

THE MESSAGE FROM THE DEAD

"Meyer always said that he did not believe in spirits," remarked Mr. Clifford reflectively.

"Well, he believes in them now," answered Benita with a little laugh. "But, father, the poor man is mad, that is the fact of it, and we must pay no attention to what he says."

"The old Molimo and some of his people--Tamas, for instance--declared that they have seen the ghost of Benita da Ferreira. Are they mad also, Benita?"

"I don't know, father. Who can say? All these things are a mystery. All I do know is that I have never seen a ghost, and I doubt if I ever shall."

"No, but when you were in that trance something that was not you spoke out of your mouth, which something said that it was your namesake, the other Benita. Well, as you say, we can't fathom these things, especially in a haunted kind of place like this, but the upshot of it is that I don't think we have much more to fear from Jacob."

"I am not so sure, father. Mad people change their moods very suddenly."

As it happened Benita was quite right. Towards suppertime Jacob Meyer reappeared, looking pale and shaken, but otherwise much as usual.

"I had a kind of fit this morning," he explained, "the result of an hallucination which seized me when my light went out in that cave. I remember that I thought I had seen a ghost, whereas I know very well that no such thing exists. I was the victim of disappointment, anxieties, and other still stronger emotions," and he looked at Benita. "Therefore, please forget anything I said or did, and--would you give me some supper?"

Benita did so, and he ate in silence, with some heartiness. When he had finished his food, and swallowed two or three tots of squareface, he spoke again:

"I have come here, where I know I am not welcome, upon business," he said in a calm, matter-of-fact voice. "I am tired of this place, and I think it is time that we attained the object of our journey here, namely, to find the hidden gold. That, as we all know, can only be done in a certain way, through the clairvoyant powers of one of us and the hypnotic powers of another. Miss Clifford, I request that you will allow me to throw you into a state of trance. You have told us everything else, but you have not yet told us where the treasure is hidden, and this it is necessary that we should know."

"And if I refuse, Mr. Meyer?"

"Then I am sorry, but I must take means to compel your obedience. Under those circumstances, much against my will, I shall be obliged"--here his eye blazed out wildly--"to execute your father, whose obstinacy and influence stand between us and splendid fortunes. No, Clifford," he added, "don't stretch out your hand towards that rifle, for I am already covering you with the pistol in my pocket, and the moment your hand touches it I shall fire. You poor old man, do you imagine for a single second that, sick as you are, and with your stiff limbs, you can hope to match yourself against my agility, intellect, and strength? Why, I could kill you in a dozen ways before you could lift a finger against me, and by the God I do not believe in, unless your daughter is more compliant, kill you I will!"

"That remains to be seen, my friend," said Mr. Clifford with a laugh, for he was a brave old man. "I am not certain that the God--whom you do not believe in--will not kill you first."

Now Benita, who had been taking counsel with herself, looked up and said suddenly:

"Very well, Mr. Meyer, I consent--because I must. To-morrow morning you shall try to mesmerize me, if you can, in the same place, before the crucifix in the cave."

"No," he answered quickly. "It was not there, it was here, and here it shall be again. The spot you mention is unpropitious to me; the attempt would fail."

"It is the spot that I have chosen," answered Benita stubbornly.

"And this is the spot that I have chosen, Miss Clifford, and my will must prevail over yours."

"Because you who do not believe in spirits are afraid to re-enter the cave, Mr. Meyer, lest you should chance----"

"Never mind what I am or am not afraid of," he replied with fury. "Make your choice between doing my will and your father's life. To-morrow morning I shall come for your answer, and if you are still obstinate, within half an hour he will be dead, leaving you and me alone together. Oh! you may call me wicked and a villain, but it is you who are wicked, you, you, you who force me to this deed of justice."

Then without another word he sprang up and walked away from them backwards, as he went covering Mr. Clifford with the pistol which he had drawn from his pocket. The last that they saw of him were his eyes, which glowered at them through the darkness like those of a lion.

"Father," said Benita, when she was sure that he had gone, "that madman really means to murder you; there is no doubt of it."

"None whatever, dear; if I am alive to-morrow night I shall be lucky, unless I can kill him first or get out of his way."

"Well," she said hurriedly, "I think you can. I have an idea. He is afraid to go into that cave, I am sure. Let us hide ourselves there. We can take food and shall have plenty of water, whereas, unless rain falls, he can get nothing to drink."

"But what then, Benita? We can't stop in the dark for ever."

"No, but we can wait there until something happens. Something must and will happen. His disease won't stand still. He may go raving mad and kill himself. Or he may attempt to attack us, though that is not likely, and then we must do what we can in self defence. Or help may reach us from somewhere. At the worst we shall only die as we should have died outside. Come, let us be quick, lest he should change his mind, and creep back upon us."

So Mr. Clifford gave way, knowing that even if he could steel himself to do the deed of attempting to kill Jacob, he would have little chance against that strong and agile man. Such a struggle would only end in his own death, and Benita must then be left alone with Meyer and his insane passions.

Hurriedly they carried their few belongings into the cave. First

they took most of the little store of food that remained, the three hand-lamps and all the paraffin; there was but one tin. Then returning they fetched the bucket, the ammunition, and their clothes. Afterwards, as there was still no sign of Meyer, they even dared to drag in the waggon tent to make a shelter for Benita, and all the wood that they had collected for firing. This proved a wearisome business, for the logs were heavy, and in his crippled state Mr. Clifford could carry no great burden. Indeed, towards the end Benita was forced to complete the task alone, while he limped beside her with his rifle, lest Jacob should surprise them.

When at length everything was done it was long past midnight, and so exhausted were they that, notwithstanding their danger, they flung themselves down upon the canvas tent, which lay in a heap at the end of the cave near the crucifix, and fell asleep.

When Benita woke the lamp had gone out, and it was pitch dark. Fortunately, however, she remembered where she had put the matches and the lantern with a candle in it. She lit the candle and looked at her watch. It was nearly six o'clock. The dawn must be breaking outside, within an hour or two Jacob Meyer would find that they had gone. Suppose that his rage should overcome his fear and that he should creep upon them. They would know nothing of it until his face appeared in the faint ring of light. Or he might even shoot her father out of the darkness. What could she do that would give them warning? A thought came to her.

Taking one of the tent ropes and the lantern, for her father still slept heavily, she went down to the entrance of the cave, and at the end of the last zigzag where once a door had been, managed to make it fast to a stone hinge about eighteen inches above the floor, and on the other side to an eye opposite that was cut in the solid rock to receive a bolt of wood or iron. Meyer, she knew, had no lamps or oil, only matches and perhaps a few candles. Therefore if he tried to enter the cave it was probable that he would trip over the rope and thus give them warning. Then she went back, washed her face and hands with some water that they had drawn on the previous night to satisfy their thirst, and tidied herself as best she could. This done, as her father still slept, she filled the lamps, lit one of them, and looked about her, for she was loth to wake him.

Truly it was an awful place in which to dwell. There above them towered the great white crucifix; there in the corner were piled the remains of the Portuguese. A skull with long hair still hanging to it grinned at her, a withered hand was thrust forward as though to clutch her. Oh, no wonder that in such a spot Jacob Meyer had seen ghosts! In front, too, was the yawning grave where they had found the monk; indeed, his bones wrapped in dark robes still lay within, for Jacob had tumbled them back again. Then beyond and all around deep, dark, and utter silence.

At last her father woke, and glad enough was she of his human company. They breakfasted upon some biscuits and water, and afterwards, while Mr. Clifford watched near the entrance with his rifle, Benita set to work

to arrange their belongings. The tent she managed to prop up against the wall of the cave by help of some of the wood which they had carried in. Beneath it she spread their blankets, that it might serve as a sleeping place for them both, and outside placed the food and other things.

While she was thus engaged she heard a sound at the mouth of the cave--Jacob Meyer was entering and had fallen over her rope. Down it she ran, lantern in hand, to her father, who, with his rifle raised, was shouting:

"If you come in here, I put a bullet through you!"

Then came the answer in Jacob's voice, which rang hollow in that vaulted place:

"I do not want to come in; I shall wait for you to come out. You cannot live long in there; the horror of the dark will kill you. I have only to sit in the sunlight and wait."

Then he laughed, and they heard the sound of his footsteps retreating down the passage.

"What are we to do?" asked Mr. Clifford despairingly. "We cannot live without light, and if we have light he will certainly creep to the entrance and shoot us. He is quite mad now; I am sure of it from his voice."



Benita thought a minute, then she answered:

"We must build up the passage. Look," and she pointed to the lumps of rock that the explosion of their mine had shaken down from the roof, and the slabs of cement that they had broken from the floor with the crowbar. "At once, at once," she went on; "he will not come back for some hours, probably not till night."

So they set to work, and never did Benita labour as it was her lot to do that day. Such of the fragments as they could lift they carried between them, others they rolled along by help of the crowbar. For hour after hour they toiled at their task. Luckily for them, the passage was not more than three feet wide by six feet six high, and their material was ample. Before the evening they had blocked it completely with a wall several feet in thickness, which wall they supported on the inside with lengths of the firewood lashed across to the old hinges and bolt-holes, or set obliquely against its face.

It was done, and they regarded their work with pride, although it seemed probable that they were building up their own tomb. Because of its position at an angle of the passage, they knew that Meyer could not get to it with a pole to batter it down. Also, there was no loose powder left, so his only chance would be to pull it to pieces with his hands, and this, they thought, might be beyond his power. At least, should he attempt it, they would have ample warning. Yet that day was not to pass

without another trouble.

Just as they had rolled up and levered into place a long fragment of rock designed to prevent the ends of their supporting pieces of wood from slipping on the cement floor, Mr. Clifford uttered an exclamation, then said:

"I have wrung my back badly. Help me to the tent. I must lie down."

Slowly and with great pain they staggered up the cave, Mr. Clifford leaning on Benita and a stick, till, reaching the tent at last, he almost fell on to the blankets and remained there practically crippled.

Now began Benita's terrible time, the worst of all her life. Every hour her father became more ill. Even before they took refuge in the cave he was completely broken down, and now after this accident he began to suffer very much. His rheumatism or sciatica, or whatever it was, seemed to settle upon the hurt muscles of his back, causing him so much pain that he could scarcely sleep for ten minutes at a stretch. Moreover, he would swallow but little of the rough food which was all Benita was able to prepare for him; nothing, indeed, except biscuit soaked in black coffee, which she boiled over a small fire made of wood that they had brought with them, and occasionally a little broth, tasteless stuff enough, for it was only the essence of biltong, or sun-dried flesh, flavoured with some salt.

Then there were two other terrors against she must fight, the darkness and the dread of Jacob Meyer. Perhaps the darkness was the worse of them. To live in that hideous gloom in which their single lamp, for she dared burn no more lest the oil should give out, seemed but as one star to the whole night, ah! who that had not endured it could know what it meant? There the sick man, yonder the grinning skeletons, around the blackness and the silence, and beyond these again a miserable death, or Jacob Meyer. But of him Benita saw nothing, though once or twice she thought that she heard his voice raving outside the wall which they had built. If so, either he did not try to pull it down, or he failed in the attempt, or perhaps he feared that should he succeed, he would be greeted by a bullet. So at last she gave up thinking about him. Should he force his way into the cave she must deal with the situation as best she could. Meanwhile, her father's strength was sinking fast.

Three awful days went by in this fashion, and the end drew near. Although she tried to force herself to it, Benita could not swallow enough food to keep up her strength. Now that the passage was closed the atmosphere of this old vault, for it was nothing more, thickened by the smoke of the fire which she was obliged to burn, grew poisonous and choked her. Want of sleep exhausted her, dread of what the morrow might bring forth crushed her strong spirit. She began to break down, knowing that the hour was near when she and her father must die together.

Once, as she slept awhile at his side, being wakened by his groaning, Benita looked at her watch. It was midnight. She rose, and going to the

embers of the little fire, warmed up some of her biltong broth which she poured into a tin pannikin. With difficulty she forced him to swallow a few mouthfuls of it, then, feeling a sudden weakness, drank the rest herself. It gave her power to think, and her father dozed off into an uneasy sleep.

Alas! thinking was of no use, nothing could be done. There was no hope save in prayer. Restlessness seized Benita, and taking the lantern she wandered round the cave. The wall that they had built remained intact, and oh! to think that beyond it flowed the free air and shone the blessed stars! Back she came again, skirting the pits that Jacob Meyer had dug, and the grave of the old monk, till she reached the steps of the crucifix, and holding up her candle, looked at the thorn-crowned brow of the Christ above.

It was wonderfully carved; that dying face was full of pity. Would not He Whom it represented pity her? She knelt down on the topmost step, and clasping the pierced feet with her arms, began to pray earnestly, not for herself but that she might save her father. She prayed as she had never prayed before, and so praying, sank into a torpor or a swoon.

It seemed to Benita that this sleep of hers suddenly became alive; in it she saw many things. For instance, she saw herself seated in a state of trance upon that very step where now she knelt, while before her stood her father and Jacob Meyer. Moreover, something spoke in her; she could not hear a voice, but she seemed to see the words written in the air

before her. These were the words:--

"Clasp the feet of the Christ and draw them to the left. The passage beneath leads to the chamber where the gold is hid, and thence to the river bank. That is the secret which ere I depart, I the dead Benita, pass on to you, the living Benita, as I am commanded. In life and death peace be to your soul."

Thrice did this message appear to repeat itself in the consciousness of Benita. Then, suddenly as she had slept, she woke again with every letter of it imprinted on her mind. Doubtless it was a dream, nothing but a dream bred by the fact that her arms were clasping the feet of the crucifix. What did it say? "Draw them to the left."

She did so, but nothing stirred. Again she tried, and still nothing stirred. Of course it was a dream. Why had such been sent to mock her? In a kind of mad irritation she put out all her remaining strength and wrestled with those stony feet. They moved a little--then of a sudden, without any further effort on her part, swung round as high as the knees where drapery hung, concealing the join in them. Yes, they swung round, revealing the head of a stair, up which blew a cold wind that it was sweet to breathe.

Benita rose, gasping. Then she seized her lantern and ran to the little tent where her father lay.