

THE CHASE

The Matabele it was, sure enough; there could be no doubt of it, for soon three other men joined the sentry and began to talk with him, pointing with their great spears at the side of the hill. Evidently they were arranging a surprise when there was sufficient light to carry it out.

"They have seen our fire," whispered her father to Benita; "now, if we wish to save our lives, there is only one thing to do--ride for it before they muster. The impi will be camped upon the other side of the hill, so we must take the road we came by."

"That runs back to Bambatse," faltered Benita.

"Bambatse is better than the grave," said her father. "Pray Heaven that we may get there."

To this argument there was no answer, so having drunk a sup of water, and swallowing a few mouthfuls of food as they went, they crept to the horses, mounted them, and as silently as possible began to ride down the hill.

The sentry was alone again, the other three men having departed. He

stood with his back towards them. Presently when they were quite close on to him, he heard their horses' hoofs upon the grass, wheeled round at the sound, and saw them. Then with a great shout he lifted his spear and charged.

Mr. Clifford, who was leading, held out his rifle at arm's length--to raise it to his shoulder he had no time--and pulled the trigger. Benita heard the bullet clap upon the hide shield, and next instant saw the Matabele warrior lying on his back, beating the air with his hands and feet. Also, she saw beyond the shoulder of the kopje, which they were rounding, hundreds of men marching, and behind them a herd of cattle, the dim light gleaming upon the stabbing spears and on the horns of the oxen. She glanced to the right, and there were more men. The two wings of the impi were closing upon them. Only a little lane was left in the middle. They must get through before it shut.

"Come," she gasped, striking the horse with her heel and the butt of her gun, and jerking at its mouth.

Her father saw also, and did likewise, so that the beasts broke into a gallop. Now from the point of each wing sprang out thin lines of men, looking like great horns, or nippers, whose business it was to meet and cut them off. Could they pass between them before they did meet? That was the question, and upon its answer it depended whether or no they had another three minutes to live. To think of mercy at the hands of these bloodthirsty brutes, after they had just killed one of their number

before their eyes, was absurd. It was true he had been shot in self-defence; but what count would savages take of that, or of the fact that they were but harmless travellers? White people were not very popular with the Matabele just then, as they knew well; also, their murder in this remote place, with not another of their race within a couple of hundred miles, would never even be reported, and much less avenged. It was as safe as any crime could possibly be.

All this passed through their minds as they galloped towards those closing points. Oh! the horror of it! But two hundred yards to cover, and their fate would be decided. Either they would have escaped at least for a while, or time would be done with them; or, a third alternative, they might be taken prisoners, in all probability a yet more dreadful doom. Even then Benita determined that if she could help it this should not befall her. She had the rifle and the revolver that Jacob Meyer had given her. Surely she would be able to find a moment to use one or the other upon herself. She clenched her teeth, and struck the horse again and again, so that now they flew along. The Matabele soldiers were running their best to catch them, and if these had been given but five seconds of start, caught they must have been. But that short five seconds saved their lives.

When they rushed through them the foremost men of the nippers were not more than twenty yards apart. Seeing that they had passed, these halted and hurled a shower of spears after them. One flashed by Benita's cheek, a line of light; she felt the wind of it. Another cut her dress, and

a third struck her father's horse in the near hind leg just above the knee-joint, remaining fast there for a stride or two, and then falling to the ground. At first the beast did not seem to be incommoded by this wound; indeed, it only caused it to gallop quicker, and Benita rejoiced, thinking that it was but a scratch. Then she forgot about it, for some of the Matabele, who had guns, began to shoot them, and although their marksmanship was vile, one or two of the bullets went nearer than was pleasant. Lastly a man, the swiftest runner of them all, shouted after them in Zulu:

"The horse is wounded. We will catch you both before the sun sets."

Then they passed over the crest of a rise and lost sight of them for a while.

"Thank God!" gasped Benita when they were alone again in the silent veld; but Mr. Clifford shook his head.

"Do you think they will follow us?" she asked.

"You heard what the fellow said," he answered evasively. "Doubtless they are on their way to attack Bambatse, and have been round to destroy some other wretched tribe, and steal the cattle which we saw. Yes, I fear that they will follow. The question is, which of us can get to Bambatse first."

"Surely we ought to on the horses, father."

"Yes, if nothing happens to them," and as he spoke the words the mare which he was riding dropped sharply upon her hind leg, the same that had been struck with the spear; then recovered herself and galloped on.

"Did you see that?" he asked.

She nodded; then said:

"Shall we get off and look at the cut?"

"Certainly not," he answered. "Our only chance is to keep her moving; if once the wound stiffens, there's an end. The sinew cannot have been severed, or it would have come before now."

So they pushed on.

All that morning did they canter forward wherever the ground was smooth enough to allow them to do so, and notwithstanding the increasing lameness of Mr. Clifford's mare, made such good progress that by midday they reached the place where they had passed the first night after leaving Bambatse. Here sheer fatigue and want of water forced them to stop a little while. They dismounted and drank greedily from the spring, after which they allowed the horses to drink also; indeed it was impossible to keep them away from the water. Then they ate a little, not

because they desired food, but to keep up their strength, and while they did so examined the mare. By now her hind leg was much swollen, and blood still ran from the gash made by the assegai. Moreover, the limb was drawn up so that the point of the hoof only rested on the ground.

"We must get on before it sets fast," said Mr. Clifford, and they mounted again.

Great heavens! what was this? The mare would not stir. In his despair Mr. Clifford beat it cruelly, whereupon the poor brute hobbled forward a few paces on three legs, and again came to a standstill. Either an injured sinew had given or the inflammation was now so intense that it could not bend its knee. Understanding what this meant to them, Benita's nerve gave out at last, and she burst into weeping.

"Don't cry, love," he said. "God's will be done. Perhaps they have given up the hunt by now; at any rate, my legs are left, and Bambatse is not more than sixteen miles away. Forward now," and holding to her saddle-strap they went up the long, long slope which led to the poort in the hills around Bambatse.

They would have liked to shoot the mare, but being afraid to fire a rifle, could not do so. So they left the unhappy beast to its fate, and with it everything it carried, except a few of the cartridges. Before they went, however, at Benita's prayer, her father devoted a few seconds to unbuckling the girths and pulling off the bridle, so that it might

have a chance of life. For a little way it hobbled after them on three legs, then, the saddle still upon its back, stood whinnying piteously, till at last, to Benita's intense relief, a turn in their path hid it from their sight.

Half a mile further on she looked round in the faint hope that it might have recovered itself and followed. But no mare was to be seen. Something else was to be seen, however, for there, three or four miles away upon the plain behind them, easy to be distinguished in that dazzling air, were a number of black spots that occasionally seemed to sparkle.

"What are they?" she asked faintly, as one who feared the answer.

"The Matabele who follow us," answered her father, "or rather a company of their swiftest runners. It is their spears that glitter so. Now, my love, this is the position," he went on, as they struggled forward: "those men will catch us before ever we can get to Bambatse; they are trained to run like that, for fifty miles, if need be. But with this start they cannot catch your horse, you must go on and leave me to look after myself."

"Never, never!" she exclaimed.

"But you shall, and you must. I am your father and I order you. As for me, what does it matter? I may hide from them and escape, or--at least I

am old, my life is done, whereas yours is before you. Now, good-bye, and go on," and he let go of the saddle-strap.

By way of answer Benita pulled up the horse.

"Not one yard," she said, setting her mouth.

Then he began to storm at her, calling her disobedient, and undutiful, and when this means failed to move her, to implore her almost with tears.

"Father, dear," she said, leaning down towards him as he walked, for now they were going on again, "I told you why I wanted to run away from Bambatse, didn't I?--because I would rather risk my life than stay. Well, do you think that I wish to return there and live in that place alone with Jacob Meyer? Also, I will tell you another thing. You remember about Mr. Seymour? Well, I can't get over that; I can't get over it at all, and therefore, although of course I am afraid, it is all one to me. No, we will escape together, or die together; the first if we can."

Then with a groan he gave up the argument, and as he found breath they discussed their chances. Their first idea was to hide, but save for a few trees all the country was open; there was no place to cover them. They thought of the banks of the Zambesi, but between them and the river rose a bare, rock-strewn hill with several miles of slope. Long before



they could reach its crest, even if a horse were able to travel there, they must be overtaken. In short, there was nothing to do except to push for the nek, and if they were fortunate enough to reach it before the Matabele, to abandon the horse there and try to conceal themselves among the ruins of the houses beyond. This, perhaps, they might do when once the sun was down.

But they did not deceive themselves; the chances were at least fifty to one against them, unless indeed their pursuers grew weary and let them go.

At present, however, they were by no means weary, for having perceived them from far away, the long-legged runners put on the pace, and the distance between them and their quarry was lessening.

"Father," said Benita, "please understand one thing. I do not mean to be taken alive by those savages."

"Oh! how can I----" he faltered.

"I don't ask you," she answered. "I will see to that myself. Only, if I should make any mistake----" and she looked at him.

The old man was getting very tired. He panted up the steep hillside, and stumbled against the stones. Benita noted it, and slipping from the horse, made him mount while she ran alongside. Then when he was a

little rested they changed places again, and so covered several miles of country. Subsequently, when both of them were nearly exhausted, they tried riding together--she in front and he behind, for their baggage had long since been thrown away. But the weary beast could not carry this double burden, and after a few hundred yards of it, stumbled, fell, struggled to its feet again, and stopped.

So once more they were obliged to ride and walk alternately.

Now there was not much more than an hour of daylight left, and the narrow pass lay about three miles ahead of them. That dreadful three miles; ever thereafter it was Benita's favourite nightmare! At the beginning of it the leading Matabele were about two thousand yards behind them; half-way, about a thousand; and at the commencement of the last mile, say five hundred.

Nature is a wonderful thing, and great are its resources in extremity. As the actual crisis approached, the weariness of these two seemed to depart, or at any rate it was forgotten. They no longer felt exhausted, nor, had they been fresh from their beds, could they have climbed or run better. Even the horse seemed to find new energy, and when it lagged Mr. Clifford dug the point of his hunting knife into its flank. Gasping, panting, now one mounted and now the other, they struggled on towards that crest of rock, while behind them came death in the shape of those sleuth-hounds of Matabele. The sun was going down, and against its flaming ball, when they glanced back they could see their dark forms

outlined; the broad spears also looked red as though they had been dipped in blood. They could even hear their taunting shouts as they called to them to sit down and be killed, and save trouble.

Now they were not three hundred yards away, and the crest of the pass was still half a mile ahead. Five minutes passed, and here, where the track was very rough, the horse blundered upwards slowly. Mr. Clifford was riding at the time, and Benita running at his side, holding to the stirrup leather. She looked behind her. The savages, fearing that their victims might find shelter over the hill, were making a rush, and the horse could go no faster. One man, a great tall fellow, quite out-distanced his companions. Two minutes more and he was not over a hundred paces from them, a little nearer than they were to the top of the pass. Then the horse stopped and refused to stir any more.

Mr. Clifford jumped from the saddle, and Benita, who could not speak, pointed to the pursuing Matabele. He sat down upon a rock, cocked his rifle, took a deep breath, and aimed and fired at the soldier who was coming on carelessly in the open. Mr. Clifford was a good shot, and shaken though he was, at this supreme moment his skill did not fail him. The man was struck somewhere, for he staggered about and fell; then slowly picked himself up, and began to hobble back towards his companions, who, when they met him, stopped a minute to give him some kind of assistance.

That halt proved their salvation, for it gave them time to make one last

despairing rush, and gain the brow of the poort. Not that this would have saved them, however, since where they could go the Matabele could follow, and there was still light by which the pursuers would have been able to see to catch them. Indeed, the savages, having laid down the wounded man, came on with a yell of rage, fifty or more of them.

Over the pass father and daughter struggled, Benita riding; after them, perhaps sixty yards away, ran the Matabele, gathered in a knot now upon the narrow, ancient road, bordered by steep hillsides.

Then suddenly from all about them, as it appeared to Benita, broke out the blaze and roar of rifles, rapid and continuous. Down went the Matabele by twos and threes, till at last it seemed as though but quite a few of them were left upon their feet, and those came on no more; they turned and fled from the neck of the narrow pass to the open slope beyond.

Benita sank to the ground, and the next thing that she could remember was hearing the soft voice of Jacob Meyer, who said:

"So you have returned from your ride, Miss Clifford, and perhaps it was as well that the thought came from you to me that you wished me to meet you here in this very place."