

XXIII

BENITA GIVES HER ANSWER

"Your answer, Benita," Robert said dreamily, for to him this thing seemed a dream.

"Have I not given it, months ago? Oh, I remember, it was only in my heart, not on my lips, when that blow fell on me! Then afterwards I heard what you had done and I nearly died. I wished that I might die to be with you, but I could not. I was too strong; now I understand the reason. Well, it seems that we are both living, and whatever happens, here is my answer, if it is worth anything to you. Once and for all, I love you. I am not ashamed to say it, because very soon we may be separated for the last time. But I cannot talk now, I have come here to save my father."

"Where is he, Benita?"

"Dying in a cave up at the top of that fortress. I got down by a secret way. Are the Matabele still here?"

"Very much so," he answered. "But something has happened. My guard woke

me an hour ago to say that a messenger had arrived from their king, Lobengula, and now they are talking over the message. That is how you came to get through, otherwise the sentries would have assegaied you, the brutes," and he drew her to him and kissed her passionately for the first time; then, as though ashamed of himself, let her go.

"Have you anything to eat?" she asked. "I--I--am starving. I didn't feel it before, but now----"

"Starving, you starving, while I--look, here is some cold meat which I could not get down last night, and put by for the Kaffirs. Great Heavens! that I should feed you with Kaffirs' leavings! But it is good--eat it."

Benita took the stuff in her fingers and swallowed it greedily; she who for days had lived on nothing but a little biscuit and biltong. It tasted delicious to her--never had she eaten anything so good. And all the while he watched her with glowing eyes.

"How can you look at me?" she said at length. "I must be horrible; I have been living in the dark and crawling through mud. I trod upon a crocodile!" and she shuddered.

"Whatever you are I never want to see you different," he answered

slowly. "To me you are most beautiful."

Even then, wreck as she was, the poor girl flushed, and there was a mist in her eyes as she looked up and said:

"Thank you. I don't care now what happens to me, and what has happened doesn't matter at all. But can we get away?"

"I don't know," he answered; "but I doubt it. Go and sit on the waggon-box for a few minutes while I dress, and we will see."

Benita went. The mist was thinning now, and through it she saw a sight at which her heart sank, for between her and the mount Bambatse Matabele were pouring towards their camp on the river's edge. They were cut off. A couple of minutes later Robert joined her, and as he came she looked at him anxiously in the growing light. He seemed older than when they had parted on the Zanzibar; changed, too, for now his face was serious, and he had grown a beard; also, he appeared to limp.

"I am afraid there is an end," she said, pointing to the Matabele below.

"Yes, it looks like it. But like you, I say, what does it matter now?" and he took her hand in his, adding: "let us be happy while we can if only for a few minutes. They will be here presently."

"What are you?" she asked. "A prisoner?"

"That's it. I was following you when they captured me; for I have been here before and knew the way. They were going to kill me on general principles, only it occurred to one of them who was more intelligent than the rest that I, being a white man, might be able to show them how to storm the place. Now I was sure that you were there, for I saw you standing on that point, though they thought you were the Spirit of Bambatse. So I wasn't anxious to help them, for then--you know what happens when the Matabele are the stormers! But--as you still lived--I wasn't anxious to die either. So I set them to work to dig a hole with their assegais and sharp axes, through granite. They have completed exactly twenty feet of it, and I reckon that there are one hundred and forty to go. Last night they got tired of that tunnel and talked of killing me again, unless I could show them a better plan. Now all the fat is in the fire, and I don't know what is to happen. Hullo! here they come. Hide in the waggon, quick!"

Benita obeyed, and from under cover of the tent where the Matabele could not see her, watched and listened. The party that approached consisted of a chief and about twenty men, who marched behind him as a guard. Benita knew that chief. He was the captain Maduna, he of the royal blood whose life she had saved. By his side was a Natal Zulu, Robert Seymour's driver, who could speak English and acted as interpreter.

"White man," said Maduna, "a message has reached us from our king.

Lobengula makes a great war and has need of us. He summons us back from

this petty fray, this fight against cowards who hide behind walls, whom otherwise we would have killed, everyone, yes, if we sat here till we grew old. So for this time we leave them alone."

Robert answered politely that he was glad to hear it, and wished them a good journey.

"Wish yourself a good journey, white man," was the stern reply.

"Why? Do you desire that I should accompany you to Lobengula?"

"No, you go before us to the kraal of the Black One who is even greater than the child of Moselikatse, to that king who is called Death."

Robert crossed his arms and said: "Say on."

"White man, I promised you life if you would show us how to pierce or climb those walls. But you have made fools of us--you have set us to cut through rock with spears and axes. Yes, to hoe at rock as though it were soil--you who with the wisdom of your people could have taught us some better way. Therefore we must go back to our king disgraced, having failed in his service, and therefore you who have mocked us shall die. Come down now, that we may kill you quietly, and learn whether or no you are a brave man."

Then it was, while her lover's hand was moving towards the pistol hidden beneath his coat, that Benita, with a quick movement, emerged from the waggon in which she crouched, and stood up at his side upon the driving box.

"Ow!" said the Captain. "It is the White Maiden. Now how came she here? Surely this is great magic. Can a woman fly like a bird?" and they stared at her amazed.

"What does it matter how I came, chief Maduna?" she answered in Zulu.

"Yet I will tell you why I came. It was to save you from dipping your spear in the innocent blood, and bringing on your head the curse of the innocent blood. Answer me now. Who gave you and your brother yonder your

lives within that wall when the Makalanga would have torn you limb from limb, as hyenas tear a buck? Was it I or another?"

"Inkosi-kaas--Chieftainess," replied the great Captain, raising his broad spear in salute. "It was you and no other."

"And what did you promise me then, Prince Maduna?"

"Maiden of high birth, I promised you your life and your goods, should you ever fall into my power."

"Does a leader of the Amandabele, one of the royal blood, lie like a Mashona or a Makalanga slave? Does he do worse--tell half the truth only, like a cheat who buys and keeps back half the price?" she asked contemptuously. "Maduna, you promised me not one life, but two, two lives and the goods that belong to both. Ask of your brother there, who was witness of the words."

"Great Heavens!" muttered Robert Seymour to himself, as he looked at Benita standing with outstretched hand and flashing eyes. "Who would have thought that a starved woman could play such a part with death on the hazard?"

"It is as this daughter of white chiefs says," answered the man to whom she had appealed. "When she freed us from the fangs of those dogs, you promised her two lives, my brother, one for yours and one for mine."

"Hear him," went on Benita. "He promised me two lives, and how did this prince of the royal blood keep his promise? When I and the old man, my father, rode hence in peace, he loosed his spears upon us; he hunted us. Yet it was the hunters who fell into the trap, not the hunted."

"Maiden," replied Maduna, in a shamed voice, "that was your fault, not mine. If you had appealed to me I would have let you go. But you killed my sentry, and then the chase began, and ere I knew who you were my runners were out of call."

"Little time had I to ask your mercy; but so be it," said Benita. "I accept your word, and I forgive you that offence. Now fulfil your oath. Begone and leave us in peace."

Still Maduna hesitated.

"I must make report to the king," he said. "What is this white man to you that I should spare him? I give you your life and your father's life, not that of this white man who has tricked us. If he were your father, or your brother, it would be otherwise. But he is a stranger, and belongs to me, not to you."

"Maduna," she asked, "do women such as I am share the waggon of a stranger? This man is more to me than father or brother. He is my husband, and I claim his life."

"Ow!" said the spokesman of the audience, "we understand now. She is his wife, and has a right to him. If she were not his wife she would not be in his waggon. It is plain that she speaks the truth, though how she came here we do not know, unless, as we think, she is a witch," and he smiled at his own cleverness.

"Inkosi-kaas," said Maduna, "you have persuaded me. I give you the life of that white fox, your husband, and I hope that he will not trick you as he has tricked us, and set you to hoe rock instead of soil," and he looked at Robert wrathfully. "I give him to you and all his belongings."



Now, is there anything else that you would ask?"

"Yes," replied Benita coolly, "you have many oxen there which you took from the other Makalanga. Mine are eaten and I need cattle to draw my waggon. I ask a present of twenty of them, and," she added by an afterthought, "two cows with young calves, for my father is sick yonder, and must have milk."

"Oh! give them to her. Give them to her," said Maduna, with a tragic gesture that in any other circumstances would have made Benita laugh. "Give them to her and see that they are good ones, before she asks our shields and spears also--for after all she saved my life."

So men departed to fetch those cows and oxen, which presently were driven in.

While this talk was in progress the great impi of the Matabele was massing for the march, on the flat ground a little to the right of them. Now they began to come past in companies, preceded by the lads who carried the mats and cooking-pots and drove the captured sheep and cattle. By this time the story of Benita, the witch-woman whom they could not kill, and who had mysteriously flown from the top of the peak into their prisoner's waggon, had spread among them. They knew also that it was she who had saved their general from the Makalanga, and those who had heard her admired the wit and courage with which she had pleaded and won her cause. Therefore, as they marched past in their companies,

singing a song of abuse and defiance of the Makalanga who peered at them from the top of the wall, they lifted their great spears in salutation to Benita standing upon the waggon-box.

Indeed, they were a wondrous and imposing spectacle, such a one as few white women have ever seen.

At length all were gone except Maduna and a body-guard of two hundred men. He walked to the front of the waggon and addressed Robert Seymour.

"Listen, you fox who set us to hoe granite," he said indignantly. "You have outwitted us this time, but if ever I meet you again, then you die. Now I have given you your life, but," he added, almost pleadingly, "if you are really brave as white men are said to be, will you not come down and fight me man to man for honour's sake?"

"I think not," answered Robert, when he understood this challenge, "for what chance should I have against so brave a warrior? Also this lady--my wife--needs my help on her journey home."

Maduna turned from him contemptuously to Benita.

"I go," he said, "and fear not; you will meet no Matabele on that journey. Have you more words for me, O Beautiful One, with a tongue of oil and a wit that cuts like steel?"

"Yes," answered Benita. "You have dealt well with me, and in reward I give you of my good luck. Bear this message to your king from the White Witch of Bambatse, for I am she and no other. That he leave these Makalanga, my servants, to dwell unharmed in their ancient home, and that he lift no spear against the White Men, lest that evil which the Molimo foretold to you, should fall upon him."

"Ah!" said Maduna, "now I understand how you flew from the mountain top into this man's waggon. You are not a white woman, you are the ancient Witch of Bambatse herself. You have said it, and with such it is not well to war. Great lady of Magic, Spirit from of old, I salute you, and I thank you for your gifts of life and fortune. Farewell."

Then he, too, stalked away at the head of his guard, so that presently, save for the three Zulu servants and the herd of cattle, Robert and Benita were left utterly alone.

Now, her part played and the victory won, Benita burst into tears and fell upon her lover's breast.

Presently she remembered, and freed herself from his arms.

"I am a selfish wretch," she said. "How dare I be so happy when my father is dead or dying? We must go at once."

"Go where?" asked the bewildered Robert.

"To the top of the mountain, of course, whence I came. Oh! please don't stop to question me, I'll tell you as we walk. Stay," and she called to the Zulu driver, who with an air of utter amazement was engaged in milking one of the gift cows, to fill two bottles with the milk.

"Had we not better shout to the Makalanga to let us in?" suggested Robert, while this was being done, and Benita wrapped some cooked meat in a cloth.

"No, no. They will think I am what I said I was--the Witch of Bambatse, whose appearance heralds misfortune, and fear a trap. Besides, we could not climb the top wall. You must follow my road, and if you can trust them, bring two of those men with you with lanterns. The lad can stop to herd the cattle."

Three minutes later, followed by the two Zulus, they were walking--or rather, running--along the banks of the Zambesi.

"Why do you not come quicker?" she asked impatiently. "Oh, I beg your pardon, you are lame. Robert, what made you lame, and oh! why are you not dead, as they all swore you were, you, you--hero, for I know that part of the story?"

"For a very simple reason, Benita: because I didn't die. When that Kaffir took the watch from me I was insensible, that's all. The sun

brought me to life afterwards. Then some natives turned up, good people in their way, although I could not understand a word they said. They made a stretcher of boughs and carried me for some miles to their kraal inland. It hurt awfully, for my thigh was broken, but I arrived at last. There a Kaffir doctor set my leg in his own fashion; it has left it an inch shorter than the other, but that's better than nothing.

"In that place I lay for two solid months, for there was no white man within a hundred miles, and if there had been I could not have communicated with him. Afterwards I spent another month limping up towards Natal, until I could buy a horse. The rest is very short. Hearing of my reported death, I came as fast as I could to your father's farm, Rooi Krantz, where I learned from the old vrouw Sally that you had taken to treasure-hunting, the same treasure that I told you of on the Zanzibar.

"So I followed your spoor, met the servants whom you had sent back, who told me all about you, and in due course, after many adventures, as they say in a book, walked into the camp of our friends, the Matabele.

"They were going to kill me at once, when suddenly you appeared upon that point of rock, glittering like--like the angel of the dawn. I knew that it must be you, for I had found out about your attempted escape, and how you were hunted back to this place. But the Matabele all thought that it was the Spirit of Bambatse, who has a great reputation in these parts. Well, that took off their attention, and afterwards, as I told

you, it occurred to them that I might be an engineer. You know the rest, don't you?"

"Yes," answered Benita softly. "I know the rest."

Then they plunged into the reeds and were obliged to stop talking, since they must walk in single file. Presently Benita looked up and saw that she was under the thorn which grew in the cleft of the rock. Also, with some trouble she found the bunch of reeds that she had bent down, to mark the inconspicuous hole through which she had crept, and by it her lantern. It seemed weeks since she had left it there.

"Now," she said, "light your candles, and if you see a crocodile, please shoot."