

XIV

THE FLIGHT

The next morning, Sunday, Meyer went to work on his new plan. What it was Benita did not trouble to inquire, but she gathered that it had something to do with the measuring out of the chapel cave into squares for the more systematic investigation of each area. At twelve o'clock he emerged for his midday meal, in the course of which he remarked that it was very dreary working in that place alone, and that he would be glad when it was Monday, and they could accompany him. His words evidently disturbed Mr. Clifford not a little, and even excited some compunction in the breast of Benita.

What would his feelings be, she wondered, when he found that they had run away, leaving him to deal with their joint undertaking single-handed! Almost was she minded to tell him the whole truth; yet--and this was a curious evidence of the man's ascendancy over her--she did not. Perhaps she felt that to do so would be to put an end to their scheme, since then by argument, blandishments, threats, force, or appeal to their sense of loyalty, it mattered not which, he would bring about its abandonment. But she wanted to fulfil that scheme, to be free of Bambatse, its immemorial ruins, its graveyard cave, and the ghoul, Jacob Meyer, who could delve among dead bones and in living hearts with equal skill and insight, and yet was unable to find the

treasure that lay beneath either of them.

So they hid the truth, and talked with feverish activity about other things, such as the drilling of the Makalanga, and the chances of an attack by the Matabele, which happily now seemed to be growing small; also of the conditions of their cattle, and the prospect of obtaining more to replace those that had died. Indeed, Benita went farther; in her new-found zeal of deception she proceeded to act a lie, yes, even with her father's reproachful eyes fixed upon her. Incidentally she mentioned that they were going to have an outing, to climb down the ladder and visit the Makalanga camp between the first and second walls and mix with the great world for a few hours; also to carry their washing to be done there, and bring up some clean clothes and certain books which she had left below.

Jacob came out of his thoughts and calculations, and listened gloomily.

"I have half a mind to come with you," he said, words at which Benita shivered. "It certainly is most cursed lonesome in that cave, and I seem to hear things in it, as though those old bones were rattling, sounds like sighs and whispers too, which are made by the draught."

"Well, why don't you?" asked Benita.

It was a bold stroke, but it succeeded. If he had any doubts they vanished, and he answered at once:

"Because I have not the time. We have to get this business finished one way or another before the wet season comes on, and we are drowned out of the place with rain, or rotted by fever. Take your afternoon out, Miss Clifford; every maid of all work is entitled to as much, and I am afraid that is your billet here. Only," he added, with that care for her safety which he always showed in his more temperate moods, "pray be careful, Clifford, to get back before sundown. That wall is too risky for your daughter to climb in the dusk. Call me from the foot of it; you have the whistle, and I will come down to help her up. I think I'll go with you after all. No, I won't. I made myself so unpleasant to them yesterday that those Makalanga can't wish to see any more of me at present. I hope you will have a more agreeable afternoon than I shall. Why don't you take a ride outside the wall? Your horses are fat and want exercise, and I do not think that you need be afraid of the Matabele." Then without waiting for an answer, he rose and left them.

Mr. Clifford looked after him doubtfully.

"Oh, I know," said Benita, "it seems horribly mean, but one must do shabby things sometimes. Here are the bundles all ready, so let us be off."

Accordingly they went, and from the top of the wall Benita glanced back to bid goodbye to that place which she hoped never to see again. Yet she could not feel as though she looked her last upon it; to her it wore

no air of farewell, and even as she descended the perilous stairs, she found herself making mental notes as to how they might best be climbed again. Also, she could not believe that she had done with Mr. Meyer. It seemed to her as though for a long while yet her future would be full of him.

They reached the outer fortifications in safety, and there were greeted with some surprise but with no displeasure by the Makalanga, whom they found still drilling with the rifles, in the use of which a certain number of them appeared to have become fairly proficient. Going to the hut in which the spare goods from the waggon had been stored, they quickly made their preparations. Here also, Mr. Clifford wrote a letter, one of the most unpleasant that he had ever been called upon to compose. It ran thus:

"Dear Meyer,

"I don't know what you will think of us, but we are escaping from this place. The truth is that I am not well, and my daughter can bear it no longer. She says that if she stops here, she will die, and that hunting for treasure in that ghastly grave-yard is shattering her nerves. I should have liked to tell you, but she begged me not, being convinced that if I did, you would over-persuade us or stop us in some way. As for the gold, if you can find it, take it all. I renounce my share. We are leaving you the waggon and the oxen, and starting down country on our horses. It is a perilous business, but less so than staying here, under

the circumstances. If we never meet again we hope that you will forgive us, and wish you all good fortune.--Yours sincerely and with much regret,

"T. Clifford."

The letter written, they saddled the horses which had been brought up for their inspection, and were found to be in good case, and fastened their scanty belongings, and as many cartridges as they could carry in packs behind their saddles. Then, each of them armed with a rifle--for during their long journeyings Benita had learned to shoot--they mounted and made for the little side-entrance, as the main gate through which they had passed on their arrival was now built up. This side-entrance, a mere slit in the great wall, with a precipitous approach, was open, for now that their fear of the Matabele had to some extent passed off, the Makalanga used it to drive their sheep and goats in and out, since it was so constructed with several twists and turns in the thickness of the wall, that in a few minutes it could be effectually blocked by stones that lay at hand. Also, the ancient architect had arranged it in such a fashion that it was entirely commanded from the crest of the wall on either side.

The Makalanga, who had been watching their proceedings curiously, made no attempt to stop them, although they guessed that they might have a little trouble with the sentries who guarded the entrances all day, and

even when it was closed at night, with whom also Mr. Clifford proposed to leave the letter. When they reached the place, however, and had dismounted to lead the horses down the winding passage and the steep ascent upon its further side, it was to find that the only guard visible proved to be the old Molimo himself, who sat there, apparently half asleep.

But as they came he showed himself to be very much awake, for without moving he asked them at once whither they were going.

"To take a ride," answered Mr. Clifford. "The lady, my daughter, is weary of being cooped up in this fortress, and wishes to breathe the air without. Let us pass, friend, or we shall not be back by sunset."

"If you be coming back at sunset, white man, why do you carry so many things upon your packs, and why are your saddle-bags filled with cartridges?" he asked. "Surely you do not speak the truth to me, and you hope that never more will you see the sun set upon Bambatse."

Now understanding that it was hopeless to deceive him, Benita exclaimed boldly:

"It is so; but oh! my Father, stay us not, for fear is behind us, and therefore we fly hence."

"And is there no fear before you, maiden? Fear of the wilderness, where

none wander save perchance the Amandabele with their bloody spears; fear of wild beasts and of sickness that may overtake you so that, first one and then the other, you perish there?"

"There is plenty, my Father, but none of them so bad as the fear behind. Yonder place is haunted, and we give up our search and would dwell there no more."

"It is haunted truly, maiden, but its spirits will not harm you whom they welcome as one appointed, and we are ever ready to protect you because of their command that has come to me in dreams. Nor, indeed, is it the spirits whom you fear, but rather the white man, your companion, who would bend you to his will. Deny it not, for I have seen it all."

"Then knowing the truth, surely you will let us go," she pleaded, "for I swear to you that I dare not stay."

"Who am I that I should forbid you?" he asked. "Yet I tell you that you would do well to stay and save yourselves much terror. Maiden, have I not said it days and day ago, that here and here only you must accomplish your fate? Go now if you will, but you shall return again," and once more he seemed to begin to doze in the sun.

The two of them consulted hastily together.

"It is no use turning back now," said Benita, who was almost weeping

with doubt and vexation. "I will not be frightened by his vague talk. What can he know of the future more than any of the rest of us? Besides, all he says is that we shall come back again, and if that does happen, at least we shall have been free for a little while. Come, father."

"As you wish," answered Mr. Clifford, who seemed too miserable and depressed to argue. Only he threw down the letter upon the Molimo's lap, and begged him to give it to Meyer when he came to look for them.

The old man took no notice; no, not even when Benita bade him farewell and thanked him for his kindness, praying that all good fortune might attend him and his tribe, did he answer a single word or even look up. So they led their horses down the narrow passage where there was scarcely room for them to pass, and up the steep path beyond. On the further side of the ancient ditch they remounted them while the Makalanga watched them from the walls, and cantered away along the same road by which they had come.

Now this road, or rather track, ran first through the gardens and then among the countless ruined houses that in bygone ages formed the great city whereof the mount Bambatse had been the citadel and sanctuary. The relics of a lost civilization extended for several miles, and were bounded by a steep and narrow neck or pass in the encircling hills, the same that Robert Seymour and his brother had found too difficult for their waggon at the season in which they visited the place some years before. This pass, or port as it is called in South Africa, had been

strongly fortified, for on either side of it were the ruins of towers. Moreover, at its crest it was so narrow and steep-sided that a few men posted there, even if they were armed only with bows and arrows, could hold an attacking force in check for a considerable time. Beyond it, after the hill was descended, a bush-clad plain dotted with kopjes and isolated granite pillars formed of boulders piled one upon another, rolled away for many miles.

Mr. Clifford and Benita had started upon their mad journey about three o'clock in the afternoon, and when the sun began to set they found themselves upon this plain fifteen or sixteen miles from Bambatse, of which they had long lost sight, for it lay beyond the intervening hills. Near to them was a kopje, where they had outspanned by a spring of water when on their recent journey, and since they did not dare to travel in the dark, here they determined to off-saddle, for round this spring was good grass for the horses.

As it chanced, they came upon some hartebeeste here which were trekking down to drink, but although they would have been glad of meat, they were afraid to shoot, fearing lest they should attract attention; nor for the same reason did they like to light a fire. So having knee-haltered the horses in such fashion that they could not wander far, and turned them loose to feed, they sat down under a tree, and made some sort of a meal off the biltong and cooked corn which they had brought with them. By the time this was finished darkness fell, for there was little moon, so that nothing remained to do except to sleep within a circle of a few dead

thorn-boughs which they had drawn about their camp. This, then, they did, and so weary were they both, that notwithstanding all the emotions through which they had passed, and their fears lest lions should attack them--for of these brutes there were many in this veld--rested soundly and undisturbed till within half an hour of dawn.

Rising somewhat chilled, for though the air was warm a heavy dew had soaked their blankets, once more they ate and drank by starlight, while the horses, which they had tied up close to them during the night, filled themselves with grass. At the first break of day they saddled them, and before the sun rose were on their road again. At length up it came, and the sight and warmth of it put new heart into Benita. Her fears seemed to depart with the night, and she said to her father that this successful start was of good augury, to which he only answered that he hoped so.

All that day they rode forward in beautiful weather, not pressing their horses, for now they were sure that Jacob Meyer, who if he followed at all must do so on foot, would never be able to overtake them. At noon they halted, and having shot a small buck, Benita cooked some of it in the one pot that they had brought with them, and they ate a good meal of fresh meat.

Riding on again, towards sundown they came to another of their old camping-places, also a bush-covered kopje. Here the spring of water was more than halfway up the hill, so there they off-saddled in a green

bower of a place that because of its ferns and mosses looked like a rock garden. Now, although they had enough cold meat for food, they thought themselves quite safe in lighting a fire. Indeed, this it seemed necessary to do, since they had struck the fresh spoor of lions, and even caught sight of one galloping away in the tall reeds on the marshy land at the foot of the hill.

That evening they fared sumptuously upon venison, and as on the previous day lay down to rest in a little "boma" or fence made of boughs. But they were not allowed to sleep well this night, for scarcely had they shut their eyes when a hyena began to howl about them. They shouted and the brute went away, but an hour or two later, they heard ominous grunting sounds, followed presently by a loud roar, which was answered by another roar, whereat the horses began to whinny in a frightened fashion.

"Lions!" said Mr. Clifford, jumping up and throwing dead wood on the fire till it burnt to a bright blaze.

After that all sleep became impossible, for although the lions did not attack them, having once winded the horses they would not go away, but continued wandering round the kopje, grunting and growling. This went on till about three o'clock in the morning, when at last the beasts took their departure, for they heard them roaring in the distance. Now that they seemed safe, having first made up the fire, they tried to get some rest.

When, as it appeared to her, Benita had been asleep but a little while, she was awakened by a new noise. It was still dark, but the starlight showed her that the horses were quite quiet; indeed, one of them was lying down, and the other eating some green leaves from the branches of the tree to which it was tethered. Therefore that noise had not come from any wild animal of which they were afraid. She listened intently, and presently heard it again; it was a murmur like to that of people talking somewhere at the bottom of the hill. Then she woke her father and told him, but although once or twice they thought they heard the sound of footsteps, nothing else could be distinguished. Still they rose, and having saddled and bridled the horses as noiselessly as might be, waited for the dawn.

At last it came. Up on the side of the kopje they were in clear air, above which shone the red lights of morning, but under them lay billows of dense, pearl-hued mist. By degrees this thinned beneath the rays of the risen sun, and through it, looking gigantic in that light, Benita saw a savage wrapped in a kaross, who was walking up and down and yawning, a great spear in his hand.

"Look," she whispered, "look!" and Mr. Clifford stared down the line of her outstretched finger.

"The Matabele," he said. "My God! the Matabele!"