

XXIV

THE TRUE GOLD

"Let me go first," said Robert.

"No," answered Benita. "I know the way; but please do watch for that horrible crocodile."

Then she knelt down and crept into the hole, while after her came Robert, and after him the two Zulus, who protested that they were not ant-bears to burrow under ground. Lifting the lantern she searched the cave, and as she could see no signs of the crocodile, walked on boldly to where the stair began.

"Be quick," she whispered to Robert, for in that place it seemed natural to speak low. "My father is above and near his death. I am dreadfully afraid lest we should be too late."

So they toiled up the endless steps, a very strange procession, for the two Zulus, bold men enough outside, were shaking with fright, till at length Benita clambered out of the trap door on to the floor of the treasure chamber, and turned to help Robert, whose lameness made him somewhat slow and awkward.

"What's all that?" he asked, pointing to the hide sacks, while they

waited for the two scared Kaffirs to join them.

"Oh!" she answered indifferently, "gold, I believe. Look, there is some of it on the floor, over Benita da Ferreira's footsteps."

"Gold! Why, it must be worth----! And who on earth is Benita da Ferreira?"

"I will tell you afterwards. She has been dead two or three hundred years; it was her gold, or her people's, and those are her footprints in the dust. How stupid you are not to understand! Never mind the hateful stuff; come on quickly."

So they passed the door which she had opened that morning, and clambered up the remaining stairway. So full was Benita of terrors that she could never remember how she climbed them. Suppose that the foot of the crucifix had swung to; suppose that her father were dead; suppose that Jacob Meyer had broken into the cave? Well for herself she was no longer afraid of Jacob Meyer. Oh, they were there! The heavy door had begun to close, but mercifully her bit of rock kept it ajar.

"Father! Father!" she cried, running towards the tent.

No answer came. She threw aside the flap, held down the lantern and looked. There he lay, white and still. She was too late!

"He is dead, he is dead!" she wailed. Robert knelt down at her side, and examined the old man, while she waited in an agony.

"He ought to be," he said slowly; "but, Benita, I don't think he is. I can feel his heart stir. No, don't stop to talk. Pour out some of that squareface, and here, mix it with this milk."

She obeyed, and while he held up her father's head, with a trembling hand emptied a little of the drink into his mouth. At first it ran out again, then almost automatically he swallowed some, and they knew that he was alive, and thanked Heaven. Ten minutes later Mr. Clifford was sitting up staring at them with dull and wondering eyes, while outside the two Zulus, whose nerves had now utterly broken down, were contemplating the pile of skeletons in the corner and the white towering crucifix, and loudly lamenting that they should have been brought to perish in this place of bones and ghosts.

"Is it Jacob Meyer who makes that noise?" asked Mr. Clifford faintly.

"And, Benita, where have you been so long, and--who is this gentleman with you? I seem to remember his face."

"He is the white man who was in the waggon, father, an old friend come to life again. Robert, can't you stop the howling of those Kaffirs?

Though I am sure I don't wonder that they howl; I should have liked to do so for days. Oh! father, father, don't you understand me? We are saved, yes, snatched out of hell and the jaws of death."

"Is Jacob Meyer dead, then?" he asked.

"I don't know where he is or what has happened to him, and I don't care, but perhaps we had better find out. Robert, there is a madman outside. Make the Kaffirs pull down that wall, would you? and catch him."

"What wall? What madman?" he asked, staring at her.

"Oh, of course you don't know that, either. You know nothing. I'll show you, and you must be prepared, for probably he will shoot at us."

"It all sounds a little risky, doesn't it?" asked Robert doubtfully.

"Yes, but we must take the risk. We cannot carry my father down that place, and unless we can get him into light and air soon, he will certainly die. The man outside is Jacob Meyer, his partner--you remember him. All these weeks of hardship and treasure-hunting have sent him off his head, and he wanted to mesmerize me and----"

"And what? Make love to you?"

She nodded, then went on:

"So when he could not get his way about the mesmerism and so forth, he threatened to murder my father, and that is why we had to hide in this

cave and build ourselves up, till at last I found the way out."

"Amiable gentleman, Mr. Jacob Meyer, now as always," said Robert flushing. "To think that you should have been in the power of a scoundrel like that! Well, I hope to come square with him."

"Don't hurt him, dear, unless you are obliged. Remember he is not responsible. He thought he saw a ghost here the other day."

"Unless he behaves himself he is likely to see a good many soon," muttered Robert.

Then they went down the cave, and as silently as possible began to work at the wall, destroying in a few minutes what had been built up with so much labour. When it was nearly down the Zulus were told that there was an enemy outside, and that they must help to catch him if necessary, but were not to harm him. They assented gladly enough; indeed, to get out of that cave they would have faced half a dozen enemies.

Now there was a hole right through the wall, and Robert bade Benita stand to one side. Then as soon as his eyes became accustomed to the little light that penetrated there, he drew his revolver and beckoned the Kaffirs to follow. Down the passage they crept, slowly, lest they should be blinded when they came to the glare of the sunshine, while Benita waited with a beating heart.

A little time went by, she never knew how long, till suddenly a rifle shot rang through the stillness. Benita was able to bear no more. She rushed down the winding passage, and presently, just beyond its mouth, in a blurred and indistinct fashion saw that the two white men were rolling together on the ground, while the Kaffirs sprang round watching for an opportunity to seize one of them. At that moment they succeeded, and Robert rose, dusting his hands and knees.

"Amiable gentleman, Mr. Jacob Meyer," he repeated. "I could have killed him as his back was towards me, but didn't because you asked me not. Then I stumbled with my lame leg, and he whipped round and let drive with his rifle. Look," and he showed her where the bullet had cut his ear. "Luckily I got hold of him before he could loose off another."

Benita could find no words, her heart was too full of thankfulness. Only she seized Robert's hand and kissed it. Then she looked at Jacob.

He was lying upon the broad of his back, the two big Zulus holding his arms and legs; his lips were cracked, blue and swollen; his face was almost black, but his eyes still shone bright with insanity and hate.

"I know you," he screamed hoarsely to Robert. "You are another ghost, the ghost of that man who was drowned. Otherwise my bullet would have killed you."

"Yes, Mr. Meyer," Seymour answered, "I am a ghost. Now, you boys, here's

a bit of rope. Tie his hands behind his back and search him. There is a pistol in that pocket."

They obeyed, and presently Meyer was disarmed and bound fast to a tree.

"Water," he moaned. "For days I have had nothing but the dew I could lick off the leaves."

Pitying his plight, Benita ran into the cave and returned presently with a tin of water. One of the Kaffirs held it to his lips, and he drank greedily. Then, leaving one Zulu to watch him, Robert, Benita, and the other Zulu went back, and as gently as they could carried out Mr. Clifford on his mattress, placing him in the shade of a rock, where he lay blessing them feebly, because they had brought him into the light again. At the sight of the old man Meyer's rage blazed up afresh.

"Ah," he screamed, "if only I had killed you long ago, she would be mine now, not that fellow's. It was you who stood between us."

"Look here, my friend," broke in Robert. "I forgive you everything else, but, mad or sane, be good enough to keep Miss Clifford's name off your lips, or I will hand you over to those Kaffirs to be dealt with as you deserve."

Then Jacob understood, and was silent. They gave him more water and food to eat, some of the meat that they had brought with them, which he

devoured ravenously.

"Are you sensible now?" asked Robert when he had done. "Then listen to me; I have some good news for you. That treasure you have been hunting for has been found. We are going to give you half of it, one of the waggons and some oxen, and clear you out of this place. Then if I set eyes on you again before we get to a civilized country, I shoot you like a dog."

"You lie!" said Meyer sullenly. "You want to turn me out into the wilderness to be murdered by the Makalanga or the Matabele."

"Very well," said Robert. "Untie him, boys, and bring him along. I will show him whether I lie."

"Where are they taking me to?" asked Meyer. "Not into the cave? I won't go into the cave; it is haunted. If it hadn't been for the ghost there I would have broken down their wall long ago, and killed that old snake before her eyes. Whenever I went near that wall I saw it watching me."

"First time I ever heard of a ghost being useful," remarked Robert.

"Bring him along. No, Benita, he shall see whether I am a liar."

So the lights were lit, and the two stalwart Zulus hauled Jacob forward, Robert and Benita following. At first he struggled violently, then, on finding that he could not escape, went on, his teeth chattering with

fear.

"It is cruel," remonstrated Benita.

"A little cruelty will not do him any harm," Robert answered. "He has plenty to spare for other people. Besides, he is going to get what he has been looking for so long."

They led Jacob to the foot of the crucifix, where a paroxysm seemed to seize him, then pushed him through the swinging doorway beneath, and down the steep stairs, till once more they all stood in the treasure-chamber.

"Look," said Robert, and, drawing his hunting-knife, he slashed one of the hide bags, whereon instantly there flowed out a stream of beads and nuggets. "Now, my friend, am I a liar?" he asked.

At this wondrous sight Jacob's terror seemed to depart from him, and he grew cunning.

"Beautiful, beautiful!" he said, "more than I thought--sacks and sacks of gold. I shall be a king indeed. No, no, it is all a dream--like the rest. I don't believe it's there. Loose my arms and let me feel it."

"Untie him," said Robert, at the same time drawing his pistol and covering the man; "he can't do us any hurt."

The Kaffirs obeyed, and Jacob, springing at the slashed bag, plunged his thin hands into it.

"No lie," he screamed, "no lie," as he dragged the stuff out and smelt at it. "Gold, gold, gold! Hundreds of thousands of pounds' worth of gold! Let's make a bargain, Englishman, and I won't kill you as I meant to do. You take the girl and give me all the gold," and in his ecstasy he began to pour the glittering ingots over his head and body.

"A new version of the tale of Danaë," began Robert in a sarcastic voice, then suddenly paused, for a change had come over Jacob's face, a terrible change.

It turned ashen beneath the tan, his eyes grew large and round, he put up his hands as though to thrust something from him, his whole frame shivered, and his hair seemed to erect itself. Slowly he retreated backwards, and would have fallen down the unclosed trap-hole had not one of the Kaffirs pushed him away. Back he went, still back, till he struck the further wall and stood there, perhaps for half a minute. He lifted his hand and pointed first to those ancient footprints, some of which still remained in the dust of the floor, and next, as they thought, at Benita. His lips moved fast, he seemed to be pleading, remonstrating, yet--and this was the ghastliest part of it--from them there came no sound. Lastly, his eyes rolled up until only the whites of them were visible, his face became wet as though water had been poured over it,

and, still without a sound, he fell forward and moved no more.

So terrible was the scene that with a howl of fear the two Kaffirs turned and fled up the stairway. Robert sprang to the Jew, dragged him over on to his back, put his hand upon his breast and lifted his eyelids.

"Dead," he said. "Stone dead. Privation, brain excitement, heart failure--that's the story."

"Perhaps," answered Benita faintly; "but really I think that I begin to believe in ghosts also. Look, I never noticed them before, and I didn't walk there, but those footsteps seem to lead right up to him." Then she turned too and fled.

Another week had gone by. The waggons were laden with a burden more precious perhaps than waggons have often borne before. In one of them, on a veritable bed of gold, slept Mr. Clifford, still very weak and ill, but somewhat better than he had been, and with a good prospect of recovery, at any rate for a while. They were to trek a little after dawn, and already Robert and Benita were up and waiting. She touched his arm and said to him:

"Come with me. I have a fancy to see that place once more, for the last time."

So they climbed the hill and the steep steps in the topmost wall that Meyer had blocked--re-opened now--and reaching the mouth of the cave, lit the lamps which they had brought with them, and entered. There were the fragments of the barricade that Benita had built with desperate hands, there was the altar of sacrifice standing cold and grey as it had stood for perhaps three thousand years. There was the tomb of the old monk who had a companion now, for in it Jacob Meyer lay with him, his bones covered by the débris that he himself had dug out in his mad search for wealth; and there the white Christ hung awful on His cross. Only the skeletons of the Portuguese were gone, for with the help of his Kaffirs Robert had moved them every one into the empty treasure-chamber, closing the trap beneath, and building up the door above, so that there they might lie in peace at last.

In this melancholy place they tarried but a little while, then, turning their backs upon it for ever, went out and climbed the granite cone to watch the sun rise over the broad Zambesi. Up it came in glory, that same sun which had shone upon the despairing Benita da Ferreira, and upon the English Benita when she had stood there in utter hopelessness, and seen the white man captured by the Matabele.

Now, different was their state indeed, and there in that high place, whence perhaps many a wretched creature had been cast to death, whence certainly the Portuguese maiden had sought her death, these two happy beings were not ashamed to give thanks to Heaven for the joy which it

had vouchsafed to them, and for their hopes of life full and long to be travelled hand in hand. Behind them was the terror of the cave, beneath them were the mists of the valley, but above them the light shone and rolled and sparkled, and above them stretched the eternal sky!

They descended the pillar, and near the foot of it saw an old man sitting. It was Mambo, the Molimo of the Makalanga: even when they were still far away from him they knew his snow-white head and thin, ascetic face. As they drew near Benita perceived that his eyes were closed, and whispered to Robert that he was asleep. Yet he had heard them coming, and even guessed her thought.

"Maiden," he said in his gentle voice, "maiden who soon shall be a wife, I do not sleep, although I dream of you as I have dreamt before. What did I say to you that day when first we met? That for you I had good tidings; that though death was all about you, you need not fear; that in this place you who had known great sorrow should find happiness and rest. Yet, maiden, you would not believe the words of the Munwali, spoken by his prophet's lips, as he at your side, who shall be your husband, would not believe me in years past when I told him that we should meet again."

"Father," she answered, "I thought your rest was that which we find only in the grave."

"You would not believe," he went on without heeding her, "and therefore

you tried to fly, and therefore your heart was torn with terror and with agony, when it should have waited for the end in confidence and peace."

"Father, my trial was very sore."

"Maiden, I know it, and because it was so sore that patient Spirit of Bambatse bore with you, and through it all guided your feet aright. Yes, with you has that Spirit gone, by day, by night, in the morning and in the evening. Who was it that smote the man who lies dead yonder with horror and with madness when he would have bent your will to his and made you a wife to him? Who was it that told you the secret of the treasure-pit, and what footsteps went before you down its stair? Who was it that led you past the sentries of the Amandabele and gave you wit and power to snatch your lord's life from Maduna's bloody hand? Yes, with you it has gone and with you it will go. No more shall the White Witch stand upon the pillar point at the rising of the sun, or in the shining of the moon."

"Father, I have never understood you, and I do not understand you now," said Benita. "What has this spirit to do with me?"

He smiled a little, then answered slowly:

"That I may not tell you; that you shall learn one day, but never here. When you also have entered into silence, then you shall learn. But I say to you that this shall not be till your hair is as white as mine, and

your years are as many. Ah! you thought that I had deserted you, when fearing for your father's life you wept and prayed in the darkness of the cave. Yet it was not so, for I did but suffer the doom which I had read to fulfil itself as it must do."

He rose to his feet and, resting on his staff, laid one withered hand upon the head of Benita.

"Maiden," he said, "we meet no more beneath the sun. Yet because you have brought deliverance to my people, because you are sweet and pure and true, take with you the blessing of Munwali, spoken by the mouth of his servant Mambo, the old Molimo of Bambatse. Though from time to time you must know tears and walk in the shade of sorrows, long and happy shall be your days with him whom you have chosen. Children shall spring up about you, and children's children, and with them also shall the blessing go. The gold you white folk love is yours, and it shall multiply and give food to the hungry and raiment to those that are a-cold. Yet in your own heart lies a richer store that cannot melt away, the countless treasure of mercy and of love. When you sleep and when you wake Love shall take you by the hand, till at length he leads you through life's dark cave to that eternal house of purest gold which soon or late those that seek it shall inherit," and with his staff he pointed to the glowing morning sky wherein one by one little rosy clouds floated upwards and were lost.

To Robert and to Benita's misty eyes they looked like bright-winged

angels throwing wide the black doors of night, and heralding that
conquering glory at whose advent despair and darkness flee away.