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Allan Quatermain

By H. RIDER HAGGARD.

AUTHOR OF "KING SOLOMON'S MINES," "SHE," "JESS," "THE WITCH'S HEAD," ETC.

CHAPTER XII—CONTINUED.

As this lovely pair swept onward to their respective thrones, amid the deep attentive silence of the court, I was bound to confess to myself that they did indeed fulfill my idea of royalty. Royal they were in every way—in form, in grace and queenly dignity, and in the barbaric splendor of their attendant pomp. But methought that they needed no guards or gold to proclaim their power and bind the loyalty of wayward men. A glance from those bright eyes or a smile from those sweet lips, and while the red blood runs in the veins of youth women such as these will never lack subjects ready to do their biddings to the death.

But, after all, they were women first and queens afterward, and therefore not devoid of curiosity. As they passed to their seats I saw both of them glance swiftly in our direction. I saw, too, that their eyes passed by me, seeing nothing to charm them in the person of an insignificant and grizzled old man. Then they looked with evident astonishment on the grim form of old Umslopogaas, who raised his ax in salutation. Attracted next by the splendor of Good's apparel, for a second their glance rested on him, like a humming moth upon a flower, then off it darted to where Sir Henry Curtis stood, the sunlight from a window playing upon his yellow hair and peaked beard, and marking out the outlines of his massive frame against the twilight of the somewhat gloomy hall. He raised his eyes and they met the fair Nyleptha's full, and thus for the first time the goodliest man and woman that it has ever been my lot to see looked one upon the other. And why it was I know not, but I saw the swift blood run up beneath Nyleptha's skin as the pink lights run up the morning sky. Red grew her fair bosom and shapely arm, red the swan like neck; the rounded cheeks blushed red as the petals of a rose, and then the crimson flood sank back to whence it came, and left her pale and trembling.

I glanced at Sir Henry. He, too, had colored up to the eyes.

"On my word!" thought I to myself, "the ladies have come on the stage, and now we may look to the plot to develop itself." And I sighed and shook my head, knowing that the beauty of a woman is like the beauty of the lightning—a destructive thing and a cause of desolation. By the time that I had finished my reflections both the queens were on the thrones, for all this had happened in about six seconds. Once more the unseen trumpets blared out, and then the court seated itself and Queen Sorais motioned to us to do likewise.

Next from among the crowd, whither he had withdrawn, stepped forward our guide, the old gentleman who had towed us ashore, holding by the hand the girl whom we had first seen and afterwards rescued from the hippopotamus. Having made obeisance, he proceeded to address the queens, evidently describing to them the way and place where we had been found. It was most amusing to watch the astonishment, not unmixed with fear, reflected upon their faces as they listened to his tale. Clearly they could not understand how we had reached the lake, and been found floating on it, and were inclined to attribute our presence to supernatural causes. Then the narrative proceeded, as I judged from the frequent appeals that our guide made to the girl, to the point where we had shot the hippopotami, and we at once perceived that there was something very wrong about those hippopotami, for the history was frequently interrupted by indignant exclamations from the little group of white robed priests, and even from the courtiers, while the two queens listened with an amazed expression, especially when our guide pointed to the rifles in our hands as being the means of destruction. And here, to make matters clear, I may as well explain at once that the inhabitants of Zu-Vendis are sun worshipers, and that for some reason or other the hippopotamus is a sacred animal among them. Not that they do not kill it, because at a certain season of the year they slaughter thousands—which are specially preserved in large lakes up the country—and use their hides for armor for soldiers; but this does not prevent them from considering these animals as sacred to the sun. Now, as ill luck would have it, the particular hippopotami we had shot were a family of tame animals that were kept at the mouth of the port, and daily fed by priests whose special duty it was to attend to them. When we shot them I thought that the brutes were suspiciously tame, and this was, as we afterwards ascertained, the cause of it. Thus it came about that in attempting to show off we had committed sacrilege of a most aggravated nature.

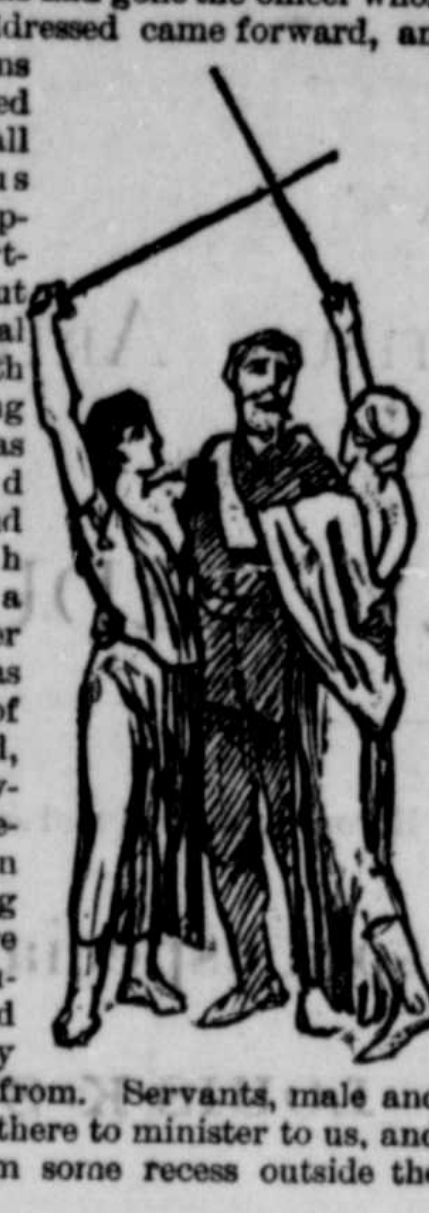
When our guide had finished his tale, the old man with the long beard and round cap, whose appearance I have already described, and who was, as I have said, the high priest of the country, and known by the name of Agon, rose and commenced an impassioned harangue. I did not like the look of his cold gray eye as he fixed it on us. I should have liked it still less had I known that in the name of the outraged majesty of his god he was demanding that the whole lot of us should be offered up as a sacrifice by means of being burnt alive.

After he had finished speaking the Queen Sorais addressed him in a soft and musical voice, and appeared, to judge from his gestures of dissent, to be putting the other side of the question before him. Then Nyleptha spoke in liquid accents. Little did we know that she was pleading for our lives. Finally, she turned and addressed a tall, soldier like man of middle age with a black beard and a long, plain sword, whose name, as we afterwards learned, was Nasta, and who was the greatest lord in the country, apparently appealing to him for support. Now when Sir Henry had caught her eye and she had blushed so rosy red, I had seen that the incident had not escaped this man's notice, and what is more, that it was eminently disagreeable to him, for he bit his lip and his hand tightened on his sword hilt. Afterwards we learned that he was an aspirant for the hand of this queen in marriage, which accounted for it. This being so, Nyleptha could not have appealed to a worse person, for speaking in slow, heavy tones, he appeared to confirm all that the High Priest Agon said. As he spoke, Sorais put her elbow on her knee, and resting her chin on her hand, looked at him with a suppressed smile upon her lips, as though she saw through the man, and was determined to be his match; but Nyleptha grew very angry. Her cheek flushed, her eyes flashed, and she did indeed look lovely. Finally she turned to Agon and seemed to give some sort of qualified assent, for he bowed at her words; and as she spoke she moved her hands as though to emphasize her words; while all the time Sorais kept her chin on her hand and smiled. Then suddenly Nyleptha made a sign and the trumpets blew again, and everybody rose to leave the hall save ourselves and the guards, whom she motioned to stay.

When they were all gone she bent forward and, smiling sweetly, partially by signs and partly by exclamations, made it clear to us that she was very anxious to know where we came from. The difficulty was how to explain, but at last an idea struck me. I had my large pocket book in my pocket and a pencil. Taking it out, I made a little sketch of a lake, and then as best I could, drew the underground river and the lake at the other end. When I had done this I advanced to the steps of the throne and gave it to her. She understood it at once and clapped her hands with delight, and then descending from the throne took it to her sister Sorais, who also evidently understood. Next she took the pencil from me, and after examining it with curiosity, proceeded to make a series of delightful little sketches, the first representing herself holding out both hands in welcome, and a man uncommonly like Sir Henry taking them. Next she drew a lovely little picture of a hippopotamus rolling about dying in the water, and of an individual, in whom we had no difficulty in recognizing Agon, the high priest, holding up his hands in horror on the bank. Then followed a most alarming picture of a dreadful fiery furnace and of the same figure, Agon, poking us into it with a forked stick. This picture perfectly horrified me, but I was a little reassured when she nodded sweetly and proceeded to make a fourth drawing—of a man again uncommonly like Sir Henry, and of two women, in whom I recognized Sorais and herself, each with one arm around him, and holding a sword in protection over him. To all of these Sorais, who I saw was employed in carefully taking us all in—especially Curtis—signified her approval by nodding.

At last Nyleptha drew a final sketch of a rising sun, indicating that she must go, and that we should meet on the following morning; whereat Sir Henry looked so disappointed that she saw it, and I suppose by way of consolation, extended her hand to him to kiss, which he did with pious fervor. At the same time Sorais, of whom Good had never taken his eyeglass during the whole indaba (interview), rewarded him by giving him her hand to kiss, though while she did so her eyes were fixed upon Sir Henry. I am glad to say that I was not implicated in these proceedings; neither of them gave me her hand to kiss.

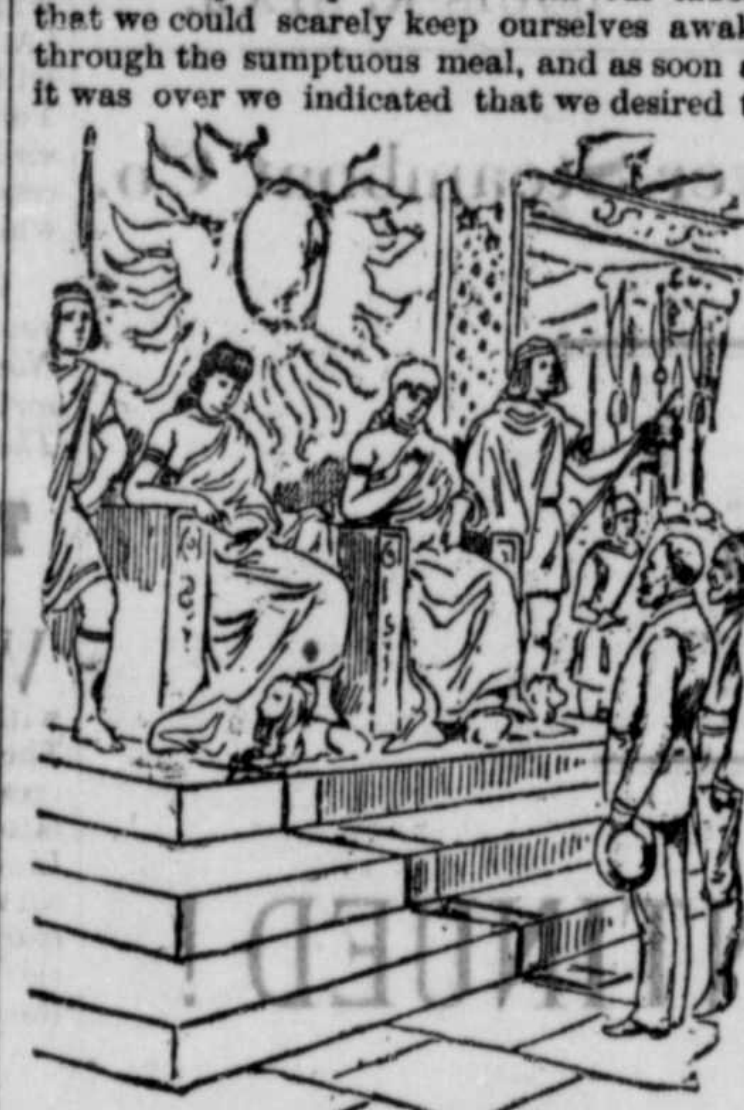
Then Nyleptha turned and addressed the man who appeared to be in command of the body guard, apparently from her manner and his frequent obeisances, giving him very stringent and careful orders; after which, with a somewhat coquettish nod and smile, she left the hall, followed by Sorais and most of the guards.



When the queens had gone the officer whom Nyleptha had addressed came forward, and with many tokens of deep respect led us from the hall through various passages to a sumptuous set of apartments opening out of a large central room lighted with brazen swinging lamps (for it was now dusk), and richly carpeted and strewn with couches. On a table in the center of the room was set a profusion of food and fruit, and, what is more, flowers. There was delicious wine also in ancient looking sealed earthenware flagons, and beautifully chased golden and ivory cups to drink it from. Servants, male and female, also were there to minister to us, and while we ate, from some recess outside the apartment

> The silver lute did speak between the trumpet's
> lordly blowing;

and altogether we found ourselves in a sort of earthly paradise, which was only disturbed by the vision of that disgusting high priest who intended to commit us to the flames. But so very weary were we with our labors that we could scarcely keep ourselves awake through the sumptuous meal, and as soon as it was over we indicated that we desired to sleep. So they led us off, and would have given us a room each, but we made it clear that we would sleep two in a room. As a further precaution against surprise we left Umslopogaas with his ax to sleep in the main chamber, near the curtained doorways leading to the apartments which we occupied respectively, Good and I in the one and Sir Henry and Alphonse in the other. Then throwing off our clothes, with the exception of the mail shirts, which we considered it safer to keep on, we flung ourselves down upon the low and luxurious couches, and drew the silk embroidered coverlids over us.



The Sister Queens.

In two minutes I was just dropping off when I was aroused by Good's voice.

"I say, Quatermain," he said, "did you ever see such eyes?"

"Eyes," I said, crossly; "what eyes?"

"Why, the queen's, of course! Sorais, I mean—at least I think that is her name."

"Oh, I don't know," I yawned; "I didn't notice them much; I suppose they are good eyes," and again I dropped off.

Five minutes or so elapsed, and I was once more awakened.

"I say, Quatermain," said the voice.

"Well," I answered, testily, "what is it now?"

"Did you notice her ankle? The shape"—

This was more than I could stand. By my bed stood the veldtschoons I had been wearing. Moved quite beyond myself, I took them up and threw them straight at Good's head—and hit it.

After that I slept the sleep of the just, and a very heavy sleep it must be. As for Good, I don't know if he went to sleep, or if he continued to pass Sorais' beauties in mental review, and what is more, I don't care.

CHAPTER XIII.

ABOUT THE ZU-VENDI PEOPLE.

And now the curtain is down for a few hours, and the actors in this novel drama are plunged in dewy sleep. Perhaps we should except Nyleptha, whom the reader may, if poetically inclined, imagine lying in her bed of state encompassed by her maidens, tiring women, guards and all other people and appurtenances that surround a throne, and yet not able to slumber for thinking of the strangers who had visited a country where no such strangers had ever come before, and wondering, as she lay awake, who they were and what their past had been, and if she was ugly compared to the women of their native place. I, however, not being poetically inclined, will take advantage of the lull to give some account of the people among whom we found ourselves, compiled, needless to state, from information which we subsequently collected.

The name of this country, to begin at the beginning, is Zu-Vendis, from Zu, "yellow," and Vendis, "place or country." Why it is called the Yellow Country I have never been able to ascertain accurately, nor do the inhabitants themselves know. Three reasons are, however, given, each of which would suffice to account for it. The first is that the name owes its origin to the great quantity of gold that is found in the land. Indeed, in this respect Zu-Vendis is a veritable Eldorado, the precious metal being extraordinarily plentiful.

The second reason given is, that at certain seasons of the year the native grasses of the country, which are very sweet and good, turn as yellow as ripe corn; and the third arises from a tradition that the people were originally yellow skinned, but grew white after living for many generations upon these high lands. Zu-Vendis is a country about the size of France, is, roughly speaking, oval in shape, and on every side cut off from the surrounding territory by illimitable forests of impenetrable thorn, beyond which are said to be hundreds of miles of morasses, deserts and great mountains. It is, in short, a huge, high table land rising up in the center of the dark continent, much as in southern Africa flat topped mountains rise from the level of the surrounding veldt. Milosis itself lies, according to my aneroid, at a level of about 9,000 feet above the sea, but most of the land is even higher, the greatest elevation of the open country being, I believe, about 11,000 feet. As a consequence the climate is, comparatively speaking, a cold one, being very similar to that of southern England, only brighter and not so rainy. The land is, however, exceedingly fertile, and grows all cereals and temperate fruits and timber to perfection; and in the lower lying parts even produces a hardy variety of sugar cane. Coal is found in great abundance, and in many places crops out from the surface; and so is pure marble, both black and white. The same may be said of almost every metal except silver, which is scarce, and only to be obtained from a range of mountains in the north.

Zu-Vendis comprises in her boundaries a great variety of scenery, including two ranges of snowclad mountains, one on the western boundary beyond the impenetrable belt of thorn forest, and the other piercing the country from north to south, and passing at a distance of about eighty miles from Milosis, from which town its higher peaks are distinctly visible. This range forms the chief watershed of the land. There are also three large lakes—the biggest, namely that whereon we emerged, and which is named Milosis after the city, covering some 200 square miles of country—and numerous small ones, some of them salt.

The population of this favored land is, comparatively speaking, dense, numbering at a rough estimate from 10,000,000 to 12,000,000. As to their descent, I can give no certain information. Their written records, which extend back for about 1,000 years, give no hint of it. One very ancient chronicler does indeed, in alluding to some old tradition that existed in his day, talk of it as having probably originally "come down with the people from the coast," but that may mean little or nothing. In short, the origin of the Zu-Vendi is lost in the mists of time. Whence they came or of what race they are no man knows. Their architecture and some of their sculptures suggest an Egyptian or possibly an Assyrian origin; but it is well known that their present remarkable style of building has only sprung up within the last 800 years, and they certainly retain no traces of Egyptian theology or customs. Again, their appearance and some of their habits are rather Jewish; but here again it seems hardly conceivable that they should have utterly lost all traces of the Jewish religion. Still, for aught I know, they may be one of the lost ten tribes whom people are so fond of discovering all over the world, or they may not. I do not know, and so can only describe them as I find them, and leave wiser heads than mine to make what they can out of it, if indeed this account should ever be read at all, which is exceedingly doubtful.

In addition to being an agricultural people the Zu-Vendi are, oddly enough, excessively warlike; and as they cannot, from the exigency of their position, make war upon other nations, they fight among each other like the famed Kilkenny cats, with the happy result that the population never outgrows the power of the country to support it. This habit of theirs is largely fostered by the political condition of the country. The monarchy is nominally an absolute one, save in so far as it is tempered by the power of the priests and the informal council of the great lords; but, as in many other such institutions, the king's writ does not run unquestioned throughout the length and breadth of the land.

Zu-Vendis has had its king makers as well as England, a fact that will be appreciated when I state that eight different dynasties have sat upon the throne during the last 1,000 years, every one of which took its rise from some noble family that succeeded in grasping the purple after a sanguinary struggle. At the date of our arrival in the country things were a little better than they had been for some centuries, the last king, the father of Nyleptha and Sorais, having been an exceptionally able and vigorous ruler, and, as a consequence, kept down the power of the priests and nobles. On his death, two years before we reached Zu-Vendis, the twin sisters, his children, were, following an ancient precedent, called to the throne, since an attempt to exclude either would instantly have provoked a sanguinary civil war; but it was generally felt in the country that this measure was a most unsatisfactory one, and could hardly be expected to be permanent. Indeed, as it was, the various intrigues that were set on foot by ambitious nobles to obtain the hand of one or other of the queens in marriage had disquieted the country, and the general opinion was that there would be bloodshed before long.

I will now pass on to the question of the Zu-Vendi religion, which is nothing more or less than sun worship of a pronounced and highly developed character. Around this sun worship is grouped the entire social system of the Zu-Vendi. It sends its roots through every institution and custom of the land. From the cradle to the grave the Zu-Vendi follows the sun in every sense of the word.

The priests of the sun do not marry, but are recruited by young men specially devoted to the work by their parents and supported by the state. The nomination to the higher offices of the priesthood lies with the crown, but once appointed, the nominees cannot be dispossessed, and it is scarcely too much to say that they really rule the land. To begin with, they are a united body sworn to obedience and secrecy, so that an order issued by the high priest at Milosis will be instantly and unhesitatingly acted upon by the resident priest of a little country town three or four hundred miles off. They are the judges of the land, criminal and civil, an appeal lying only to the lord paramount of the district and from him to the king, and they have, of course, practically unlimited jurisdiction over religious and moral offenses, together with a right of excommunication, which, as in the faiths of more highly civilized lands, is a very effective weapon. Indeed, their rights and powers are almost unlimited; but I may as well state here that the priests of the sun are wise in their generation and do not push things too far. It is but very seldom that they go to extremes against anybody, being more inclined to exercise the prerogative of mercy than run the risk of exasperating the powerful and vigorous minded people on whose neck they have set their yoke, lest it should rise and break it off altogether.

Another source of the power of the priests is their practical monopoly of learning, and their very considerable astronomical knowledge, which enables them to keep a hold on the popular mind by predicting eclipses and even comets. In Zu-Vendis only a few of the upper classes can read and write, but nearly all the priests have this knowledge, and are therefore looked upon as learned men.

The social system of the Zu-Vendi allows considerable liberty to the individual, provided he does not offend against the laws and customs of the country. They are polygamous in theory, though most of them have only one wife on account of the expense. By law a man is bound to provide a separate establishment for each wife. The first wife also is the legal wife, and her children are said to be "of the house of the father." The children of the other wives are of the houses of their respective mothers. This does not, however, imply any slur upon either mother or children. Again, a first wife can, on entering into the marriage state, make a bargain that her husband shall marry no other wife. This, however, is very rarely done, as the women are the great upholders of polygamy, which not only provides for their surplus numbers, but gives greater importance to the first wife, who is thus practically the head of several households. Marriage is looked upon as primarily a civil contract, and, subject to certain conditions and to a proper provision for children, is dissoluble at the will of both contracting parties, the divorce, or "unloosing," being formally and ceremoniously accomplished by going through certain portions of the marriage ceremony backward.

The Zu-Vendi are on the whole a very kindly, pleasant and light hearted people. They are not great traders and care little about money, only working to earn enough to support themselves in that class of life in which they were born. They are exceedingly conservative, and look with disfavor on changes. Their legal tender is silver, cut into little squares of different weights; gold is the baser coin, and is about of the same value as our silver. It is, however, much prized for its beauty, and largely used for ornaments and decorative purposes. Most of the trade, however, is carried on by means of sale and barter, payment being made in kind. Agriculture is the great business of the country, and is really well understood and carried out, most of the available acreage being under cultivation. Great attention is also given to the breeding of cattle and horses, the latter being unsurpassed by any I have ever seen either in Europe or Africa.

And now comes a question which I find some difficulty in answering. Are the Zu-Vendi a civilized or a barbarous people? Sometimes I think the one, sometimes the other. In some branches of art they have attained the very highest proficiency. Take, for instance, their buildings and their statuary. I do not think that the latter can be equaled either in beauty or imaginative power anywhere in the world; and as for the former, it may have been rivaled in ancient Egypt, but I am sure that it has never been since. But, on the other hand, they are totally ignorant of many other arts. Till Sir Henry, who happened to know something about it, showed them how to do it by mixing silica and lime, they could not make a piece of glass, and their crockery is rather primitive. A water clock is their nearest approach to a watch; indeed, ours delighted them exceedingly. They know nothing about steam, electricity or gunpowder, and, mercifully for themselves, nothing about printing or the penny post. Thus they are spared many evils; for of a truth our age has learned the wisdom of the old world saying, "He who increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow."

As regards their religion, it is a natural one for imaginative people, who know no better, and might therefore be expected to turn to the sun and worship him as the all father, but it cannot justly be called elevating or spiritual. It is true that they do sometimes speak of the sun as the "garment of the spirit;" but it is a vague term, and what they really adore is the fiery orb himself. They also call him the "hope of eternity;" but here again the meaning is vague, and I doubt if the phrase conveys any very clear impression to their minds. Some of them do indeed believe in a future life for the good—I know that Nyleptha does firmly—but it is a private faith, arising from the promptings of the spirit, not an essential of their creed. So, on the whole, I cannot say that I consider this sun worship as a religion indicative of a civilized people, however magnificent and imposing its ritual, or however moral and high sounding the maxims of its priests, many of whom, I am sure, have their own opinions on the whole subject; though of course they have nothing but praise for a system which provides them with so many of the good things of this world.

There are now only two more matters to which I need allude, namely, the language and the system of caligraphy. As for the former, it is soft sounding, and very rich and flexible. Sir Henry says that it sounds something like modern Greek, but of course it has no connection with it. It is easy to acquire, being simple in its construction, and a peculiar quality about it is its euphony, and the way in which the sound of the words adapts itself to the meaning to be expressed. Long before we mastered the language we could frequently make out what was meant by the ring of the sentence. It is on this account that the language lends itself so well to poetical declamation, of which these remarkable people are very fond. The Zu-Vendi alphabet seems, Sir Henry says, to be derived, like every other known system of letters, from a Phœnician source, and therefore more remotely still from the ancient Egyptian hieratic writing. Whether or no this is a fact I cannot say, not being learned in such matters. All I know about it is that their alphabet consists of eighteen hieroglyphics, each of which is, to my mind, more puzzling and cumbersome than the last. But as the people of Zu-Vendis are not given to the writing of novels, or of anything except business documents and records of the briefest character, it answers their purpose well enough.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FLOWER TEMPLE.

It was half past eight by my watch when I woke on the morning following our arrival at Milosis, having slept almost exactly twelve hours, and I must say that I did indeed feel better. Ah, what a blessed thing is sleep! and what a difference twelve hours of it or so makes to us after days and nights of toil and danger. It is like going to bed one man and getting up another.

I sat up upon my silken couch—never had I slept upon such a bed before—and the first thing that I saw was Good's eyeglass fixed on me from the recesses of his silken couch. There was nothing else of him to be seen except his eyeglass, but I knew from the look of it that he was awake, and waiting till I woke up to begin.

"I say, Quatermain," he commenced, sure enough, "did you observe her skin? It is as smooth as the back of an ivory hair brush."

"Now, look here, Good," I remonstrated, when there came a knocking at the door, which, on being opened, admitted a functionary, who signified by signs that he was there to lead us to the bath. We gladly consented, and were conducted to a delightful marble chamber, with a pool of running crystal water in the center of it, into which we gayly plunged. When we had bathed we returned to our apartment and dressed, and then went into the central room where we had supped on the previous evening, to find a morning meal already prepared for us, and a capital meal it was, though I should be puzzled to describe the dishes. After breakfast we lounged round and admired the tapestries and carpets and some pieces of statuary that were placed about, wondering the while what was going to happen next. Indeed, by this time our minds were in such a state of complete bewilderment that we were, as a matter of fact, ready for anything that might arrive. As for our sense of astonishment, it was pretty well obliterated. While we were still thus engaged, our friend the captain of the guard presented himself, and with many obeisances signified that we were to follow him, which we did, not without doubts and heart searchings—for we guessed that the time had come when we should have to settle the bill for those confounded hippopotami with our cold eyed friend Agon, the high priest. However, there was no help for it, and personally I took great comfort in the promise of the protection of the sister queens, knowing that if ladies have a will they can generally find a way; so off we started as though we liked it. A minute's walk through a passage and an outer court brought us to the great double gates of the palace that open on to the wide highway which runs up hill through the heart of Milosis to the Temple of the Sun, a mile away, and thence down the slope on the farther side of the temple to the outer wall of the city.

These gates are very large and massive, and an extraordinarily beautiful work in metal. Between them—for one set is placed at the entrance to an interior, and one at that of the exterior wall—is a fosse, forty-five feet in width. This fosse is filled with water and spanned by a drawbridge, which, when lifted, makes the palace nearly impregnable to anything except siege guns. As we came one half of the wide gates were flung open, and we passed over the drawbridge, and presently stood gazing up one of the most imposing, if not the most imposing, roadways in the world. It is 100 feet from curb to curb, and on either side, not cramped and crowded together, as is our European fashion, but each standing in its own grounds, and built equidistant from and in similar style to the rest, are a series of splendid single storied mansions, all of red granite. These are the town houses of the nobles of the court, and stretch away in unbroken lines for a mile or more till the eye is arrested by the glorious vision of the Temple of the Sun that crowns the hill and heads the roadway.

As we stood gazing at this splendid sight, of which more anon, there suddenly dashed up to the gateway four chariots, each drawn by two white horses. The first and last of these chariots were occupied by guards, but the center two were empty, except for the driver, and to these we were conducted. Alphonse and I got into the first, and Sir Henry, Good and Umslopogaas into the one behind, and then suddenly off we went, and we did go. Among the Zu-Vendi it is not usual to trot horses either riding or driving—especially when the journey to be made is a short one—they go at full gallop. As soon as we were seated the driver called out, the horses sprang forward, and we were whirled away at a speed sufficient to take one's breath, and which, till I got accustomed to it, kept me in momentary fear of an upset. As for the wretched Alphonse, he clung with a despairing face to the side of what he called this "devil of a flacre," thinking that every moment was his last. Presently it occurred to him to ask where we were going, and I told him that, so far as I could ascertain, we were going to be sacrificed by burning. You should have seen his face as he grasped the side of the vehicle and cried out in his terror.

But the wild looking charioteer only leaned forward over his flying steeds and shouted; and the air, as it went singing past, bore away the sound of Alphonse's lamentations.

And now before us, in all its marvelous splendor and dazzling loveliness, shone out the Temple of the Sun—the peculiar pride of the Zu-Vendi, to whom it was what Solomon's, or rather Herod's, Temple was to the Jews. The wealth and skill and labor of generations had been given to the building of this wonderful place, which had been only finally completed within the last fifty years.

The building itself is of pure and polished white marble, which shows out in marvelous contrast to the red granite of the frowning city, on whose brow it glistens indeed like an imperial diadem upon the forehead of a dusky queen. The outer surface of the dome and of the twelve petal courts is covered entirely with thin sheets of beaten gold; and from the extreme point of the roof of each of these petals a glorious golden form with a trumpet in its hand and wide spread wings is figured in the very act of soaring into space. I really must leave whoever reads this to imagine the surpassing glory of these golden roofs flashing when the sun strikes—flashing like a thousand fires aflame on a mountain of polished marble—so fiercely that the reflection can be clearly seen from the great peaks of the range a hundred miles away.

It is a marvelous sight, this golden flower upborne upon the cool white marble walls, and I doubt if the world can show such another. What makes the whole effect even more gorgeous is that a belt of 150 feet around the marble wall of the temple is planted with an indigenous species of sunflower, which were at the time when we first saw them a sheet of golden bloom.

The main entrance to this wonderful place is between the two northernmost of the rays or petal courts, and is protected first by the usual bronze gates, and then by doors made of solid marble, beautifully carved with allegorical subjects and overlaid with gold. When these are passed there is only the thickness of the wall, which is, however, twenty-five feet (for the Zu-Vendi build for all time), and another slight door, also of white marble, introduced in order to avoid causing a visible gap in the inner skin of the wall, and you stand in the circular hall under the great dome. Advancing to the central altar you look upon as beautiful a sight as the imagination of man can conceive. You are in the middle of the holy place, and above you the great white marble dome (for the inner skin, like the outer, is of polished marble throughout) arches away in graceful curves something like that of St. Paul's in London, only at a slighter angle, and from the funnel like opening at the exact apex a bright beam of light pours down upon the golden altar. At the east and the west are other altars, and other beams of light stab the sacred twilight to the heart. In every direction, white, mystic, wonderful, open out the ray like courts, each pierced through by a single arrow of light that serves to illumine its lofty silence and dimly to reveal the monuments of the mighty dead.

Overcome at so awe inspiring a sight, the vast loveliness of which thrills the nerves like a glance from beauty's eyes, you turn to the central golden altar, in the midst of which, though you cannot see it now, there burns a pale but steady flame crowned with curls of faint blue smoke. It is of marble overlaid with pure gold, in shape round like the sun, four feet in height and thirty-six in circumference. Here also, hinged to the foundations of the altar, are twelve petals of beaten gold. All night and, except at one hour, all day also, these petals are closed over the altar itself exactly as the petals of a water lily close over the yellow crown in stormy weather, but when the sun at midday pierces through the funnel in the dome and lights upon the golden flower, the petals open and reveal the hidden mystery, only to close again when the ray has passed.

Nor is this all. Standing in semicircles, at equal distances from each other on the north and south of the sacred place, are ten golden angels, or female winged forms, exquisitely shaped and draped. These figures, which are slightly larger than life size, stand with bent heads in an attitude of adoration, their faces shadowed by their wings, and are most imposing and of exceeding beauty.

There is but one thing further that calls for description in this altar, which is, that to the east the flooring in front of it is not of pure white marble, as elsewhere throughout the building, but of solid brass; and this is also the case in front of the other two altars.

At the temple gates our party was received by a guard of soldiers, who appeared to be under the orders of a priest; and by them we were conducted into one of the ray or "petal" courts, as the priests call them, and there left for at least half an hour. Here we conferred together, and realizing that we stood in great danger of our lives, determined if any attempt should be made upon us, to sell them as dearly as we could—Umslopogaas announcing his fixed intention of committing sacrilege on the person of Agon, the high priest, by splitting his venerable head with Inkosi-kaas. From where we stood we could perceive that an immense multitude were pouring into the temple, evidently in expectation of some unusual event, and I could not help fearing that we had to do with it. And here I may explain that every day, when the sunlight falls upon the central altar, and the trumpets sound, a burnt sacrifice is offered to the sun, consisting generally of the carcass of a sheep or an ox, or sometimes of fruit or corn. This event comes off about midday; not always exactly at that hour, but as Zu-Vendis is situated not far from the line, although—being so high above the sea it is very temperate—midday and the falling of the sunlight on the altar were generally simultaneous. Today the sacrifice was to take place at about eight minutes past twelve.

Just at 12 o'clock a priest appeared, and made a sign, and the officer of the guard signified to us that we were expected to advance, which we did with the best grace that we could muster, all except Alphonse, whose irrepressible teeth instantly began to chatter. In a few seconds we were out of the court and looking at a vast see of human faces stretching away to the farthest limits of the great circle, all straining to catch a glimpse of the mysterious strangers who had committed sacrilege; the first strangers, mind you, who, to the knowledge of the multitude, had ever set foot in Zu-Vendis since such time that the memory of man runneth not to the contrary.

As we appeared there was a murmur throughout the vast crowd that went echoing away up the great dome, and we saw a visible blush of excitement grow on the thousands of faces, like a pink light on a stretch of pale cloud, and a very curious effect it was. On we passed down a lane cut through the heart of the human mass, till presently we stood upon the brazen patch of flooring to the east of the central altar, and immediately facing it. For some thirty feet around the golden winged figures the space was roped off, and the multitudes stood outside the ropes.

Within were a circle of white robed gold cinctured priests, holding long golden trumpets in their hands, and immediately in front of us was our friend Agon, the high priest, with his curious cap upon his head. His was the only covered head in that vast assemblage. We took our stand upon the brazen space, little knowing what was prepared for us beneath, but I noticed a curious hissing sound proceeding apparently from the floor for which I could not account. Then came a pause, and I looked round to see if there was any sign of the two queens, Nyleptha and Sorais, but they were not there. To the right of us, however, was a bare space that I guessed was reserved for them.

We waited, and presently a far off trumpet blew, apparently high up in the dome. Then came another murmur from the multitude, and up a long lane, leading to the open space to our right, we saw the two queens walking side by side. Behind them were some nobles of the court, among whom I recognized the great lord Nasta, and behind them again a body of about fifty guards. These last I was very glad to see. Presently they had all arrived and taken their stand, the two queens in front, the nobles to the right and left, and the guards in a double semicircle behind them.

Then came another silence, and Nyleptha looked up and caught my eye; it seemed to me that there was meaning in her glance, and I watched it narrowly. From my eye it traveled down to the brazen flooring, on the outer edge of which we stood. Then followed a slight and almost imperceptible sidelong movement of the head. I did not understand it, and it was repeated. Then I guessed that she meant us to move back off the brazen floor. One more glance and I was sure of it—there was danger in standing on the floor. Sir Henry was placed on one side of me, Umslopogaas on the other. Keeping my eyes fixed straight before me I whispered to them, first in Zulu and then in English, to draw slowly back inch by inch till half their feet were resting on the marble flooring where the brass ceased. Sir Henry whispered on to Good and Alphonse, and slowly, very, very slowly, we shifted backward; so slowly, indeed, that nobody except Nyleptha and Sorais, who saw everything, seemed to notice the movement. Then I glanced again at Nyleptha, and saw that, by an almost imperceptible nod, she indicated approval. All the while Agon's eyes were fixed upon the altar before him, apparently in an ecstasy of contemplation, and mine were fixed upon the small of his back in another sort of ecstasy. Then suddenly he flung up his long arms, and in a solemn and resounding voice commenced a chant, of which for convenience' sake I append a rough, a very rough translation here, though, of course, I did not then comprehend its meaning. It was an invocation to the sun, and ran somewhat as follows:

> "There is silence upon the face of the Earth and the waters thereof!
> Yea, the silence doth brood on the waters like a nesting bird;
> The silence sleepeth also upon the bosom of the profound darkness.
> Only high up in the great spaces star doth speak unto star.
> The Earth is faint with longing and wet with the tears of her desire;
> The star girdled night doth embrace her, but she is not comforted.
> She lies enshrouded in mists like a corpse in the grave clothes,
> And stretches her pale hands to the east.
>
> "When Thou art wroth then Thou dost hide Thy face;
> Thou drawest around Thee a thick curtain of shadows.
> Then the Earth grows cold and the Heavens are dismayed;
> They tremble, and the sound thereof is the sound of thunder;
> They weep, and their tears are outpoured in the rain;
> They sigh, and the wild winds are the voice of their sighing;
> The flowers die, the fruitful fields languish and turn pale;
> The old men and the little children go unto their appointed place
> When Thou withdrawest Thy light, O Sun!
>
> Say, what art Thou, O Thou matchless Splendor?
> Who set Thee on high, O Thou flaming Terror?
> When didst Thou begin and when is the day of thy ending?
> Thou art the raiment of the living Spirit.
> None did place Thee on high, for Thou wast the Beginning.
> Thou shalt not be ended when Thy children are forgotten;
> Nay, Thou shalt never end, for Thy hours are eternal.
> Thou sittest on high within Thy golden house and measurest out the centuries.
> O Father of Life! O dark dispelling Sun!"

He ceased this solemn chant, which, though it seems a poor enough thing after going through my mill, is really beautiful and impressive in the original; and then, after a moment's pause, he glanced up toward the funnel sloped opening in the dome and added:

"O Sun, descend upon Thine Altar."

As he spoke a wonderful and beautiful thing happened. Down from on high flashed a splendid living ray of light, cleaving the twilight like a sword of fire. Full upon the closed petals it fell and ran shimmering down their golden sides, and then the glorious flower opened as though beneath the bright influence. Slowly it opened, and as the great petals fell wide and revealed the golden altar on which the fire ever burns, the priests blew a blast upon the trumpets, and from all the people there rose a shout of praise that beat against the domed roof and came echoing down the marble walls. And now the flower altar was open, and the sunlight fell full upon the tongue of sacred flame and beat it down, so that it wavered, sank, and vanished into the hollow recesses whence it rose. As it vanished, the mellow notes of the trumpets rolled out once more. Again the old priest flung up his hands and called aloud:

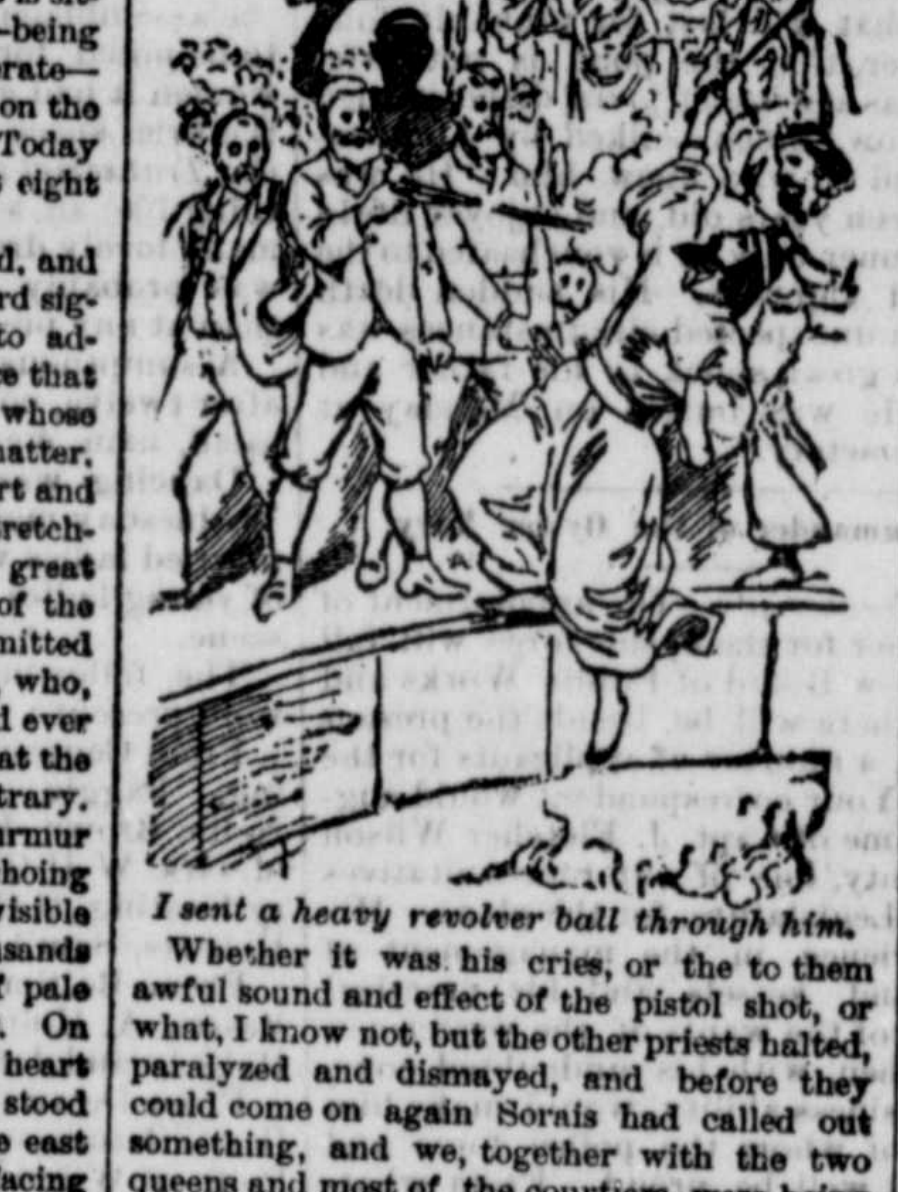
"We sacrifice to Thee, O Sun."

Once more I caught Nyleptha's eye; it was fixed upon the brazen flooring.

"Look out," I said aloud; and as I said it, I saw Agon bend forward and touch something on the altar. As he did so, the great white sea of faces around us turned red and then white again, and a deep breath went up like a universal sigh. Nyleptha leaned forward and with an involuntary movement covered her eyes with her hand. Sorais turned and whispered to the officer of the royal body guard, and then with a rending sound the whole of the brazen flooring slid from before our feet, and there in its place was suddenly revealed a smooth marble shaft terminating in a most awful raging furnace beneath the altar, big enough and hot enough to heat the iron stern post of a man of war.

With a cry of terror we sprang backward, all except the wretched Alphonse, who was paralyzed with fear and would have fallen into the fiery furnace which had been prepared for us, had not Sir Henry caught him in his strong hand as he was vanishing and dragged him back.

Instantly there arose the most fearful hubbub, and we four got back to back, Alphonse dodging frantically round our little circle in attempt to take shelter under our legs. We all had our revolvers on—for though we had been politely disarmed of our guns on leaving the palace, of course these people did not know what a revolver was. Umslopogaas, too, had his ax, of which no effort had been made to deprive him, and now he whirled it round his head and sent his piercing Zulu war shout echoing up the marble walls in fine defiant fashion. Next second the priests, baffled of their prey, had drawn swords from beneath their white robes and were leaping on us like hounds upon a stag at bay. I saw that, dangerous as action might be, we must act or be lost; so, as the first man came bounding along—and a great tall fellow he was—I sent a heavy revolver ball through him, and down he fell at the mouth of the shaft, and slid, shrieking frantically, into the fiery gulf that had been prepared for us.



I sent a heavy revolver ball through him.

Whether it was his cries, or the to them awful sound and effect of the pistol shot, or what, I know not, but the other priests halted, paralyzed and dismayed, and before they could come on again Sorais had called out something, and we, together with the two queens and most of the courtiers, were being surrounded with a wall of armed men. In a moment it was done, and still the priests hesitated, and the people hung in the balance like a herd of startled buck, as it were, making no sign one way or the other.

The last yell of the burning priest had died away, the fire had finished him, and a great silence fell upon the place.

Then the high priest Agon turned, and his face was as the face of a devil. "Let the sacrifice be sacrificed," he cried to the queens. "Has not sacrilege enough been done by these strangers, and would ye, as queens, throw the cloak of your majesty over evil doers? Are not the creatures sacred to the Sun dead? and is not a priest of the Sun also dead, but now slain by the magic of these strangers, who come as the winds out of heaven, whence we know not, and who are what we know not? Beware, O queens, how ye tamper with the great majesty of the God, even before his high altar. There is a power that is more than your power; there is a justice that is higher than your justice. Beware how ye lift an impious hand against it. Let the sacrifice be sacrificed, O queens."

Then Sorais made answer, in her deep, quiet tones, that always seemed to me to have a suspicion of mockery about them, however serious the theme: "Oh, Agon, thou hast spoken according to thy desire, and thou hast spoken truth. But it is thou who wouldst lift an impious hand against the justice of thy God. Bethink thee the mid day sacrifice is accomplished; the Sun hath claimed his priest as a sacrifice."

This was a novel idea, and the people applauded it.

"Bethink thee, what are these men? They are strangers found floating on the bosom of a lake. Who brought them here? How came they there? How know ye that they also are not servants of the Sun? Is this the hospitality that ye would have our nation show to those whom chance brings to them, to throw them to the flames? Shame on ye! shame on ye! What is hospitality? To receive the stranger and show him favor. To bind up his wounds, and find a pillow for his head and food for him to eat. But thy pillow is the fiery furnace, and thy food the hot savor of the flame. Shame on thee, I say!"

She paused a little to watch the effect of her speech upon the multitude, and seeing that it was favorable, changed her tone from one of remonstrance to one of command.

"Ho! place there," she cried, "place, I say; make way for the queens, and those whom the queens cover with their 'kaf' (mantle)."

"And if I refuse, O queen?" said Agon between his teeth.

"Then will I cut a path with my guards," was the proud answer; "ay, even in the presence of the sanctuary, and through the bodies of thy priests."

Agon turned livid with baffled fury. He glanced at the people as though meditating an appeal to them, but saw clearly that their sympathies were all the other way. The Zu-Vendi are a very curious and sociable people, and great as was their sense of the enormity that we had committed in shooting the sacred hippopotami, they did not like the idea of the only real live strangers they had seen or heard of being consigned to a fiery furnace, thereby putting an end forever to their chance of extracting knowledge and information from and gossiping about us. Agon saw this and hesitated, and then for the first time Nyleptha spoke in her soft sweet voice.

"Bethink thee, Agon," she said, "as my sister queen hath said, these men may also be servants of the Sun. For themselves they cannot speak, for their tongues are tied. Let the matter be adjourned till such time as they have learned our language. Who can be condemned without a hearing? When these men can plead for themselves, then it will be time to put them to the proof."

Here was a clever loophole of escape, and the vindictive old priest took it, little as he liked it.

"So be it, O queens," he said. "Let the men go in peace, and when they have learned our tongue then let them speak. And I, even I, will make humble supplication at the altar lest pestilence fall on the land by cause of the sacrilege."

These words were received with a murmur of applause, and in another minute we were marching out of the temple surrounded by the royal guards.

But it was not till long afterward that we learned the exact substance of what had passed, and how hardly our lives had been wrung out of the cruel gripe of the Zu-Vendi priesthood, in the face of which even the queens were practically powerless. Had it not been for their strenuous efforts to protect us we should have been slain even before we set foot in the Temple of the Sun. The attempt to drop us bodily into the fiery pit as an offering was a last artifice to attain this end when several others quite unsuspected by us had already failed.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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