

XXII

THE VOICE OF THE LIVING

Mr. Clifford was awake again now.

"Where have you been?" he asked querulously in a thin voice. "I wanted you." Then as the light from the candle shone upon it, he noted the change that had come over her pale face, and added: "What has happened? Is Meyer dead? Are we free?"

Benita shook her head. "He was alive a few hours ago, for I could hear him raving and shouting outside the wall we built. But, father, it has all come back to me; I believe that I have found it."

"What has come back? What have you found? Are you mad, too, like Jacob?"

"What something told me when I was in the trance which afterwards I forgot, but now remember. And I have found the passage which leads to where they hid the gold. It begins behind the crucifix, where no one ever thought of looking."

This matter of the gold did not seem to interest Mr. Clifford. In his state all the wealth beneath the soil of Africa would not have appealed to him. Moreover, he hated the name of that accursed treasure, which was

bringing them to such a miserable end.

"Where does the passage run? Have you looked?" he asked.

"Not yet, but the voice in me said--I mean, I dreamed--that it goes down to the river-side. If you leant on me do you think that you could walk?"

"Not one inch," he answered. "Here where I am I shall die."

"No, no, don't talk like that. We may be saved now that I have found a way. Oh, if only you could--if only you could walk, or if I had the strength to carry you!" and she wrung her hands and began to weep, so weak was she.

Her father looked at her searchingly. Then he said:

"Well, love, I cannot, so there's an end. But you can, and you had better go."

"What! And leave you? Never."

"Yes, and leave me. Look, there is but a little oil left and only a few candles. The biscuits are done and neither of us can swallow that biltong any more. I suppose that I am dying, and your health and strength are failing you quickly in this darkness; if you stop here you must soon follow me. And what is the alternative? The madman

outside--that is, if you could find strength to pull down the wall, which I doubt. You had best go, Benita."

But still she said she would not.

"Do you not see," he added, "that it is my only chance of life? If you go you may be able to bring me help before the end comes. Should there be a passage the probability is that, although they know nothing of it, it finishes somewhere by the wall of the first enclosure where the Makalanga are. If so, you may find the Molimo, or if he is dead, Tamas or one of the others, and they will help us. Go, Benita, go at once."

"I never thought of that," she answered in a changed voice. "Of course, it may be so, if the passage goes down at all. Well, at least I can look and come back to tell you."

Then Benita placed the remainder of the oil close by her father's side, so that he could refill the lamp, for the use of his hands still remained to him. Also, she set there such crumbs of biscuit as were left, some of the biltong, a flask of Hollands, and a pail of water.

This done, she put on her long cloak, filled one of its pockets with biltong, and the other with matches and three of the four remaining candles. The fourth she insisted on leaving beside her father's bed.

When everything was ready she knelt down at his side, kissed him, and from her heart put up a prayer that they might both live to meet again, although she knew well that this they could scarcely hope to do.

Had two people ever been in a more dreadful situation, she wondered, as she looked at her father lying there, whom she must leave to fight with Death alone in that awful place, while she went forth to meet him in the unknown bowels of the earth!

Mr. Clifford read her thoughts. "Yes," he said, "it is a strange parting and a wild errand. But who knows? It may please Providence to take you through, and if not--why, our troubles will soon be over."

Then once more they kissed, and not daring to try to speak, Benita tore herself away. Passing into the passage whereof the lower half of the crucifix formed the door, she paused for a moment to examine it and to place a fragment of rock in such fashion that it could not shut again behind her. Her idea was that it worked by aid of some spring, but now she saw that this was not so, as the whole mass hung upon three stone hinges beautifully concealed. The dust and corrosion of ages which had made this door so hard to open, by filling up the tiny spaces between it and its framework, had also rendered these cracks utterly imperceptible to the eye. So accurately was it fashioned, indeed, that no one who did not know its secret would have discovered it if they searched for months or years.

Though at the time Benita took little note of such details, the passage beyond and the stair descending from it showed the same perfect workmanship. Evidently this secret way dated not from the Portuguese

period, but from that of the Phoenicians or other ancients, to whose treasure-chamber it was the approach, opening as it did from their holy of holies, to which none were admitted save the head priests. The passage, which was about seven feet high by four wide, had been hewn out of the live rock of the mountain, for thousands of little marks left by the workmen's chisels were still discernible upon its walls. So it was with the stair, that had been but little used, and remained fresh as the day when it was finished.

Down the steps, candle in hand, flitted Benita, counting them as she went. The thirtieth brought her to a landing. Here it was that she saw the first traces of that treasure which they had suffered so much to find. Something glittered at her feet. She picked it up. It was a little bar of gold weighing two or three ounces that doubtless had been dropped there. Throwing it down again she looked in front of her, and to her dismay saw a door of wood with iron bolts. But the bolts had never been shot, and when she pulled at it the door creaked upon its rusty hinges and opened. She was on the threshold of the treasure-chamber!

It was square and of the size of a small room, packed on either side almost to the low, vaulted roof with small bags of raw hide, carelessly arranged. Quite near to the door one of these bags had slipped down and burst open. It was filled with gold, some in ingots and some in raw nuggets, for there they lay in a shining, scattered heap. As she stooped to look it came into the mind of Benita that her father had said that in her trance she had told them that one of the bags of treasure was burst,

and that the skin of which it had been made was black and red. Behold! before her lay the burst bag, and the colour of the hide was black and red.

She shivered. The thing was uncanny, terrible. Uncanny was it also to see in the thick dust, which in the course of twenty or more of centuries had gathered on the floor, the mark of footprints, those of the last persons who had visited this place. There had been two of them, a man and a woman, and they were no savages, for they wore shoes. Benita placed her foot in the print left by that dead woman. It fitted it exactly, it might have been her own. Perhaps, she thought to herself, that other Benita had descended here with her father, after the Portuguese had hidden away their wealth, that she might be shown where it was, and of what it consisted.

One more glance at all this priceless, misery-working gold, and on she went, she who was seeking the gold of life and liberty for herself and him who lay above. Supposing that the stairway ended there? She stopped, she looked round, but could see no other door. To see the better she halted and opened the glass of her lantern. Still she could perceive nothing, and her heart sank. Yet why did the candle flicker so fiercely? And why was the air in this deep place so fresh? She walked forward a pace or two, then noticed suddenly that those footprints of the dead that she was following disappeared immediately in front of her, and she stopped.

It was but just in time. One step more and she would have fallen down the mouth of a deep pit. Once it had been covered with a stone, but this stone was removed, and had never been replaced. Look! there it stood against the wall of the chamber. Well was this for Benita, since her frail strength would not have sufficed to stir that massive block, even if she had discovered its existence beneath the dust.

Now she saw that down the pit ran another ladderlike stair of stone, very narrow and precipitous. Without hesitation she began its descent. Down she went and down--one hundred steps, two hundred steps, two hundred and seventy-five steps, and all the way wherever the dust had gathered the man's and the woman's footprints ran before her. There was a double line of them, one line going down and the other line returning. Those that returned were the last, for often they appeared over those that descended. Why had these dead people returned, Benita wondered.

The stair had ended; now she was in a kind of natural cave, for its sides and roof were rugged; moreover, water trickled and dripped from them. It was not very large, and it smelt horribly of mud and other things. Again she searched by the feeble light of her candle, but could see no exit. Suddenly she saw something else, however, for stepping on what she took to be a rock, to her horror it moved beneath her. She heard a snap as of jaws, a violent blow upon the leg nearly knocked her off her feet, and as she staggered backwards she saw a huge and loathsome shape rushing away into the darkness. The rock that she had trodden on was a crocodile which had its den here! With a little scream

she retreated to her stair. Death she had expected--but to be eaten by crocodiles!

Yet as Benita stood there panting a blessed hope rose in her breast. If a crocodile came in there it must also get out, and where such a great creature could go, a woman would be able to follow. Also, she must be near the water, since otherwise it could never have chosen this hole for its habitation. She collected her courage, and having clapped her hands and waved the lantern about to scare any alligators that might still be lurking there, hearing and seeing nothing more, she descended to where she had trodden upon the reptile. Evidently this was its bed, for its long body had left an impress upon the mud, and all about lay the remains of creatures that it had brought in for food. Moreover, a path ran outwards, its well-worn trail distinct even in that light.

She followed this path, which ended apparently in a blank wall. Then it was that Benita guessed why those dead folks' footprints had returned, for here had been a doorway which in some past age those who used it built up with blocks of stone and cement. How, then, did the crocodile get out? Stooping down she searched, and perceived, a few yards to the right of the door, a hole that looked as though it were water-worn. Now Benita thought that she understood. The rock was softer here, and centuries of flood had eaten it away, leaving a crack in the stratum which the crocodiles had found out and enlarged. Down she went on her hands and knees, and thrusting the lantern in front of her, crept along that noisome drain, for this was what it resembled. And now--oh! now she



felt air blowing in her face, and heard the sound of reeds whispering, and water running, and saw hanging like a lamp in the blue sky, a star--the morning star! Benita could have wept, she could have worshipped it, yet she pushed on between rocks till she found herself among tall reeds, and standing in water. She had gained the banks of the Zambesi.

Instantly, by instinct as it were, Benita extinguished her candle, fearing lest it should betray her, for constant danger had made her very cunning. The dawn had not yet broken, but the waning moon and the stars gave a good light. She paused to look. There above her towered the outermost wall of Bambatse, against which the river washed, except at such times as the present, when it was very low.

So she was not in the fortress as she had hoped, but without it, and oh! what should she do? Go back again? How would that serve her father or herself? Go on? Then she might fall into the hands of the Matabele whose camp was a little lower down, as from her perch upon the top of the cone she had seen that poor white man do. Ah! the white man! If only he lived and she could reach him! Perhaps they had not killed him after all. It was madness, yet she would try to discover; something impelled her to take the risk. If she failed and escaped, perhaps then she might call to the Makalanga, and they would let down a rope and draw her up the wall before the Matabele caught her. She would not go back empty-handed, to die in that dreadful place with her poor father. Better perish here in the sweet air and beneath the stars, even if it were upon a Matabele

spear, or by a bullet from her own pistol.

She looked about her to take her bearings in case it should ever be necessary for her to return to the entrance of the cave. This proved easy, for a hundred or so feet above her--where the sheer face of the cliff jutted out a little, at that very spot indeed on which tradition said that the body of the Señora da Ferreira had struck in its fall, and the necklace Benita wore to-day was torn from her--a stunted mimosa grew in some cleft of the rock. To mark the crocodile run itself she bent down a bunch of reeds, and having first lit a few Tandstickor brimstone matches and thrown them about inside of it, that the smell of them might scare the beast should it wish to return, she set her lantern behind a stone near to the mouth of the hole.

Then Benita began her journey which, when the river was high, it would not have been possible for her to make except by swimming. As it was, a margin of marsh was left between her and the steep, rocky side of the mount from which the great wall rose, and through this she made her way. Never was she likely to forget that walk. The tall reeds dripped their dew upon her until she was soaked; long, black-tailed finches--saccaboolas the natives call them--flew up undisturbed, and lobbed away across the river; owls flitted past and bitterns boomed at the coming of the dawn. Great fish splashed also in the shallows, or were they crocodiles? Benita hoped not--for one day she had seen enough of crocodiles.

It was all very strange. Could she be the same woman, she wondered, who not a year before had been walking with her cousins down Westbourne Grove, and studying Whiteley's windows? What would these cousins say now if they could see her, white-faced, large-eyed, desperate, splashing through the mud upon the unknown banks of the Zambesi, flying from death to death!

On she struggled, above her the pearly sky in which the stars were fading, around her the wet reeds, and pervading all the heavy low-lying mists of dawn. She was past the round of the walls, and at length stood upon dry ground where the Matabele had made their camp. But in that fog she saw no Matabele; probably their fires were out, and she chanced to pass between the sentries. Instinctively, more than by reason, she headed for that hillock upon which she had seen the white man's waggon, in the vague hope that it might still be there. On she struggled, still on, till at length she blundered against something soft and warm, and perceived that it was an ox tied to a trek-tow, beyond which were other oxen and a white waggon-cap.

So it was still there! But the white man, where was he? Through the dense mist Benita crept to the disselboom. Then, seeing and hearing nothing, she climbed to the voorkissie and kneeling on it, separated the tent flaps and peered into the waggon. Still she could see nothing because of the mist, yet she heard something, a man breathing in his sleep. Somehow she thought that it was a white man; a Kaffir did not

breathe like that. She did not know what to do, so remained kneeling there. It seemed as though the man who was asleep began to feel her presence, for he muttered to himself--surely the words were English! Then quite suddenly he struck a match and lit a candle which stood in a beer bottle by his side. She could not see his face while he lit the match, for his arm hid it, and the candle burned up slowly. Then the first thing she saw was the barrel of a revolver pointing straight at her.

"Now, my black friend," said a pleasant voice, "down you go or I shoot. One, two! Oh, my God!"

The candle burned up, its light fell upon the white, elfish face of Benita, whose long dark hair streamed about her; it shone in her great eyes. Still she could see nothing, for it dazzled her.

"Oh, my God!" said the voice again. "Benita! Benita! Have you come to tell me that I must join you? Well, I am ready, my sweet, my sweet! Now I shall hear your answer."

"Yes," she whispered, and crawling forward down the cartel Benita fell upon his breast.

For she knew him at last--dead or living she cared not--she knew him, and out of hell crept to him, her heaven and her home!