyer?" she asked quietly. "I might even be driven to the same fate as that poor girl two hundred years ago," and she pointed to the cone of rock behind her.

"For Heaven's sake, don't talk like that!" he broke in.

"Why not? One must face things, and it would be better than Jacob Meyer; for who would protect me here?"

Mr. Clifford walked up and down for a few minutes, while his daughter watched him anxiously.

"I can see no plan," he said, stopping opposite her. "We cannot take the waggon even if there are enough oxen left to draw it, for it is his as much as mine, and I am sure that he will never leave this treasure unless he is driven away."

"And I am sure I hope that he will not. But, father, the horses are our own; it was his that died, you remember. We can ride away on them."

He stared at her and answered:

"Yes, we could ride away to our deaths. Suppose they got sick or lame; suppose we meet the Matabele, or could find no game to shoot; suppose one of us fell ill--oh! and a hundred things. What then?"

"Why, then it is just as well to perish in the wilderness as here, where our risks are almost as great. We must take our chance, and trust to God. Perhaps He will be merciful and help us. Listen now, father. To-morrow is Sunday, when you and I do no work that we can help. Mr. Meyer is a Jew, and he won't waste Sunday. Well now, I will say that I want to go down to the outer wall to fetch some clothes which I left

in the waggon, and to take others for the native women to wash, and of course you will come with me. Perhaps he will be deceived, and stay behind, especially as he has been there to-day. Then we can get the horses and guns and ammunition, and anything else that we can carry in the way of food, and persuade the old Molimo to open the gate for us. You know, the little side gate that cannot be seen from up here, and before Mr. Meyer misses us and comes to look, we shall be twenty miles away, and--horses can't be overtaken by a man on foot."

"He will say that we have deserted him, and that will be true."

"You can leave a letter with the Molimo explaining that it was my fault, that I was getting ill and thought that I should die, and that you knew it would not be fair to ask him to come, and so to lose the treasure, to every halfpenny of which he is welcome when it is found. Oh! father, don't hesitate any longer; say that you will take me away from Mr. Meyer."

"So be it then," answered Mr. Clifford, and as he spoke, hearing a sound, they looked up and saw Jacob approaching them.

Luckily he was so occupied with his own thoughts that he never noted the guilty air upon their faces, and they had time to compose themselves a little. But even thus his suspicions were aroused.

"What are you talking of so earnestly?" he asked.

"We were wondering how you were getting on with the Makalanga," answered

Benita, fibbing boldly, "and whether you would persuade them to face the ghosts. Did you?"

"Not I," he answered with a scowl. "Those ghosts are our worst enemies in this place; the cowards swore that they would rather die. I should have liked to take some of them at their word and make ghosts of them; but I remembered the situation and didn't. Don't be afraid, Miss Clifford, I never even lost my temper, outwardly at any rate. Well, there it is; if they won't help us, we must work the harder. I've got a new plan, and we'll begin on it to-morrow."

"Not to-morrow, Mr. Meyer," replied Benita with a smile. "It is Sunday, and we rest on Sunday, you know."

"Oh! I forgot. The Makalanga with their ghosts and you with your Sunday--really I do not know which is the worse. Well, then, I must do my own share and yours too, I suppose," and he turned with a shrug of his shoulders.