

THE FIRST EXPERIMENT

Again Benita and her father stared at each other blankly, almost with despair. They were trapped, cut off from all help; in the power of a man who was going mad. Mr. Clifford said nothing. He was old and growing feeble; for years, although he did not know it, Meyer had dominated him, and never more so than in this hour of stress and bewilderment. Moreover, the man had threatened to murder him, and he was afraid, not so much for himself as for his daughter. If he were to die now, what would happen to her, left alone with Jacob Meyer? The knowledge of his own folly, understood too late, filled him with shame. How could he have been so wicked as to bring a girl upon such a quest in the company of an unprincipled Jew, of whose past he knew nothing except that it was murky and dubious? He had committed a great crime, led on by a love of lucre, and the weight of it pressed upon his tongue and closed his lips; he knew not what to say.

For a little while Benita was silent also; hope died within her. But she was a bold-spirited woman, and by degrees her courage re-asserted itself. Indignation filled her breast and shone through her dark eyes. Suddenly she turned upon Jacob, who sat before them smoking his pipe and enjoying their discomfiture.

"How dare you?" she asked in a low, concentrated voice. "How dare you, you coward?"

He shrank a little beneath her scorn and anger; then seemed to recover and brace himself, as one does who feels that a great struggle is at hand, upon the issue of which everything depends.

"Do not be angry with me," he answered. "I cannot bear it. It hurts--ah! you don't know how it hurts. Well, I will tell you, and before your father, for that is more honourable. I dare--for your sake."

"For my sake? How can it benefit me to be cooped up in this horrible place with you? I would rather trust myself with the Makalanga, or even," she added with bitter scorn, "even with those bloody-minded Matabele."

"You ran away from them very fast a little while ago, Miss Clifford. But you do not understand me. When I said for your sake, I meant for my own. See, now. You tried to leave me the other day and did not succeed. Another time you might succeed, and then--what would happen to me?"

"I do not know, Mr. Meyer," and her eyes added--"I do not care."

"Ah! but I know. Last time it drove me nearly mad; next time I should go quite mad."

"Because you believe that through me you will find this treasure of which you dream day and night, Mr. Meyer----"

"Yes," he interrupted quickly. "Because I believe that in you I shall find the treasure of which I dream day and night, and because that treasure has become necessary to my life."

Benita turned quickly towards her father, who was puzzling over the words, but before either of them could speak Jacob passed his hand across his brow in a bewildered way and said:

"What was I talking of? The treasure, yes, the uncountable treasure of pure gold, that lies hid so deep, that is so hard to discover and to possess; the useless, buried treasure that would bring such joy and glory to us both, if only it could be come at and reckoned out, piece by piece, coin by coin, through the long, long years of life."

Again he paused; then went on.

"Well, Miss Clifford, you are quite right; that is why I have dared to make you a prisoner, because, as the old Molimo said, the treasure is yours and I wish to share it. Now, about this treasure, it seems that it can't be found, can it, although I have worked so hard?" and he looked at his delicate, scarred hands.

"Quite so, Mr. Meyer, it can't be found, so you had better let us go

down to the Makalanga."

"But there is a way, Miss Clifford, there is a way. You know where it lies, and you can show me."

"If I knew I would show you soon enough, Mr. Meyer, for then you could take the stuff and our partnership would be at an end."

"Not until it is divided ounce by ounce and coin by coin. But first--first you must show me, as you say you will, and as you can."

"How, Mr. Meyer? I am not a magician."

"Ah! but you are. I will tell you how, having your promise. Listen now, both of you. I have studied. I know a great many secret things, and I read in your face that you have the gift--let me look in your eyes a while, Miss Clifford, and you will go to sleep quite gently, and then in your sleep, which shall not harm you at all, you will see where that gold lies hidden, and you will tell us."

"What do you mean?" asked Benita, bewildered.

"I know what he means," broke in Mr. Clifford. "You mean that you want to mesmerize her as you did the Zulu chief."

Benita opened her lips to speak, but Meyer said quickly:

"No, no; hear me first before you refuse. You have the gift, the precious gift of clairvoyance, that is so rare."

"How do you know that, Mr. Meyer? I have never been mesmerized in my life."

"It does not matter how. I do know it; I have been sure of it from the moment when first we met, that night by the kloof. Although, perhaps, you felt nothing then, it was that gift of yours working upon a mind in tune, my mind, which led me there in time to save you, as it was that gift of yours which warned you of the disaster about to happen to the ship--oh! I have heard the story from your own lips. Your spirit can loose itself from the body: it can see the past and the future; it can discover the hidden things."

"I do not believe it," answered Benita; "but at least it shall not be loosed by you."

"It shall, it shall," he cried with passion, his eyes blazing on her as he spoke. "Oh! I foresaw all this, and that is why I was determined you should come with us, so that, should other means fail, we might have your power to fall back upon. Well, they have failed; I have been patient, I have said nothing, but now there is no other way. Will you be so selfish, so cruel, as to deny me, you who can make us all rich in an hour, and take no hurt at all, no more than if you had slept awhile?"

"Yes," answered Benita. "I refuse to deliver my will into the keeping of any living man, and least of all into yours, Mr. Meyer."

He turned to her father with a gesture of despair.

"Cannot you persuade her, Clifford? She is your daughter, she will obey you."

"Not in that," said Benita.

"No," answered Mr. Clifford. "I cannot, and I wouldn't if I could. My daughter is quite right. Moreover, I hate this supernatural kind of thing. If we can't find this gold without it, then we must let it alone, that is all."

Meyer turned aside to hide his face, and presently looked up again, and spoke quite softly.

"I suppose that I must accept my answer, but when you talked of any living man just now, Miss Clifford, did you include your father?"

She shook her head.

"Then will you allow him to try to mesmerize you?"

Benita laughed.

"Oh, yes, if he likes," she said. "But I do not think that the operation will be very successful."

"Good, we will see to-morrow. Now, like you, I am tired. I am going to bed in my new camp by the wall," he added significantly.

"Why are you so dead set against this business?" asked her father, when he had gone.

"Oh, father!" she answered, "can't you see, don't you understand? Then it is hard to have to tell you, but I must. In the beginning Mr. Meyer only wanted the gold. Now he wants more, me as well as the gold. I hate him! You know that is why I ran away. But I have read a good deal about this mesmerism, and seen it once or twice, and who knows? If once I allow his mind to master my mind, although I hate him so much, I might become his slave."

"I understand now," said Mr. Clifford. "Oh, why did I ever bring you here? It would have been better if I had never seen your face again."

On the morrow the experiment was made. Mr. Clifford attempted to

mesmerize his daughter. All the morning Jacob, who, it now appeared, had practical knowledge of this doubtful art, tried to instruct him therein. In the course of the lesson he informed him that for a short period in the past, having great natural powers in that direction, he had made use of them professionally, only giving up the business because he found it wrecked his health. Mr. Clifford remarked that he had never told him that before.

"There are lots of things in my life that I have never told you," replied Jacob with a little secret smile. "For instance, once I mesmerized you, although you did not know it, and that is why you always have to do what I want you to, except when your daughter is near you, for her influence is stronger than mine."

Mr. Clifford stared at him.

"No wonder Benita won't let you mesmerize her," he said shortly.

Then Jacob saw his mistake.

"You are more foolish than I thought," he said. "How could I mesmerize you without your knowing it? I was only laughing at you."

"I didn't see the laugh," replied Mr. Clifford uneasily, and they went on with the lesson.

That afternoon it was put to proof--in the cave itself, where Meyer seemed to think that the influences would be propitious. Benita, who found some amusement in the performance, was seated upon the stone steps underneath the crucifix, one lamp on the altar and others one each side of her.

In front stood her father, staring at her and waving his hands mysteriously in obedience to Jacob's directions. So ridiculous did he look indeed while thus engaged that Benita had the greatest difficulty in preventing herself from bursting into laughter. This was the only effect which his grimaces and gesticulations produced upon her, although outwardly she kept a solemn appearance, and even from time to time shut her eyes to encourage him. Once, when she opened them again, it was to perceive that he was becoming very hot and exhausted, and that Jacob was watching him with such an unpleasant intentness that she re-closed her eyes that she might not see his face.

It was shortly after this that of a sudden Benita did feel something, a kind of penetrating power flowing upon her, something soft and subtle that seemed to creep into her brain like the sound of her mother's lullaby in the dim years ago. She began to think that she was a lost traveller among alpine snows wrapped round by snow, falling, falling in ten myriad flakes, every one of them with a little heart of fire. Then it came to her that she had heard this snow-sleep was dangerous, the last of all sleeps, and that its victims must rouse themselves, or die.

Benita roused herself just in time--only just, for now she was being borne over the edge of a precipice upon the wings of swans, and beneath her was darkness wherein dim figures walked with lamps where their hearts should be. Oh, how heavy were her eyelids! Surely a weight hung to each of them, a golden weight. There, there, they were open, and she saw. Her father had ceased his efforts; he was rubbing his brow with a red pocket-handkerchief, but behind him, with rigid arms outstretched, his glowing eyes fastened on her face, stood Jacob Meyer. By an effort she sprang to her feet, shaking her head as a dog does.

"Have done with this nonsense," she said. "It tires me," and snatching one of the lamps she ran swiftly down the place.

Benita expected that Jacob Meyer would be very angry with her, and braced herself for a scene. But nothing of the sort happened. A while afterwards she saw the two of them approaching, engaged apparently in amicable talk.

"Mr. Meyer says that I am no mesmerist, love," said her father, "and I can quite believe him. But for all that it is a weary job. I am as tired as I was after our escape from the Matabele."

She laughed and answered:

"To judge by results I agree with you. The occult is not in your line,

father. You had better give it up."

"Did you, then, feel nothing?" asked Meyer.

"Nothing at all," she answered, looking him in the eyes. "No, that's wrong, I felt extremely bored and sorry to see my father making himself ridiculous. Grey hairs and nonsense of that sort don't go well together."

"No," he answered. "I agree with you--not of that sort," and the subject dropped.

For the next few days, to her intense relief, Benita heard no more of mesmerism. To begin with, there was something else to occupy their minds. The Matabele, tired of marching round the fortress and singing endless war-songs, had determined upon an assault. From their point of vantage on the topmost wall the three could watch the preparations which they made. Trees were cut down and brought in from a great distance that rude ladders might be fashioned out of them; also spies wandered round reconnoitring for a weak place in the defences. When they came too near the Makalanga fired on them, killing some, so that they retreated to the camp, which they had made in a fold of ground at a little distance. Suddenly it occurred to Meyer that although here the Matabele were safe from the Makalanga bullets, it was commanded from the greater eminence, and by way of recreation he set himself to harass them. His rifle was a sporting Martini, and he had an ample supply of ammunition. Moreover, he

was a beautiful marksman, with sight like that of a hawk.

A few trial shots gave him the range; it was a shade under seven hundred yards, and then he began operations. Lying on the top of the wall and resting his rifle upon a stone, he waited until the man who was superintending the manufacture of the ladders came out into the open, when, aiming carefully, he fired. The soldier, a white-bearded savage, sprang into the air, and fell backwards, while his companions stared upwards, wondering whence the bullet had come.

"Pretty, wasn't it?" said Meyer to Benita, who was watching through a pair of field-glasses.

"I dare say," she answered. "But I don't want to see any more," and giving the glasses to her father, she climbed down the wall.

But Meyer stayed there, and from time to time she heard the report of his rifle. In the evening he told her that he had killed six men and wounded ten more, adding that it was the best day's shooting which he could remember.

"What is the use when there are so many?" she asked.

"Not much," he answered. "But it annoys them and amuses me. Also, it was part of our bargain that we should help the Makalanga if they were attacked."

"I believe that you like killing people," she said.

"I don't mind it, Miss Clifford, especially as they tried to kill you."

XVIII

THE OTHER BENITA

At irregular times, when he had nothing else to do, Jacob went on with his man-shooting, in which Mr. Clifford joined him, though with less effect. Soon it became evident that the Matabele were very much annoyed by the fatal accuracy of this fire. Loss of life they did not mind in the abstract, but when none of them knew but that their own turn might come next to perish beneath these downward plunging bullets, the matter wore a different face to them. To leave their camp was not easy, since they had made a thorn boma round it, to protect them in case the Makalanga should make a night sally; also they could find no other convenient spot. The upshot of it all was to hurry their assault, which they delivered before they had prepared sufficient ladders to make it effective.

At the first break of dawn on the third day after Mr. Clifford's attempt