

XVI

BACK AT BAMBATSE

How they reached Bambatse Benita never could remember, but afterwards she was told that both she and her father were carried upon litters made of ox-hide shields. When she came to her own mind again, it was to find herself lying in her tent outside the mouth of the cave within the third enclosure of the temple-fortress. Her feet were sore and her bones ached, physical discomforts that brought back to her in a flash all the terrors through which she had passed.

Again she saw the fierce pursuing Matabele; again heard their cruel shouts and the answering crack of the rifles; again, amidst the din and the gathering darkness, distinguished the gentle, foreign voice of Meyer speaking his words of sarcastic greeting. Next oblivion fell upon her, and after it a dim memory of being helped up the hill with the sun pouring on her back and assisted to climb the steep steps of the wall by means of a rope placed around her. Then forgetfulness again.

The flap of her tent was drawn aside and she shrank back upon her bed, shutting her eyes for fear lest they should fall upon the face of Jacob Meyer. Feeling that it was not he, or learning it perhaps from the footfall, she opened them a little, peeping at her visitor from between her long lashes. He proved to be--not Jacob or her father, but the old

Molimo, who stood beside her holding in his hand a gourd filled with goat's milk. Then she sat up and smiled at him, for Benita had grown very fond of this ancient man, who was so unlike anyone that she had ever met.

"Greeting, Lady," he said softly, smiling back at her with his lips and dreamy eyes, for his old face did not seem to move beneath its thousand wrinkles. "I bring you milk. Drink; it is fresh and you need food."

So she took the gourd and drank to the last drop, for it seemed to her that she had never tasted anything so delicious.

"Good, good," murmured the Molimo; "now you will be well again."

"Yes, I shall get well," she answered; "but oh! what of my father?"

"Fear not; he is still sick, but he will recover also. You shall see him soon."

"I have drunk all the milk," she broke out; "there is none left for him."

"Plenty, plenty," he answered, waving his thin hand. "There are two cups full--one for each. We have not many she-goats down below, but the best of their milk is saved for you."

"Tell me all that has happened, Father," and the old priest, who liked her to call him by that name, smiled again with his eyes, and squatted down in the corner of the tent.

"You went away, you remember that you would go, although I told you that you must come back. You refused my wisdom and you went, and I have learned all that befell you and how you two escaped the impi. Well, that night after sunset, when you did not return, came the Black One--yes, yes, I mean Meyer, whom we name so because of his beard, and," he added deliberately, "his heart. He came running down the hill asking for you, and I gave him the letter.

"He read it, and oh! then he went mad. He cursed in his own tongue; he threw himself about; he took a rifle and wished to shoot me, but I sat silent and looked at him till he grew quiet. Then he asked why I had played him this trick, but I answered that it was no trick of mine who had no right to keep you and your father prisoners against your will, and that I thought you had gone away because you were afraid of him, which was not wonderful if that was how he talked to you. I told him, too, I who am a doctor, that unless he was careful he would go mad; that already I saw madness in his eye; after which he became quiet, for my words frightened him. Then he asked what could be done, and I said--that night, nothing, since you must be far away, so that it would be useless to follow you, but better to go to meet you when you came back. He asked what I meant by your coming back, and I answered that I meant what I said, that you would come back in great haste and peril--although you

would not believe me when I told you so--for I had it from the Munwali whose child you are.

"So I sent out my spies, and that night went by, and the next day and night went by, and we sat still and did nothing, though the Black One wished to wander out alone after you. But on the following morning, at the dawn, a messenger came in who reported that it had been called to him by his brethren who were hidden upon hilltops and in other places for miles and miles, that the Matabele impi, having destroyed another family of the Makalanga far down the Zambesi, was advancing to destroy us also. And in the afternoon came a second spy, who reported that you two had been surrounded by the impi, but had broken through them, and were riding hitherward for your lives. Then I took fifty of the best of our people and put them under the command of Tamas, my son, and sent them to ambush the pass, for against the Matabele warriors on the plain we, who are not warlike, do not dare to fight.

"The Black One went with them, and when he saw how sore was your strait, wished to run down to meet the Matabele, for he is a brave man. But I had said to Tamas--'No, do not try to fight them in the open, for there they will certainly kill you.' Moreover, Lady, I was sure that you would reach the top of the poort. Well, you reached it, though but by the breadth of a blade of grass, and my children shot with the new rifles, and the place being narrow so that they could not miss, killed many of those hyenas of Amandabele. But to kill Matabele is like catching fleas on a dog's back: there are always more. Still it served its turn, you

and your father were brought away safely, and we lost no one."

"Where, then, are the Matabele now?" asked Benita.

"Outside our walls, a whole regiment of them: three thousand men or more, under the command of the Captain Maduna, he of the royal blood, whose life you begged, but who nevertheless hunted you like a buck."

"Perhaps he did not know who it was," suggested Benita.

"Perhaps not," the Molimo answered, rubbing his chin, "for in such matters even a Matabele generally keeps faith, and you may remember he promised you life for life. However, they are here ravening like lions round the walls, and that is why we carried you up to the top of the hill, that you might be safe from them."

"But are you safe, my Father?"

"I think so," he replied with a dry little chuckle in his throat.

"Whoever built this fortress built it strong, and we have blocked the gates. Also, they caught no one outside; all are within the walls, together with the sheep and goats. Lastly, we have sent most of the women and children across the Zambesi in canoes, to hide in places we know of whither the Amandabele cannot follow, for they dare not swim a river. Therefore, for those of us that remain we have food for three months, and before then the rains will drive the impi out."

"Why did you not all go across the river, Father?"

"For two reasons, Lady. The first is, that if we once abandoned our stronghold, which we have held from the beginning, Lobengula would take it, and keep it, so that we could never re-enter into our heritage, which would be a shame to us and bring down the vengeance of the spirits of our ancestors upon our heads. The second is, that as you have returned to us we stay to protect you."

"You are very good to me," murmured Benita.

"Nay, nay, we brought you here, and we do what I am told to do from Above. Trouble may still come upon you; yes, I think that it will come, but once more I pray you, have no fear, for out of this evil root shall spring a flower of joy," and he rose to go.

"Stay," said Benita. "Has the chief Meyer found the gold?"

"No; he has found nothing; but he hunts and hunts like a hungry jackal digging for a bone. But that bone is not for him; it is for you, Lady, you and you only. Oh! I know, you do not seek, still you shall find. Only the next time that you want help, do not run away into the wilderness. Hear the word of Munwali given by his mouth, the Molimo of Bambatse!" And as he spoke, the old priest backed himself out of the tent, stopping now and again to bow to Benita.

A few minutes later her father entered, looking very weak and shaken, and supporting himself upon a stick. Happy was the greeting of these two who, with their arms about each other's neck, gave thanks for their escape from great peril.

"You see, Benita, we can't get away from this place," Mr. Clifford said presently. "We must find that gold."

"Bother the gold," she answered with energy; "I hate its very name. Who can think of gold with three thousand Matabele waiting to kill us?"

"Somehow I don't feel afraid of them any more," said her father; "they have had their chance and lost it, and the Makalanga swear that now they have guns to command the gates, the fortress cannot be stormed. Still, I am afraid of someone."

"Who?"

"Jacob Mayer. I have seen him several times, and I think that he is going mad."

"The Molimo said that too, but why?"

"From the look of him. He sits about muttering and glowing with those dark eyes of his, and sometimes groans, and sometimes bursts into shouts

of laughter. That is when the fit is on him, for generally he seems right enough. But get up if you think you can, and you shall judge for yourself."

"I don't want to," said Benita feebly. "Father, I am more afraid of him now than ever. Oh! why did you not let me stop down below, among the Makalanga, instead of carrying me up here again, where we must live alone with that terrible Jew?"

"I wished to, dear, but the Molimo said we should be safer above, and ordered his people to carry you up. Also, Jacob swore that unless you were brought back he would kill me. Now you understand why I believe that he is mad."

"Why, why?" gasped Benita again.

"God knows," he answered with a groan; "but I think that he is sure that we shall never find the gold without you, since the Molimo has told him that it is for you and you alone, and he says the old man has second sight, or something of the sort. Well, he would have murdered me--I saw it in his eye--so I thought it better to give in rather than that you should be left here sick and alone. Of course there was one way----" and he paused.

She looked at him and asked:



"What way?"

"To shoot him before he shot me," he answered in a whisper, "for your sake, dear--but I could not bring myself to do it."

"No," she said with a shudder, "not that--not that. Better that we should die than that his blood should be upon our hands. Now I will get up and try to show no fear. I am sure that is best, and perhaps we shall be able to escape somehow. Meanwhile, let us humour him, and pretend to go on looking for this horrible treasure."

So Benita rose to discover that, save for her stiffness, she was but little the worse, and finding all things placed in readiness, set to work with her father's help to cook the evening meal as usual. Of Meyer, who doubtless had placed things in readiness, she saw nothing.

Before nightfall he came, however, as she knew he would. Indeed, although she heard no step and her back was towards him, she felt his presence; the sense of it fell upon her like a cold shadow. Turning round she beheld the man. He was standing close by, but above her, upon a big granite boulder, in climbing which his soft veldt shoes, or hide shoes, had made no noise, for Meyer could move like a cat. The last rays from the sinking sun struck him full, outlining his agile, nervous shape against the sky, and in their intense red light, which flamed upon him, he appeared terrible. He looked like a panther about to spring; his eyes shone like a panther's, and Benita knew that she was the prey whom he

desired. Still, remembering her resolution, she determined to show no fear, and addressed him:

"Good-evening, Mr. Meyer. Oh! I am so stiff that I cannot lift my neck to look at you," and she laughed.

He bounded softly from the rock, like a panther again, and stood in front of her.

"You should thank the God you believe in," he said, "that by now you are not stiff indeed--all that the jackals have left of you."

"I do, Mr. Meyer, and I thank you, too; it was brave of you to come out to save us. Father," she called, "come and tell Mr. Meyer how grateful we are to him."

Mr. Clifford hobbled out from his hut under the tree, saying:

"I have told him already, dear."

"Yes," answered Jacob, "you have told me; why repeat yourself? I see that supper is ready. Let us eat, for you must be hungry; afterwards I have something to tell you."

So they ate, with no great appetite, any of them--indeed Meyer touched but little food, though he drank a good deal, first of strong black

coffee and afterwards of squareface and water. But on Benita he pressed the choicest morsels that he could find, eyeing her all the while, and saying that she must take plenty of nutriment or her beauty would suffer and her strength wane. Benita bethought her of the fairy tales of her childhood, in which the ogre fed up the princess whom he purposed to devour.

"You should think of your own strength, Mr. Meyer," she said; "you cannot live on coffee and squareface."

"It is all I need to-night. I am astonishingly well since you came back. I can never remember feeling so well, or so strong. I can do the work of three men, and not be tired; all this afternoon, for instance, I have been carrying provisions and other things up that steep wall, for we must prepare for a long siege together; yet I should never know that I had lifted a single basket. But while you were away--ah! then I felt tired."

Benita changed the subject, asking him if he had made any discoveries.

"Not yet, but now that you are back the discoveries will soon come. Do not be afraid; I have my plan which cannot fail. Also, it was lonely working in that cave without you, so I only looked about a little outside till it was time to go to meet you, and shoot some of those Matabele. Do you know?--I killed seven of them myself. When I was shooting for your sake I could not miss," and he smiled at her.

Benita shrank from him visibly, and Mr. Clifford said in an angry voice:

"Don't talk of those horrors before my daughter. It is bad enough to have to do such things, without speaking about them afterwards."

"You are right," he replied reflectively; "and I apologise, though personally I never enjoyed anything so much as shooting those Matabele. Well, they are gone, and there are plenty more outside. Listen! They are singing their evening hymn," and with his long finger he beat time to the volleying notes of the dreadful Matabele war-chant, which floated up from the plain below. "It sounds quite religious, doesn't it? only the words--no, I will not translate them. In our circumstances they are too personal.

"Now I have something to say to you. It was unkind of you to run away and leave me like that, not honourable either. Indeed," he added with a sudden outbreak of the panther ferocity, "had you alone been concerned, Clifford, I tell you frankly that when we met again, I should have shot you. Traitors deserve to be shot, don't they?"

"Please stop talking to my father like that," broke in Benita in a stern voice, for her anger had overcome her fear. "Also it is I whom you should blame."

"It is a pleasure to obey you," he answered bowing; "I will never

mention the subject any more. Nor do I blame you--who could?--not Jacob Meyer. I quite understand that you found it very dull up here, and ladies must be allowed their fancies. Also you have come back; so why talk of the matter? But listen: on one point I have made up my mind; for your own sake you shall not go away any more until we leave this together. When I had finished carrying up the food I made sure of that. If you go to look to-morrow morning you will find that no one can come up that wall--and, what is more, no one can go down it. Moreover, that I may be quite certain, in future I shall sleep near the stair myself."

Benita and her father stared at each other.

"The Molimo has a right to come," she said; "it is his sanctuary."

"Then he must celebrate his worship down below for a little while. The old fool pretends to know everything, but he never guessed what I was going to do. Besides, we don't want him breaking in upon our privacy, do we? He might see the gold when we find it, and rob us of it afterwards."