

"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

at mesmerism, Benita was awakened by the sounds of shouts and firing. Having dressed herself hastily, she hurried in the growing light towards that part of the wall from below which the noise seemed to come, and climbing it, found her father and Jacob already seated there, their rifles in hand.

"The fools are attacking the small gate through which you went out riding, Miss Clifford, the very worst place that they could have chosen, although the wall looks very weak there," said the latter. "If those Makalanga have any pluck they ought to teach them a lesson."

Then the sun rose and they saw companies of Matabele, who carried ladders in their hands, rushing onwards through the morning mist till their sight of them was obstructed by the swell of the hill. On these companies the two white men opened fire, with what result they could not see in that light. Presently a great shout announced that the enemy had gained the fosse and were setting up the ladders. Up to this time the Makalanga appeared to have done nothing, but now they began to fire rapidly from the ancient bastions which commanded the entrance the impi was striving to storm, and soon through the thinning fog they perceived wounded Matabele staggering and crawling back towards their camp. Of these, the light now better, Jacob did not neglect to take his toll.

Meanwhile, the ancient fortress rang with the hideous tumult of the attack. It was evident that again and again, as their fierce war-shouts proclaimed, the Matabele were striving to scale the wall, and again and

again were beaten back by the raking rifle fire. Once a triumphant yell seemed to announce their success. The fire slackened and Benita grew pale with fear.

"The Makalanga cowards are bolting," muttered Mr. Clifford, listening with terrible anxiety.

But if so their courage came back to them, for presently the guns cracked louder and more incessant than before, and the savage cries of "Kill! Kill! Kill!" dwindled and died away. Another five minutes and the Matabele were in full retreat, bearing with them many dead and wounded men upon their backs or stretched out on the ladders.

"Our Makalanga friends should be grateful to us for those hundred rifles," said Jacob as he loaded and fired rapidly, sending his bullets wherever the clusters were thickest. "Had it not been for them their throats would have been cut by now," he added, "for they could never have stopped those savages with the spear."

"Yes, and ours too before nightfall," said Benita with a shudder, for the sight of this desperate fray and fear of how it might end had sickened her. "Thank Heaven, it is over! Perhaps they will give up the siege and go away."

But, notwithstanding their costly defeat, for they had lost over a hundred men, the Matabele, who were afraid to return to Buluwayo except

as victors, did nothing of the sort. They only cut down a quantity of reeds and scrub, and moved their camp nearly to the banks of the river, placing it in such a position that it could no longer be searched by the fire of the two white men. Here they sat themselves down sullenly, hoping to starve out the garrison or to find some other way of entering the fortress.

Now Meyer's shooting having come to an end for lack of men to shoot at, since the enemy exposed themselves no more, he was again able to give his full attention to the matter of the treasure hunt.

As nothing could be found in the cave he devoted himself to the outside enclosure which, it may be remembered, was grown over with grass and trees and crowded with ruins. In the most important of these ruins they began to dig somewhat aimlessly, and were rewarded by finding a certain amount of gold in the shape of beads and ornaments, and a few more skeletons of ancients. But of the Portuguese hoard there was no sign. Thus it came about that they grew gloomier day by day, till at last they scarcely spoke to each other. Jacob's angry disappointment was written on his face, and Benita was filled with despair, since to escape from their gaoler above and the Matabele below seemed impossible. Moreover, she had another cause for anxiety.

The ill-health which had been threatening her father for a long while now fell upon him in earnest, so that of a sudden he became a very old man. His strength and energy left him, and his mind was so filled with

remorse for what he held to be his crime in bringing his daughter to this awful place, and with terror for the fate that threatened her, that he could think of nothing else. In vain did she try to comfort him. He would only wring his hands and groan, praying that God and she would forgive him. Now, too, Meyer's mastery over him became continually more evident. Mr. Clifford implored the man, almost with tears, to unblock the wall and allow them to go down to the Makalanga. He even tried to bribe him with the offer of all his share of the treasure, if it were found, and when that failed, of his property in the Transvaal.

But Jacob only told him roughly not to be a fool, as they had to see the thing through together. Then he would go again and brood by himself, and Benita noticed that he always took his rifle or a pistol with him. Evidently he feared lest her father should catch him unprepared, and take the law into his own hands by means of a sudden bullet.

One comfort she had, however: although he watched her closely, the Jew never tried to molest her in any way, not even with more of his enigmatic and amorous speeches. By degrees, indeed, she came to believe that all this was gone from his mind, or that he had abandoned his advances as hopeless.

A week passed since the Matabele attack, and nothing had happened. The Makalanga took no notice of them, and so far as she was aware the old Molimo never attempted to climb the blocked wall or otherwise to communicate with them, a thing so strange that, knowing his affection

for her, Benita came to the conclusion that he must be dead, killed perhaps in the attack. Even Jacob Meyer had abandoned his digging, and sat about all day doing nothing but think.

Their meal that night was a miserable affair, since in the first place provisions were running short and there was little to eat, and in the second no one spoke a word. Benita could swallow no food; she was weary of that sun-dried trek-ox, for since Meyer had blocked the wall they had little else. But by good fortune there remained plenty of coffee, and of this she drank two cups, which Jacob prepared and handed to her with much politeness. It tasted very bitter to her, but this, Benita reflected, was because they lacked milk and sugar. Supper ended, Meyer rose and bowed to her, muttering that he was going to bed, and a few minutes later Mr. Clifford followed his example. She went with her father to the hut beneath the tree, and having helped him to remove his coat, which now he seemed to find difficulty in doing for himself, bade him good-night and returned to the fire.

It was very lonely there in the silence, for no sound came from either the Matabele or the Makalanga camps, and the bright moonlight seemed to people the place with fantastic shadows that looked alive. Benita cried a little now that her father could not see her, and then also sought refuge in bed. Evidently the end, whatever it might be, was near, and of it she could not bear to think. Moreover, her eyes were strangely heavy, so much so that before she had finished saying her prayers sleep fell upon her, and she knew no more.

Had she remained as wakeful as it was often her fate to be during those fearful days, towards midnight she might have heard some light-footed creature creeping to her tent, and seen that the moon-rays which flowed through the gaping and ill-closed flap were cut off by the figure of a man with glowing eyes, whose projected arms waved over her mysteriously. But Benita neither heard nor saw. In her drugged rest she did not know that her sleep turned gradually to a magic swoon. She had no knowledge of her rising, or of how she threw her thick cloak about her, lit her lamp, and, in obedience to that beckoning finger, glided from the tent. She never heard her father stumble from his hut, disturbed by the sound of footsteps, or the words that passed between him and Jacob Meyer, while, lamp in hand, she stood near them like a strengthless ghost.

"If you dare to wake her," hissed Jacob, "I tell you that she will die, and afterwards you shall die," and he fingered the pistol at his belt.

"No harm shall come to her--I swear it! Follow and see. Man, man, be silent; our fortunes hang on it."

Then, overcome also by the strange fierceness of that voice and gaze, he followed.

On they go to the winding neck of the cavern, first Jacob walking backwards like the herald of majesty; then majesty itself in the shape of this long-haired, death-like woman, cloaked and bearing in her hand the light; and last, behind, the old, white-bearded man, like Time

following Beauty to the grave. Now they were in the great cavern, and now, avoiding the open tombs, the well mouth and the altar, they stood beneath the crucifix.

"Be seated," said Meyer, and the entranced Benita sat herself down upon the steps at the foot of the cross, placing the lamp on the rock pavement before her, and bowing her head till her hair fell upon her naked feet and hid them. He held his hands above her for a while, then asked:

"Do you sleep?"

"I sleep," came the strange, slow answer.

"Is your spirit awake?"

"It is awake."

"Command it to travel backwards through the ages to the beginning, and tell me what you see here."

"I see a rugged cave and wild folk dwelling in it; an old man is dying yonder," and she pointed to the right; "and a black woman with a babe at her breast tends him. A man, it is her husband, enters the cave. He holds a torch in one hand, and with the other drags a buck."

"Cease," said Meyer. "How long is this ago?"

"Thirty-three thousand two hundred and one years," came the answer, spoken without any hesitation.

"Pass on," he said, "pass on thirty thousand years, and tell me what you see."

For a long while there was silence.

"Why do you not speak?" he asked.

"Be patient; I am living through those thirty thousand years; many a life, many an age, but none may be missed."

Again there was silence for a long while, till at length she spoke:

"They are done, all of them, and now three thousand years ago I see this place changed and smoothly fashioned, peopled by a throng of worshippers clad in strange garments with clasps upon them. Behind me stands the graven statue of a goddess with a calm and cruel face, in front of the altar burns a fire, and on the altar white-robed priests are sacrificing an infant which cries aloud."

"Pass on, pass on," Meyer said hurriedly, as though the horror of that scene had leapt to his eyes. "Pass on two thousand seven hundred years

and tell me what you see."

Again there was a pause, while the spirit he had evoked in the body of Benita lived through those ages. Then slowly she answered:

"Nothing, the place is black and desolate, only the dead sleep beneath its floor."

"Wait till the living come again," he commanded; "then speak."

"They are here," she replied presently. "Tonsured monks, one of whom fashions this crucifix, and their followers who bow before the Host upon the altar. They come, they go--of whom shall I tell you?"

"Tell me of the Portuguese; of those who were driven here to die."

"I see them all," she answered, after a pause. "Two hundred and three of them. They are ragged and wayworn and hungry. Among them is a beautiful woman, a girl. She draws near to me, she enters into me. You must ask her,"--this was spoken in a very faint voice--"I am I no more."

Mr. Clifford attempted to interrupt, but fiercely Meyer bade him to be silent.

"Speak," he commanded, but the crouching figure shook her head.

"Speak," he said again, whereon another voice, not that of Benita, answered in another tongue:

"I hear; but I do not understand your language."

"Great Heaven!" said Meyer, "it is Portuguese," and for a while the terror of the thing struck him dumb, for he was aware that Benita knew no Portuguese. He knew it, however, who had lived at Lorenço Marquez.

"Who are you?" he asked in that tongue.

"I am Benita da Ferreira. I am the daughter of the Captain da Ferreira and of his wife, the lady Christinha, who stand by you now. Turn, and you will see them."

Jacob started and looked about him uneasily.

"What did she say? I did not catch it all," asked Mr. Clifford.

He translated her words.

"But this is black magic," exclaimed the old man. "Benita knows no Portuguese, so how comes she to speak it?"

"Because she is no longer our Benita; she is another Benita, Benita da Ferreira. The Molimo was right when he said that the spirit of the dead

woman went with her, as it seems the name has gone," he added.

"Have done," said Mr. Clifford; "the thing is unholy. Wake her up, or I will."

"And bring about her death. Touch or disturb her, and I tell you she will die," and he pointed to Benita, who crouched before them so white and motionless that indeed it seemed as though already she were dead.

"Be quiet," he went on. "I swear to you that no hurt shall come to her, also that I will translate everything to you. Promise, or I will tell you nothing, and her blood be on your head."

Then Mr. Clifford groaned and said:

"I promise."

"Tell me your story, Benita da Ferreira. How came you and your people here?"

"The tribes of Monomotapa rose against our rule. They killed many of us in the lower land, yes, they killed my brother and him to whom I was affianced. The rest of us fled north to this ancient fortress, hoping thence to escape by the river, the Zambesi. The Mambo, our vassal, gave us shelter here, but the tribes besieged the walls in thousands, and burnt all the boats so that we could not fly by the water. Many times we beat them back from the wall; the ditch was full of their dead, and at

last they dared to attack no more.

"Then we began to starve and they won the first wall. We went on starving and they won the second wall, but the third wall they could not climb. So we died; one by one we laid ourselves down in this cave and died, till I alone was left, for while our people had food they gave it to me who was the daughter of their captain. Yes, alone I knelt at the foot of this crucifix by the body of my father, praying to the blessed Son of Mary for the death that would not come, and kneeling there I swooned. When I awoke again the Mambo and his men stood about me, for now, knowing us to be dead, the tribes had gone, and those who were in hiding across the river had returned and knew how to climb the wall. They bore me from among the dead, they gave me food so that my strength came back; but in the night I, who in my wickedness would not live, escaped from them and climbed the pillar of black rock, so that when the sun rose they saw me standing there. They begged of me to come down, promising to protect me, but I said 'No,' who in the evil of my heart only desired to die, that I might join my father and my brother, and one who was dearer to me than all. They asked of me where the great treasure was hidden."

At these words Jacob gasped, then rapidly translated them, while the figure before them became silent, as though it felt that for the moment the power of his will was withdrawn.

"Speak on, I bid you," he said, and she continued, the rich, slow voice

dropping word after word from the lips of Benita in the alien speech that this Benita never knew.

"I answered that it was where it was, and that if they gave it up to any save the one appointed, then that fate which had befallen my people would befall theirs also. Yes, I gave it into their keeping until I came again, since with his dying breath my father had commanded me to reveal it to none, and I believed that I who was about to die should never come again.

"Then I made my last prayer, I kissed the golden crucifix that now hangs upon this breast wherein I dwell," and the hand of the living Benita was lifted, and moving like the hand of a dead thing, slowly drew out the symbol from beneath the cloak, held it for a moment in the lamplight, and let it fall to its place again. "I put my hands before my eyes that I might not see, and I hurled myself from the pinnacle."

Now the voice ceased, but from the lips came a dreadful sound, such as might be uttered by one whose bones are shattered upon rocks, followed by other sounds like those of one who chokes in water. They were so horrible to hear that Mr. Clifford nearly fainted, and even Jacob Meyer staggered and turned white as the white face of Benita.

"Wake her! For God's sake, wake her!" said her father. "She is dying, as that woman died hundreds of years ago."

"Not till she has told us where the gold is. Be quiet, you fool. She does not feel or suffer. It is the spirit within her that lives through the past again."

Once more there was silence. It seemed as though the story were all told and the teller had departed.

"Benita da Ferreira," said Meyer at length, "I command you, tell me, are you dead?"

"Oh! would that I were dead, as my body is dead!" wailed the lips of Benita. "Alas! I cannot die who suffer this purgatory, and must dwell on here alone until the destined day. Yes, yes, the spirit of her who was Benita da Ferreira must haunt this place in solitude. This is her doom, to be the guardian of that accursed gold which was wrung from the earth by cruelty and paid for with the lives of men."

"Is it still safe?" whispered Jacob.

"I will look;" then after a pause, "I have looked. It is there, every grain of it, in ox-hide bags; only one of them has fallen and burst, that which is black and red."

"Where is it?" he said again.

"I may not tell you; never, never."

"Is there anyone whom you may tell?"

"Yes."

"Whom?"

"Her in whose breast I lie."

"Tell her then."

"I have told her; she knows."

"And may she tell me?"

"Let her guard the secret as she will. O my Guardian, I thank thee. My burden is departed; my sin of self-murder is atoned."

"Benita da Ferreira, are you gone?"

No answer.

"Benita Clifford, do you hear me?"

"I hear you," said the voice of Benita, speaking in English, although Jacob, forgetting, had addressed her in Portuguese.

"Where is the gold?"

"In my keeping."

"Tell me, I command you."

But no words came; though he questioned her many times no words came, till at last her head sank forward upon her knees, and in a faint voice she murmured:

"Loose me, or I die."