

XIX

THE AWAKING

Still Jacob Meyer hesitated. The great secret was unlearned, and, if this occasion passed, might never be learned. But if he hesitated, Mr. Clifford did not. The knowledge of his child's danger, the sense that her life was mysteriously slipping away from her under pressure of the ghastly spell in which she lay enthralled, stirred him to madness. His strength and manhood came back to him. He sprang straight at Meyer's throat, gripped it with one hand, and with the other drew the knife he wore.

"You devil!" he gasped. "Wake her or you shall go with her!" and he lifted the knife.

Then Jacob gave in. Shaking off his assailant he stepped to Benita, and while her father stood behind him with the lifted blade, began to make strange upward passes over her, and to mutter words of command. For a long while they took no effect; indeed, both of them were almost sure that she was gone. Despair gripped her father, and Meyer worked at his black art so furiously that the sweat burst out upon his forehead and fell in great drops to the floor.

Oh, at last, at last she stirred! Her head lifted itself a little, her breast heaved.

"Lord in Heaven, I have saved her!" muttered Jacob in German, and worked on.

Now the eyes of Benita opened, and now she stood up and sighed. But she said nothing; only like a person walking in her sleep, she began to move towards the entrance of the cave, her father going before her with the lamp. On she went, and out of it straight to her tent, where instantly she cast herself upon her bed and sank into deep slumber. It was as though the power of the drug-induced oblivion, which for a while was over-mastered by that other stronger power invoked by Jacob, had reasserted itself.

Meyer watched her for awhile; then said to Mr. Clifford:

"Don't be afraid and don't attempt to disturb her. She will wake naturally in the morning."

"I hope so for both our sakes," he answered, glaring at him, "for if not, you or I, or the two of us, will never see another."

Meyer took no notice of his threats; indeed the man seemed so exhausted that he could scarcely stand.

"I am done," he said. "Now, as she is safe, I don't care what happens to me. I must rest," and he staggered from the tent, like a drunken man.

Outside, at the place where they ate, Mr. Clifford heard him gulping down raw gin from the bottle. Then he heard no more.

All the rest of the night, and for some hours of the early morning, did her father watch by the bed of Benita, although, lightly clad as he was, the cold of dawn struck to his bones. At length, when the sun was well up, she rose in her bed, and her eyes opened.

"What are you doing here, father?" she said.

"I have come to see where you were, dear. You are generally out by now."

"I suppose that I must have overslept myself then," she replied wearily.

"But it does not seem to have refreshed me much, and my head aches. Oh! I remember," she added with a start. "I have had such a horrid dream."

"What about?" he asked as carelessly as he could.

"I can't recall it quite, but it had to do with Mr. Meyer," and she shivered. "It seemed as though I had passed into his power, as though he had taken possession of me, body and soul, and forced me to tell him all the secret things."

"What secret things, Benita?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know now, but we went away among dead people, and I told him there. Oh! father, I am afraid of that man--terribly afraid! Protect me from him," and she began to cry a little.

"Of course I will protect you, dear. Something has upset your nerves. Come, dress yourself and you'll soon forget it all. I'll light the fire."

A quarter of an hour later Benita joined him, looking pale and shaken, but otherwise much as usual. She was ravenously hungry, and ate of the biscuits and dried meat with eagerness.

"The coffee tastes quite different from that which I drank last night," she said. "I think there must have been something in it which gave me those bad dreams. Where is Mr. Meyer? Oh, I know!" and again she put her hand to her head. "He is still asleep by the wall."

"Who told you that?"

"I can't say, but it is so. He will not come here till one o'clock. There, I feel much better now. What shall we do, father?"

"Sit in the sun and rest, I think, dear."

"Yes, let us do that, on the top of the wall. We can see the Makalanga from there, and it will be a comfort to be sure that there are other human beings left in the world besides ourselves and Jacob Meyer."

So presently they went, and from the spot whence Meyer used to shoot at the Matabele camp, looked down upon the Makalanga moving about the first enclosure far below. By the aid of the glasses Benita even thought that she recognised Tamas, although of this it was difficult to be sure, for they were all very much alike. Still, the discovery quite excited her.

"I am sure it is Tamas," she said. "And oh! how I wish that we were down there with him, although it is true that then we should be nearer to the Matabele. But they are better than Mr. Meyer, much better."

Now for a while they were silent, till at length she said suddenly:

"Father, you are keeping something back from me, and things begin to come back. Tell me; did I go anywhere last night with Mr. Meyer--you and he and I together?"

He hesitated and looked guilty; Mr. Clifford was not a good actor.

"I see that we did; I am sure that we did. Father, tell me. I must know, I will know."

Then he gave way.

"I didn't want to speak, dear, but perhaps it is best. It is a very strange story. Will you promise not to be upset?"

"I will promise not to be more upset than I am at present," she answered, with a sad little laugh. "Go on."

"You remember that Jacob Meyer wanted to mesmerize you?"

"I am not likely to forget it," she answered.

"Well, last night he did mesmerize you."

"What?" she said. "What? Oh! how dreadful! Now I understand it all. But when?"

"When you were sound asleep, I suppose. At least, the first I knew of it was that some noise woke me, and I came out of the hut to see you following him like a dead woman, with a lamp in your hand."

Then he told her all the story, while she listened aghast.

"How dared he!" she gasped, when her father had finished the long tale.

"I hate him; I almost wish that you had killed him," and she clenched her little hands and shook them in the air.

"That is not very Christian of you, Miss Clifford," said a voice behind her. "But it is past one o'clock, and as I am still alive I have come to tell you that it is time for luncheon."

Benita wheeled round upon the stone on which she sat, and there, standing amidst the bushes a little way from the foot of the wall, was Jacob Meyer. Their eyes met; hers were full of defiance, and his of conscious power.

"I do not want any luncheon, Mr. Meyer," she said.

"But I am sure that you do. Please come down and have some. Please come down."

The words were spoken humbly, almost pleadingly, yet to Benita they seemed as a command. At any rate, with slow reluctance she climbed down the shattered wall, followed by her father, and without speaking they went back to their camping place, all three of them, Jacob leading the way.

When they had eaten, or made pretence to eat, he spoke.

"I see that your father has told you everything, Miss Clifford, and of that I am glad. As for me, it would have been awkward, who must ask your forgiveness for so much. But what could I do? I knew, as I have always known, that it was only possible to find this treasure by your help.

So I gave you something to make you sleep, and then in your sleep I hypnotized you, and--you know the rest. I have great experience in this art, but I have never seen or heard of anything like what happened, and I hope I never shall again."

Hitherto Benita had sat silent, but now her burning indignation and curiosity overcame her shame and hatred.

"Mr. Meyer," she said, "you have done a shameful and a wicked thing, and I tell you at once that I can never forgive you."

"Don't say that. Please don't say that," he interrupted in tones of real grief. "Make allowances for me. I had to learn, and there was no other way. You are a born clairvoyante, one among ten thousand, my art told me so, and you know all that is at stake."

"By which you mean so many ounces of gold, Mr. Meyer."

"By which I mean the greatness that gold can give, Miss Clifford."

"Such greatness, Mr. Meyer, as a week of fever, or a Matabele spear, or God's will can rob you of. But the thing is done, and soon or late the sin must be paid for. Now I want to ask you a question. You believe in nothing; you have told me so several times. You say that there is no such thing as a spirit, that when we die, we die, and there's an end. Do you not?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then tell me, what was it that spoke out of my lips last night, and how came it that I, who know no Portuguese, talked to you in that tongue?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You have put a difficult question, but one I think that can be answered. There is no such thing as a spirit, an identity that survives death. But there is such a thing as the subconscious self, which is part of the animating principle of the universe, and, if only its knowledge can be unsealed, knows all that has passed and all that is passing in that universe. One day perhaps you will read the works of my compatriot, Hegel, and there you will find it spoken of."

"You explain nothing."

"I am about to explain, Miss Clifford. Last night I gave to your sub-conscious self--that which knows all--the strength of liberty, so that it saw the past as it happened in this place. Already you knew the story of the dead girl, Benita da Ferreira, and that story you re-enacted, talking the tongue she used as you would have talked Greek or any other tongue, had it been hers. It was not her spirit that animated you, although at the time I called it so for shortness, but your own buried knowledge, tricked out and furnished by the effort of

your human imagination. That her name, Benita, should have been yours also is no doubt a strange coincidence, but no more. Also we have no proof that it was so; only what you said in your trance."

"Perhaps," said Benita, who was in no mood for philosophical argument. "Perhaps also one day you will see a spirit, Mr. Meyer, and think otherwise."

"When I see a spirit and know that it is a spirit, then doubtless I shall believe in spirits. But what is the good of talking of such things? I do not seek spirits; I seek Portuguese gold. Now, I am sure you can tell where that gold lies. You would have told us last night, had not your nervous strength failed you, who are unaccustomed to the state of trance. Speaking as Benita da Ferreira, you said that you saw it and described its condition. Then you could, or would, say no more, and it became necessary to waken you. Miss Clifford, you must let me mesmerize you once again for a few minutes only, for then we will waste no time on past histories, and we shall find the gold. Unless, indeed," he added by an afterthought, and looking at her sharply, "you know already where it is; in which case I need not trouble you."

"I do not know, Mr. Meyer. I remember nothing about the gold."

"Which proves my theory. What purported to be the spirit of Benita da Ferreira said that it had passed the secret on to you, but in your waking state you do not know that secret. In fact, she did not pass it

on because she had no existence. But in your sub-conscious state you will know. Therefore I must mesmerize you again. Not at once, but in a few days' time, when you have quite recovered. Let us say next Wednesday, three days hence."

"You shall never mesmerize me again, Mr. Meyer."

"No, not while I live," broke in her father, who had been listening to this discussion in silence.

Jacob bowed his head meekly.

"You think so now, but I think otherwise. What I did last night I did against your will, and that I can do again, only much more easily. But I had rather do it with your will, who work not for my own sake only, but for the sake of all of us. And now let us talk no more of the matter, lest we should grow angry." Then he rose and went away.

The next three days were passed by Benita in a state of constant dread. She knew in herself that Jacob Meyer had acquired a certain command over her; that an invincible intimacy had sprung up between them. She was acquainted with his thoughts; thus, before he asked for it, she would find herself passing him some article at table or elsewhere, or answering a question that he was only about to ask. Moreover, he could bring her to him from a little distance. Thus, on two or three occasions when she was wandering about their prison enclosure, as she was wont to

do for the sake of exercise, she found her feet draw to some spot--now one place and now another--and when she reached it there before her was Jacob Meyer.

"Forgive me for bringing you here," he would say, smiling after his crooked fashion, and lifting his hat politely, "but I wish to ask you if you have not changed your mind as to being mesmerized?"

Then for a while he would hold her with his eyes, so that her feet seemed rooted to the ground, till at length it was as though he cut a rope by some action of his will and set her free, and, choked with wrath and blind with tears, Benita would turn and run from him as from a wild beast.

But if her days were evil, oh! what were her nights? She lived in constant terror lest he should again drug her food or drink, and, while she slept, throw his magic spell upon her. To protect herself from the first danger she would swallow nothing that had been near him. Now also she slept in the hut with her father, who lay near its door, a loaded rifle at his side, for he had told Jacob outright that if he caught him at his practices he would shoot him, a threat at which the younger man laughed aloud, for he had no fear of Mr. Clifford.

Throughout the long hours of darkness they kept watch alternately, one of them lying down to rest while the other peered and listened. Nor did Benita always listen in vain, for twice at least she heard stealthy

footsteps creeping about the hut, and felt that soft and dreadful influence flowing in upon her. Then she would wake her father, whispering, "He is there, I can feel that he is there." But by the time that the old man had painfully dragged himself to his feet--for now he was becoming very feeble and acute rheumatism or some such illness had got hold of him--and crept from the hut, there was no one to be seen. Only through the darkness he would hear the sound of a retreating step, and of low, mocking laughter.

Thus those miserable days went by, and the third morning came, that dreaded Wednesday. Before it was dawn Benita and her father, neither of whom had closed their eyes that night, talked over their strait long and earnestly, and they knew that its crisis was approaching.

"I think that I had better try to kill him, Benita," he said. "I am growing dreadfully weak, and if I put it off I may find no strength, and you will be at his mercy. I can easily shoot him when his back is turned, and though I hate the thought of such a deed, surely I shall be forgiven. Or if not, I cannot help it. I must think of my duty to you, not of myself."

"No, no," she answered. "I will not have it. It would be murder, although he has threatened you. After all, father, I believe that the man is half mad, and not responsible. We must take our chance and trust to God to save us. If He does not," she added, "at the worst I can always save myself," and she touched the pistol which now she wore day

and night.

"So be it," said Mr. Clifford, with a groan. "Let us pray for deliverance from this hell and keep our hands clean of blood."