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JACOB MEYER SEES A SPIRIT

For a while they were silent, then Benita said:

"Father, is it not possible that we might escape, after all? Perhaps that stair on the rampart is not so completely blocked that we could not climb over it."

Mr. Clifford, thinking of his stiff limbs and aching back, shook his head and answered:

"I don't know; Meyer has never let me near enough to see."

"Well, why do you not go to look? You know he sleeps till late now, because he is up all night. Take the glasses and examine the top of the wall from inside that old house near by. He will not see or hear you, but if I came near, he would know and wake up."

"If you like, love, I can try, but what are you going to do while I am away?"

"I shall climb the pillar."

"You don't mean----" and he stopped.

"No, no, nothing of that sort. I shall not follow the example of Benita da Ferreira unless I am driven to it; I want to look, that is all. One can see far from that place, if there is anything to see. Perhaps the Matabele are gone now, we have heard nothing of them lately."

So they dressed themselves, and as soon as the light was sufficiently strong, came out of the hut and parted, Mr. Clifford, rifle in hand, limping off towards the wall, and Benita going towards the great cone. She climbed it easily enough, and stood in the little cup-like depression on its dizzy peak, waiting for the sun to rise and disperse the mists which hung over the river and its banks.

Now whatever may have been the exact ceremonial use to which the ancients put this pinnacle, without doubt it had something to do with sun-worship. This, indeed, was proved by the fact that, at any rate at this season of the year, the first rays of the risen orb struck full upon its point. Thus it came about that, as she stood there waiting, Benita of a sudden found herself suffused in light so vivid and intense that, clothed as she was in a dress which had once been white, it must have caused her to shine like a silver image. For several minutes, indeed, this golden spear of fire blinded her so that she could see nothing, but stood quite still, afraid to move, and waiting until, as the sun grew higher, its level rays passed over her. This they did presently, and plunging into the valley, began to drive away the fog. Now she looked down, along the line of the river.

The Matabele camp was invisible, for it lay in a hollow almost at the foot of the fortress. Beyond it, however, was a rising swell of ground; it may have been half a mile from where she stood, and on the crest of it she perceived what looked like a waggon tent with figures moving round it. They were shouting also, for through the silence of the African morn the sound of their voices floated up to her.

As the mist cleared off Benita saw that without doubt it was a waggon, for there stood the long row of oxen, also it had just been captured by the Matabele, for these were about it in numbers. At the moment, however, they appeared to be otherwise occupied, for they were pointing with their spears to the pillar on Bambatse.

Then it occurred to Benita that, placed as she was in that fierce light with only the sky for background, she must be perfectly visible from the plain below, and that it might be her figure perched like an eagle between heaven and earth which excited their interest. Yes, and not theirs only, for now a white man appeared, who lifted what might have been a gun, or a telescope, towards her. She was sure from the red flannel shirt and the broad hat which he wore that he must be a white man, and oh! how her heart yearned towards him, whoever he might be! The sight of an angel from heaven could scarcely have been more welcome to Benita in her wretchedness.

Yet surely she must be dreaming. What should a white man and a waggon

be doing in that place? And why had not the Matabele killed him at once? She could not tell, yet they appeared to have no murderous intentions, since they continued to gesticulate and talk whilst he stared upwards with the telescope, if it were a telescope. So things went on for a long time, for meanwhile the oxen were outspanned, until, indeed, more Matabele arrived, who led off the white man, apparently against his will, towards their camp, where he disappeared. Then there was nothing more to be seen. Benita descended the column.

At its foot she met her father, who had come to seek her.

"What is the matter?" he asked, noting her excited face.

"Oh!" she said or rather sobbed, "there is a waggon with a white man below. I saw the Matabele capture him."

"Then I am sorry for the poor devil," answered the father, "for he is dead by now. But what could a white man have been doing here? Some hunter, I suppose, who has walked into a trap."

The face of Benita fell.

"I hoped," she said, "that he might help us."

"As well might he hope that we could help him. He is gone, and there is an end. Well, peace to his soul, and we have our own troubles to think

of. I have been to look at that wall, and it is useless to think of climbing it. If he had been a professional mason, Meyer could not have built it up better; no wonder that we have seen nothing more of the Molimo, for only a bird could reach us."

"Where was Mr. Meyer," asked Benita.

"Asleep in a blanket under a little shelter of boughs by the stair. At least, I thought so, though it was rather difficult to make him out in the shadow; at any rate, I saw his rifle set against a tree. Come, let us go to breakfast. No doubt he will turn up soon enough."

So they went, and for the first time since the Sunday Benita ate a hearty meal of biscuits soaked in coffee. Although her father was so sure that by now he must have perished on the Matabele spears, the sight of the white man and his waggon had put new life into her, bringing her into touch with the world again. After all, might it not chance that he had escaped?

All this while there had been no sign of Jacob Meyer. This, however, did not surprise them, for now he ate his meals alone, taking his food from a little general store, and cooking it over his own fire. When they had finished their breakfast Mr. Clifford remarked that they had no more drinking water left, and Benita said that she would go to fetch a pailful from the well in the cave. Her father suggested that he should accompany her, but she answered that it was not necessary as she was

quite able to wind the chain by herself. So she went, carrying the bucket in one hand and a lamp in the other.

As she walked down the last of the zigzags leading to the cave, Benita stopped a moment thinking that she saw a light, and then went on, since on turning the corner there was nothing but darkness before her. Evidently she had been mistaken. She reached the well and hung the pail on to the great copper hook, wondering as she did so how many folk had done likewise in the far, far past, for the massive metal of that hook was worn quite thin with use. Then she let the roller run, and the sound of the travelling chain clanked dismally in that vaulted, empty place. At length the pail struck the water, and she began to wind up again, pausing at times to rest, for the distance was long and the chain heavy. The bucket appeared. Benita drew it to the side of the well, and lifted it from the hook, then took up her lamp to be gone.

Feeling or seeing something, which she was not sure, she held the lamp above her head, and by its light perceived a figure standing between her and the entrance to the cave.

"Who are you?" she asked, whereon a soft voice answered out of the darkness, the voice of Jacob Meyer.

"Do you mind standing still for a few minutes, Miss Clifford? I have some paper here and I wish to make a sketch. You do not know how beautiful you look with that light above your head illuminating the

shadows and the thorn-crowned crucifix beyond. You know, whatever paths fortune may have led me into, by nature I am an artist, and never in my life have I seen such a picture. One day it will make me famous.

'How statue-like I see thee stand!

The agate lamp within thy hand.'

That's what I should put under it; you know the lines, don't you?"

"Yes, Mr. Meyer, but I am afraid you will have to paint your picture from memory, as I cannot hold up this lamp any longer; my arm is aching already. I do not know how you came here, but as you have followed me perhaps you will be so kind as to carry this water."

"I did not follow you, Miss Clifford. Although you never saw me I entered the cave before you to take measurements."

"How can you take measurements in the dark?"

"I was not in the dark. I put out my light when I caught sight of you, knowing that otherwise you would run away, and fate stood me in good stead. You came on, as I willed that you should do. Now let us talk. Miss Clifford, have you changed your mind? You know the time is up."

"I shall never change my mind. Let me pass you, Mr. Meyer."

"No, no, not until you have listened. You are very cruel to me, very cruel indeed. You do not understand that, rather than do you the slightest harm, I would die a hundred times."

"I do not ask you to die; I ask you to leave me alone--a much easier matter."

"But how can I leave you alone when you are a part of me, when--I love you? There, the truth is out, and now say what you will."

Benita lifted the bucket of water; its weight seemed to steady her. Then she put it down again, since escape was impracticable; she must face the situation.

"I have nothing to say, Mr. Meyer, except that I do not love you or any living man, and I never shall. I thank you for the compliment you have paid me, and there is an end."

"Any living man," he repeated after her. "That means you love a dead man--Seymour, he who was drowned. No wonder that I hated him when first my eyes fell on him years ago, long before you had come into our lives. Prescience, the sub-conscious self again. Well, what is the use of loving the dead, those who no longer have any existence, who have gone back into the clay out of which they were formed and are not, nor evermore shall be? You have but one life; turn, turn to the living, and make it happy."



"I do not agree with you, Mr. Meyer. To me the dead are still living; one day I shall find them. Now let me go."

"I will not let you go. I will plead and wrestle with you as in the old fable my namesake of my own race wrestled with the angel, until at length you bless me. You despise me because I am a Jew, because I have had many adventures and not succeeded; because you think me mad. But I tell you that there is the seed of greatness in me. Give yourself to me and I will make you great, for now I know that it was you whom I needed to supply what is lacking in my nature. We will win the wealth, and together we will rule----"

"Until a few days hence we starve or the Matabele make an end of us. No, Mr. Meyer, no," and she tried to push past him.

He stretched out his arms and stopped her.

"Listen," he said, "I have pleaded with you as man with woman. Now, as you refuse me and as you alone stand between me and madness, I will take another course. I am your master, your will is servant to my will; I bid you obey me."

He fixed his eyes upon hers, and Benita felt her strength begin to fail.

"Ah!" he said, "you are my servant now, and to show it I shall kiss you

on the lips; then I shall throw the sleep upon you, and you will tell me what I want to know. Afterwards we can be wed when it pleases me. Oh! do not think that your father will defend you, for if he interferes I shall kill that foolish old man, whom until now I have only spared for your sake. Remember that if you make me angry, I shall certainly kill him, and your father's blood will be on your head. Now I am going to kiss you."

Benita lifted her hand to find the pistol at her waist. It fell back again; she had no strength; it was as though she were paralysed as a bird is paralysed by a snake so that it cannot open its wings and fly away, but sits there awaiting death. She was given over into the hands of this man whom she hated. Could Heaven allow such a thing? she wondered dimly, and all the while his lips drew nearer to her face.

They touched her own, and then, why or wherefore Benita never understood, the spell broke. All his power was gone, she was as she had been, a free woman, mistress of herself. Contemptuously she thrust the man aside, and, not even troubling to run, lifted her pail of water and walked away.

Soon she saw the light again, and joyfully extinguished her lamp. Indeed, the breast of Benita, which should have been so troubled after the scene through which she had passed, strangely enough was filled with happiness and peace. As that glorious sunlight had broken on her eyes, so had another light of freedom arisen in her soul. She was no longer

afraid of Jacob Meyer; that coward kiss of his had struck off the shackles which bound her to him. Her mind had been subject to his mind, but now that his physical nature was brought into the play, his mental part had lost its hold upon her.

As she approached the hut she saw her father seated on a stone outside it, since the poor old man was now so weak and full of pain that he could not stand for very long, and seeing, remembered Meyer's threats against him. At the thought all her new-found happiness departed.

She might be safe; she felt sure that she was safe, but how about her father? If Meyer could not get his way probably he would be as good as his word, and kill him. She shivered at the thought, then, recovering herself, walked forward steadily with her bucket of water.

"You have been a long while gone, my love," said Mr. Clifford.

"Yes, father, Mr. Meyer was in the cave, and kept me."

"How did he get there, and what did he want?"

"I don't know how he got there--crept in when we were not looking, I suppose. But as for what he wanted--listen, dear," and word for word she told him what had passed.

Before she had finished, her father was almost choking with wrath.

"The dirty Jew! The villain!" he gasped. "I never dreamed that he would dare to attempt such an outrage. Well, thank Heaven! I can still hold a rifle, and when he comes out----"

"Father," she said gently, "that man is mad. He is not responsible for his actions, and therefore, except in self-defence, you must not think of such a thing. As for what he said about you, I believe it was only an empty threat, and for me you need have no fear, his power over me is gone; it went like a flash when his lips touched me," and she rubbed her own as though to wipe away some stain. "I am afraid of nothing more. I believe--yes, I believe the old Molimo was right, and that all will end well----"

As she was speaking Benita heard a shuffling sound behind her, and turned to learn its cause. Then she saw a strange sight. Jacob Meyer was staggering towards them, dragging one foot after the other through the grass and stones. His face was ghastly pale, his jaw had dropped like that of a dead man, and his eyes were set wide open and full of horror.

"What is the matter with you, man?" asked Mr. Clifford.

"I--I--have seen a ghost," he whispered. "You did not come back into the cave, did you?" he added, pointing at Benita, who shook her head.

"What ghost?" asked Mr. Clifford.

"I don't know, but my lamp went out, and then a light began to shine behind me. I turned, and on the steps of that crucifix I saw a woman kneeling. Her arms clasped the feet of the figure, her forehead rested upon the feet, her long black hair flowed down, she was dressed in white, and the light came from her body and her head. Very slowly she turned and looked at me, and oh, Heaven! that face----" and he put his hand before his eyes and groaned. "It was beautiful; yes, yes, but fearful to see, like an avenging angel. I fled, and the light--only the light--came with me down the cave, even at the mouth of it there was a little. I have seen a spirit, I who did not believe in spirits, I have seen a spirit, and I tell you that not for all the gold in the world will I enter that place again."

Then before they could answer, suddenly as though his fear had got some fresh hold of him, Jacob sprang forward and fled away, crashing through the bushes and leaping from rock to rock like a frightened buck.