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By H. RIDER HAGGARD.

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

CHAPTER XV.

SORAIS' SONG.

After our escape from Agon and his pious crew we returned to our quarters in the palace and had a very good time. The two queens, the nobles and the people vied with each other in doing us honor and showering gifts upon us. As for that painful little incident of the hippopotami it sank into oblivion, where we were quite content to leave it. Every day deputations and individuals waited on us to examine our guns and clothing, our chain shirts and our instruments, especially our watches, with which they were much delighted. In short, we became quite the rage, so much so that some of the fashionable young swells among the Zu-Vendi began to copy the cut of some of our clothes, notably Sir Henry's shooting jacket. One day, indeed, a deputation waited on us and, as usual, Good donned his full dress uniform for the occasion. This deputation seemed somehow to be of a different class to those who generally came to visit us. They were little, insignificant looking men of an excessively polite, not to say servile, demeanor, and their attention appeared to be chiefly taken up with observing the details of Good's full dress uniform, of which they took copious notes and measurements. Good was much flattered at the time, not suspecting that he had to deal with the six leading tailors of Milosis. A fortnight afterwards, however, when on attending court as usual he had the pleasure of seeing some seven or eight Zu-Vendi "mashers" arrayed in all the glory of a very fair imitation of his full dress uniform, he changed his mind. I shall never forget his face of astonishment and disgust. It was after this, chiefly in order to avoid remark, and also because our clothes were wearing out and had to be saved up, we resolved to adopt the native dress; and a very comfortable one we found it, though I am bound to say that I looked sufficiently ludicrous in it, and as for Alphonse! Only Umslopogaas would have none of these things; when his moocha was worn out the fierce old Zulu made him a new one, and went about unconcerned as grim and naked as his own battle ax.

Meanwhile we pursued our study of the language steadily and made very good progress. On the morning following our adventure in the temple three grave and reverend seigniors presented themselves armed with manuscript books, ink horns and feather pens and indicated that they had been sent to teach us, and, with the exception of Umslopogaas, we all buckled to with a will, doing four hours a day. As for Umslopogaas he would have none of that either. He did not wish to learn that "woman's talk," not he, and when one of the teachers advanced on him with a book and an ink horn and waved them before him in a mild, persuasive way, much as a church warden invitingly shakes the offertory bag under the nose of a rich but niggardly parishioner, he sprang up with a fierce oath and flashed Inkosi-kaas before the eyes of our learned friend, and there was an end of the attempt to teach him Zu-Vendi.

Thus we spent our mornings in useful occupation, which grew more and more interesting as we proceeded, and the afternoons were given up to recreation. Sometimes we made trips, notably one to the gold mines and another to the marble quarries, both of which I wish I had space and time to describe, and sometimes we went out hunting buck with dogs trained for that purpose, and a very exciting sport it is, as the country is full of agricultural inclosures, and our horses were magnificent. This is not to be wondered at, seeing that the royal stables were at our command, in addition to which we had four splendid saddle horses given to us by Nyleptha.

In the evenings it was customary for Sir Henry, Good and myself to dine, or rather sup, with their majesties—not every night, indeed, but about three or four times a week, whenever they had not much company or the affairs of state would allow of it. And I am bound to say that those little suppers were quite the most charming things of their sort that I ever had to do with. How true is the saying that the very highest in rank are always the most simple and kindly. It is from your half and half sort of people that you get pomposity and vulgarity, the difference between the two being very much what one sees every day in England between the old, out at elbows, broken down county family and the overbearing, purse proud people who come and "take the place." I really think that Nyleptha's greatest charm is her sweet simplicity, and her kindly, genuine interest even in little things. She is the simplest woman I ever knew, and where her passions are not involved one of the sweetest; but she can look queenly enough when she likes and be as fierce as any savage, too.

For instance, never shall I forget that scene when I for the first time was sure that she was really in love with Curtis. It came about in this way—all through Good's weakness for ladies' society. When we had been employed for some three months in learning Zu-Vendi it struck Master Good that he was getting rather tired of the old gentlemen who did us the honor to lead us in the way that we should go, so he proceeded, without saying a word to anybody else, to inform them that it was a peculiar fact, but that we could not make any real progress in the deeper intricacies of a foreign language unless we were taught by ladies—young ladies, he was careful to explain. In his own country, he pointed out, it was habitual to choose the very best looking and most charming girls who could be found to instruct any strangers who happened to come that way, etc.

All of this the old gentlemen swallowed open mouthed. There was, they admitted, reason in what he said, since the contemplation of the beautiful, as their philosophy taught, induced a certain porosity of mind similar to that produced upon the physical body by the healthful influences of sun and air; consequently it was probable that we might absorb the Zu-Vendi tongue a little faster if suitable teachers could be found. Another thing was that as the female sex was naturally loquacious, good practice would be gained in the viva voce department of our studies.

To all of this Good gravely assented, and the learned gentlemen departed, assuring him that their orders were to fall in with our wishes in every way, and that, if possible, our views should be met.

Imagine, therefore, the surprise and disgust of myself, and I trust and believe Sir Henry, when, on entering the room where we were accustomed to carry on our studies, the following morning, we found, instead of our usual venerable tutors, three of the best looking young women whom Milosis could produce—and that is saying a good deal—who blushed and smiled and courtesied, and gave us to understand that they were there to carry on our instruction. Then Good, as we gazed at one another in bewilderment, thought fit to explain, saying that it had slipped his memory before—but the old gentlemen had told him, on the previous evening, that it was absolutely necessary that our further education should be carried on by the other sex. I was overwhelmed, and appealed to Sir Henry for advice in such a crisis.

"Well," he said, "you see the ladies are here, ain't they? If we sent them away, don't you think it might hurt their feelings, eh? One doesn't like to be rough, you see; and they look regular blues, don't they, eh?"

By this time Good had already begun his lessons with the handsomest of the three, and so with a sigh I yielded. That day everything went very well; the young ladies were certainly very clever, and they only smiled when we blundered. I never saw Good so attentive to his books before, and even Sir Henry appeared to tackle Zu-Vendi with a renewed zest. "Ah," thought I, "will it always be thus?"

Next day we were much more lively; our work was pleasingly interspersed with questions about our native country, what the ladies were like there, etc., all of which we answered as best we could in Zu-Vendi, and I heard Good assuring his teacher that her loveliness was to the beauties of Europe as the sun to the moon; to which she replied with a little toss of the head that she was a plain teaching woman and nothing else, and that it was not kind "to deceive a poor girl so." Then we had a little singing that was really charming, so natural and unaffected. The Zu-Vendi love songs are most touching. On the third day we were all quite intimate. Good narrated some of his previous love affairs to his fair teacher, and so moved was she that her sighs mingled with his own. I discoursed with mine, a merry, blue eyed girl, upon Zu-Vendian art, and never saw that she was waiting for an opportunity to drop a specimen of the cockroach tribe down my back, while in the corner Sir Henry and his governess appeared, so far as I could judge, to be going through a lesson framed on the great educational principles laid down by Wackford Squeers, Esq., though in a very modified or rather spiritualized form. The lady softly repeated the Zu-Vendi word for "hand," and he took hers; "eyes," and he gazed deep into her brown orbs; "lips," and—but just at that moment my young lady dropped the cockroach down my back and ran away laughing. Now, if there is one thing I loath more than another it is cockroaches, and moved quite beyond myself, and yet laughing at her impudence, I took up the cushion she had been sitting on and threw it after her. Imagine then my shame, my horror and my distress, when the door opened, and, attended by two guards only, in walked Nyleptha. The cushion could not be recalled (it missed the girl and hit one of the guards on the head), but I instantly and ineffectually tried to look as though I had not thrown it. Good ceased his sighing, and began to murmur Zu-Vendi at the top of his voice, and Sir Henry whistled and looked silly. As for the poor girls, they were utterly dumfounded.

And Nyleptha! she drew herself up till her frame seemed to tower even above that of the tall guards, and her face went first red and then pale as death.

"Guards," she said, in a quiet, choked voice, and pointing at the fair but unconscious disciple of Wackford Squeers, "slay me that woman."

The men hesitated, as well they might.

"Will ye do my bidding?" she said, again in the same voice, "or will ye not?"

Then they advanced upon the girl with uplifted spears. By this time Sir Henry had recovered himself, and saw that the comedy was likely to turn into a tragedy.

"Stand back!" he said, in a voice of thunder, at the same time getting in front of the terrified girl. "Shame on thee, Nyleptha—shame! Thou shalt not kill her."

"Doubtless thou hast good reason to try to protect her. Thou couldst hardly do less in honor," answered the infuriated queen; "but she shall die—she shall die!" and she stamped her little foot.

"It is well," he answered; "then I will die with her. I am thy servant, O queen; do with me even as thou wilt," and he bowed toward her, and fixed his clear eyes contemptuously on her face.

"I could wish to slay thee, too," she answered; "for thou dost make a mock of me;" and then feeling that she was mastered, and I suppose not knowing what else to do, she burst into such a storm of tears, and looked so royally lovely in her passionate distress that, old as I am, I must say I envied Curtis his task of supporting her. It was rather odd to see him holding her in his arms considering what had just passed; a thought that seemed to occur to herself, for presently she wrenched herself free and went, leaving us all much disturbed.

Presently, however, one of the guards returned with a message to the girls that they were, on pain of death, to leave the city and return to their homes in the country, and that no further harm would come to them; and accordingly they went, one of them remarking philosophically that it could not be helped, and that it was a satisfaction to know that they had taught us a little serviceable Zu-Vendi. Mine was an exceedingly nice girl, and, overlooking the cockroach, I made her a present of my favorite lucky sixpence with a hole in it when she went away. After that our former masters resumed their course of instruction, needless to say to my great relief.

That night, when in fear and trembling we attended the royal supper table, we found that Nyleptha was laid up with a bad headache. That headache lasted for three whole days; but on the fourth she was present at supper as usual, and with the most gracious and sweet smile gave Sir Henry her hand to lead her to the table. No allusion was made to the little affair described above beyond her saying, with a charming air of innocence, that when she came to see us at our studies the other day she had been seized with a giddiness from which she had only now recovered. She supposed, she added, with the touch of the humor that was common to her, that it was the sight of people working so hard which had affected her.

In reply Sir Henry said, dryly, that he had thought she did not look quite herself on that day, whereat she flashed one of those quick glances of hers at him, which, if he had the feelings of a man, must have gone through him like a knife, and the subject dropped entirely. Indeed, after supper was over Nyleptha condescended to put us through an examination to see what we had learned, and to express herself well satisfied with the results. Indeed, she proceeded to give us, especially Sir Henry, a lesson on her own account, and very interesting we found it.

And all the while that we talked, or rather tried to talk, and laughed, Sorais would sit there in her carven ivory chair, and look at us and read us all like a book, only from time to time saying a few words, and smiling that quick ominous smile of hers which was more like a flash of summer lightning on a dark cloud than anything else. And as near to her as he dared would sit Good, worshiping through his eye glass, for he really was getting seriously devoted to this somber beauty, of whom, speaking personally, I felt terribly afraid. I watched her keenly, and soon I found out that for all her apparent impassibility she was at heart bitterly jealous of Nyleptha. Another thing I found out, and the discovery filled me with dismay; and that was, that she also was growing devoted to Sir Henry Curtis. Of course I could not be sure; it is not easy to read so cold and haughty a woman, but I noticed one or two little things, and, as elephant hunters know, dried grass shows which way the wind has set.

And so another three months passed over us, by which time we had all attained to a very considerable mastery of the Zu-Vendi language, which is an easy one to learn. And as the time went on we became great favorites with the people, and even with the courtiers, gaining an enormous reputation for cleverness, because, as I think I have said, Sir Henry was able to show them how to make glass, which was a national want; and also, by the help of a twenty year almanac that we had with us, to predict various heavenly combinations which were quite unsuspected by the native astronomers. We even succeeded in demonstrating the principle of the steam engine to a gathering of the learned men, who were filled with amazement; and several other things of the same sort we did. And so it came about that the people made up their minds that we must on no account be allowed to go out of the country (which indeed was an apparent impossibility even if we had wished it), and we were advanced to great honor and made officers of the body guards of the sister queens, while permanent quarters were assigned to us in the palace, and our opinion was asked upon questions of national policy.

But blue as the sky seemed, there was a cloud, and a big one, on the horizon. We had, indeed, heard no more of those confounded hippopotami; but it is not on that account to be supposed that our sacrilege was forgotten, or the enmity of the great and powerful priesthood headed by Agon appeased. On the contrary, it was burning the more fiercely because it was necessarily suppressed, and what had perhaps begun in bigotry was ending in downright direct hatred born of jealousy. Hitherto the priests had been the wise men of the land, and were on this account, as well as from superstitious causes, looked on with peculiar veneration. But our arrival, with our outlandish wisdom and our strange inventions and hints of unimagined things, dealt a serious blow to this state of affairs, and, among the educated Zu-Vendi, went far toward destroying the priestly prestige. A still worse affront to them, however, was the favor with which we were regarded, and the trust that was reposed in us. All these things tended to make us excessively obnoxious to the great sacerdotal clan, the most powerful because the most united faction in the kingdom.

Another source of imminent danger to us was the rising envy of some of the great lords, headed by Nasta, whose antagonism to us had at best been but thinly veiled, and which now threatened to break out into open flame. Nasta had for some years been a candidate for Nyleptha's hand in marriage; and when we appeared on the scene, I fancy, from all I could gather, that though there were still many obstacles in his path, success was by no means out of his reach. But now all this had changed; the coy Nyleptha smiled no more in his direction, and he was not slow to guess the cause. Infuriated and alarmed, he turned his attention to Sorais, only to find that he might as well try to woo a mountain side. With a bitter jest or two about his fickleness, that door was closed on him forever. So Nasta bethought him of the 30,000 wild swordsmen who would pour down at his bidding through the northern mountain passes, and no doubt vowed to adorn the gates of Milosis with our heads.

But first he determined, as we learned, to make one more attempt, and to demand the hand of Nyleptha in the open court after the formal annual ceremony of the signing of the laws that had been proclaimed by the queens during the year.

Of this astounding fact Nyleptha heard with simulated nonchalance, and with a little trembling of the voice herself informed us of it as we sat at supper on the night preceding the great ceremony of the law signing.

Sir Henry bit his lip, and, do what he could to prevent it, plainly showed his agitation.

"And what answer will the queen be pleased to give to the great lord?" asked I, in a jesting manner.

"Answer, Macumazahn" (for we had elected to pass by our Zulu names in Zu-Vendis), she said, with a pretty shrug of her ivory shoulder. "Nay, I know not; what is a poor woman to do when the wooer has 30,000 swords wherewith to urge his love?" and from under her long lashes she glanced at Curtis.

Just then we rose from the table to adjourn into another room. "Quatermain, a word, quick!" said Sir Henry to me. "Listen; I have never spoken about it, but surely you have guessed—I love Nyleptha. What am I to do?"

Fortunately, I had more or less already taken the question into consideration, and was therefore able to give such answer as seemed the wisest to me.

"You must speak to Nyleptha to-night," I said. "Now is your time—now or never. Listen; in the sitting room get near to her, and whisper to her to meet you at midnight by the Rademas statue at the end of the great hall. I will keep watch for you there. Now or never, Curtis."

We passed on into the other room. Nyleptha was sitting, her hands before her, and a sad, anxious look upon her lovely face. A little way off was Sorais talking to Good in her slow, measured tones.

The time went on; in another quarter of an hour I knew that, according to their habit, the queens would retire. As yet Sir Henry had had no chance of saying a word in private; indeed, though we saw much of the royal sisters it was by no means easy to see them alone. I racked my brains, and at last an idea came to me.

"Will the queen be pleased," I said, bowing low before Sorais, "to sing unto her servants? Our hearts are heavy this night. Sing to us, O Lady of the Night" (Sorais' favorite name among the people).

"My songs, Macumazahn, are not such as to lighten the heavy heart, yet will I sing if it pleases thee," she answered, and she rose and went a few paces to a table, whereon lay an instrument not unlike a zither, and struck a few wandering chords.

Then suddenly, like the notes of some deep throated bird, her rounded voice rang out in song so wildly sweet, and yet with so eerie and sad a refrain, that it made the very blood stand still. Up, up soared the golden notes, that seemed to melt far away, and then to grow again and travel on, laden with all the sorrow of the world and all the despair of the lost. It was a marvelous song, but I had not time to listen to it properly. However, I got the words of it afterward, and here is a translation of its burden, so far as it admits of being translated at all:

SORAIS' SONG.

As a desolate bird that through darkness its lost way is winging,
As a hand that is helplessly raised when Death's sickle is swinging,
So is life! aye, the life that lends passion and breath to my singing.

As the nightingale's song that is full of a sweetness unspoken,
As a spirit unbarring the gates of the skies for a token,
So is love! aye, the love that shall fall when his pinion is broken.

As the tramp of the legions when trumpets their challenge are sending,
As the shout of the storm god when lightnings the black sky are rending,
So is power! aye, the power that shall lie in the dust at its ending.

So short is our life; yet with space for all things to forsake us,
A bitter delusion, a dream from which naught can awake us,
Till Death's dogging footsteps at morn or at eve shall o'ertake us.

REFRAIN.

Oh, the world is fair at the dawning—dawning—dawning,
But the red sun sinks in blood, the red sun sinks in blood.

I only wish that I could write down the music too.

"Now, Curtis, now," I whispered, when she began the second verse, and turned my back.

"Nyleptha," he said—for my nerves were so much on the stretch that I could hear every word, low as it was spoken, even through Sorais' divine notes—"Nyleptha, I must speak with thee this night; upon my life I must. Say me not nay, oh, say me not nay!"

"How can I speak with thee?" she answered, looking fixedly before her; "queens are not like other people. I am surrounded and watched."

"Listen, Nyleptha, thus: I will be before the statue of Rademas in the great hall at midnight. I have the countersign and can pass in. Macumazahn will be there to keep guard, and with him the Zulu. Oh, come, my queen; deny me not."

"It is not seemly," she murmured; "and to-morrow"——

Just then the music began to die in the last wail of the refrain, and Sorais slowly turned her round.

"I will be there," said Nyleptha, hurriedly; "on thy life see that thou fail me not."

CHAPTER XVI.

BEFORE THE STATUE.

It was night—dead night—and the silence lay on the Frowning City like a cloud.

Secretly, as evil doers, Sir Henry Curtis, Umslopogaas and myself threaded our way through the passages towards a by entrance to the great throne chamber. Once we were met by the fierce, rattling challenge of the sentry. I gave the countersign and the man grounded his spear and let us pass. Also, we were officers of the queen's body guard, and in that capacity had a right to come and go unquestioned.

We gained the hall in safety. So empty and so still was it that even when we had passed, the sound of our footsteps yet echoed up the lofty walls, vibrating faintly and still more faintly against the cavern roof, like ghosts of the footsteps of dead men haunting the place that once they trod.

It was an eerie spot, and it oppressed me. The moon was full, and threw great pencils and patches of light through the high, windowless openings in the walls, that lay pure and beautiful upon the blackness of the marble floor, like white flowers on a coffin. One of these silver arrows fell upon the statue of the sleeping Rademas, and of the angel form bent over him, illumining it, and a small circle round it, with a soft, clear light, reminding me of that which Catholics illumine the altars of their cathedrals.

Here by the statue we took our stand and waited—Sir Henry and I close together, Umslopogaas some paces off in the darkness, so that I could only just make out his towering outline leaning on the outline of an ax.

So long did we wait that I almost fell asleep resting against the cold marble, but was suddenly aroused by hearing Curtis give a quick, catching breath. Then from far, far far away there came a little sound, as though the statues that lined the walls were whispering to each other some message of the ages.

It was the faint sweep of a lady's dress. Nearer it grew, and nearer yet. We could see a figure steal from patch to patch of moonlight, and even hear the soft fall of sandaled feet. Another second and I saw the black silhouette of the old Zulu raise its arm in mute salute, and Nyleptha was before us.

Oh, how beautiful she looked as she paused a moment just within the circle of the moonlight! Her hand was pressed upon her heart, and her white bosom heaved beneath it. Round her head a broidered scarf was loosely thrown, partially shadowing the perfect face, and thus rendering it even more lovely; for beauty, dependent as it is to a certain extent upon the imagination, is never so beautiful as when it is half hid. There she stood, radiant but half doubting, stately and yet so sweet. It was but a moment; but I then and there fell in love with her myself, and have remained so to this hour; for indeed she looked more like an angel out of heaven than a loving, passionate, mortal woman. Low we bowed before her, and then she spoke.

"I have come," she whispered, "but it was at great risk. Ye know not how I am watched. The priests watch me. Sorais watches me with those great eyes of hers. My very guards are spies upon me. Nasta watches me too. Oh, let him be careful!" and she stamped her foot. "Let him be careful; I am a woman, and therefore hard to drive. Ay, and I am a queen, too, and can still avenge. Let him be careful, I say, lest in place of giving him my hand I take his head;" and then she ended the outburst with a little sob and then smiled up at us bewitchingly and laughed.

"Thou didst bid me come hither, my Lord Incubu" (Curtis had taught her to call him so). "Doubtless it is about business of the state, for I know that thou art ever full of great ideas and plans for my welfare and my people's. So, even as a queen should I have come, though I greatly fear the dark alone;" and again she laughed and gave him a glance from her gray eyes.

At this point I thought it wise to move a little, since secrets "of the state" should not be made public property, but she would not let me go far, peremptorily stopping me within five yards or so, saying that she feared surprise. So it came to pass that, however unwillingly, I heard all that passed.

"Thou knowest, Nyleptha," said Sir Henry, "that it was for none of these things that I asked thee to me at this lonely place. Nyleptha, waste not the time in pleasantry, but listen to me, for—I love thee."

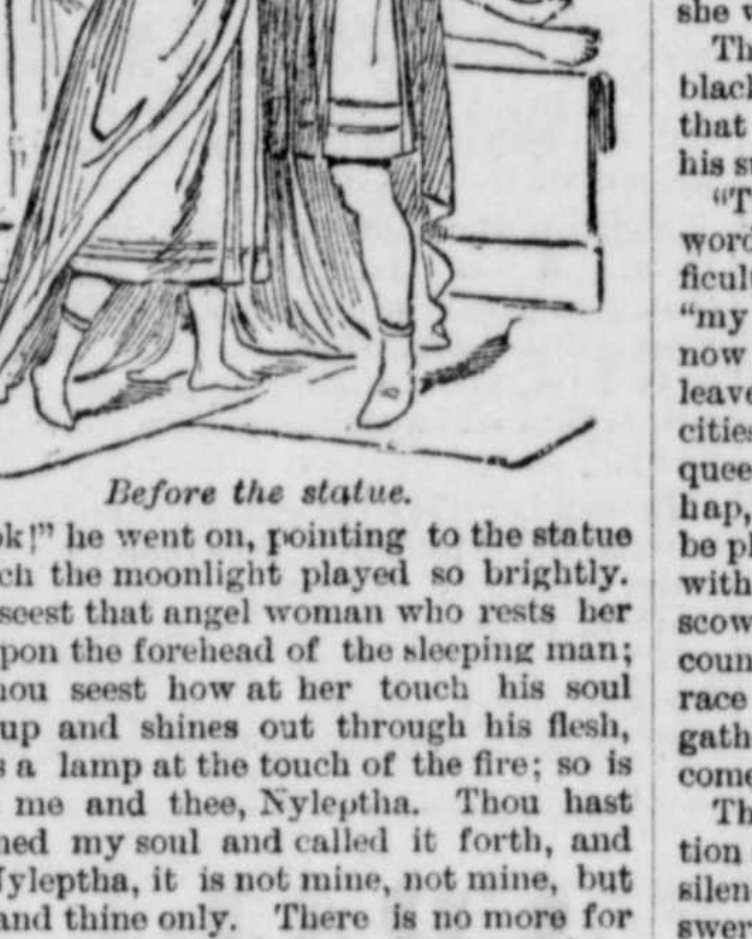
As he said the words I saw her face break up, as it were, and change. The coquetry went out of it, and in its place there shone a great light of love, which seemed to glorify it, and make it like that of the marble angel overhead. I could not help thinking that it must have been a touch of prophetic instinct which made the long dead Rademas limn in the features of the angel of his inspiring vision so strange a likeness of his own descendant. Sir Henry also must have observed and been struck by the likeness, for, catching the look upon Nyleptha's face, he glanced quickly from it to the moonlit statue, and then back again at his beloved.

"Thou sayest thou dost love me," she said, in a low voice, "and thy voice rings true; but how am I to know that thou dost speak the truth? Though," she went on, with proud humility, and in the stately third person which is so largely used by the Zu-Vendi, "I be as nothing in the eyes of my lord"—and she courtesied towards him—"who comes from among a wonderful people, to whom my people are but children, yet here am I a queen and a leader of men, and if I would go to a battle a hundred thousand spears shall sparkle in my train like stars glimmering down the path of the bent moon. And although my beauty be a little thing in the eyes of my lord"—and she lifted her broidered skirt and courtesied again—"yet here among my own people am I held right fair; and ever since I was a woman the great lords of my kingdom have made quarrel concerning me, as though, forsooth," she added, with a flash of passion, "I were a deer to be pulled down by the hungriest wolf, or a horse to be sold to the highest bidder. Let my lord pardon me if I weary my lord, but it hath pleased my lord to say that he loves me, Nyleptha, a queen of the Zu-Vendi; and therefore would I say, that though my love and my hand be not much to my lord, yet to me are they all."

"Oh!" she cried, with a sudden and thrilling change of voice, and modifying her dignified mode of address—"oh, how can I know that thou lovest but me? How can I know that thou wilt not weary of me and seek thine own place again, leaving me desolate? Who is there to tell me but that thou lovest some other woman, some fair woman unknown to me, but who yet draws breath beneath this same moon that shines on me to-night? Tell me how am I to know?" And she clasped her hands and stretched them out towards him, and looked appealingly into his face.

"Nyleptha," answered Sir Henry, adopting the Zu-Vendi way of speech, "I have told thee that I love thee; how am I to tell thee how much I love thee? Is there, then, a measure for love? Yet will I try. I say not that I have never looked upon another woman with favor, but this I say, that I love thee with all my life and with all my strength; that I love thee now, and shall love thee till I grow cold in death; aye, and as I believe, beyond my death, and on and on forever; I say that thy voice is music to my ear, and thy touch as water to a thirsty land; that when thou art there the world is beautiful, and when I see thee not it is as though the light was dead. Oh, Nyleptha, I will never leave thee! Here and now, for thy dear sake, I will forget my people and my father's house; yea, I renounce them all. By thy side will I live, Nyleptha, and at thy side will I die."

He paused and gazed at her earnestly, but she hung her head like a lily, and said never a word.



Before the statue.

"Look!" he went on, pointing to the statue on which the moonlight played so brightly. "Thou seest that angel woman who rests her hand upon the forehead of the sleeping man; and thou seest how at her touch his soul flames up and shines out through his flesh, even as a lamp at the touch of the fire; so is it with me and thee, Nyleptha. Thou hast awakened my soul and called it forth, and now, Nyleptha, it is not mine, not mine, but thine, and thine only. There is no more for me to say; in thy hands is my life." And he leaned back against the pedestal of the statue, looking very pale, and his eyes shining, but proud and handsome as a god.

Slowly, slowly she raised her head, and fixed her wonderful eyes, all alight with the greatness of her passion, full upon his face, as though to read his very soul. Then at last she spoke, low indeed, but clearly as a silver bell:

"Of a truth, weak woman that I am, I do believe thee. Ill will be the day for thee, and for me also, if it be my fate to learn that I have believed a lie. And now hearken unto me, O man, who hath wandered here from far to steal my heart and make me all thine own. I put my hand upon thine hand thus, and thus I, whose lips have never kissed before, do kiss thee on the brow; and now by my hand, and by that first and holy kiss, ay, by my people's weal and by my throne that like enough I shall lose for thee, by the name of my high house, by the sacred stone and by the eternal majesty of the Sun, I swear that for thee will I live and die. And I swear that I will love thee and thee only till death, ay, and beyond—if, as thou sayest, there be a beyond—and that thy will shall be my will, and thy ways my ways.

"Oh, see, see, my lord! thou knowest not how humble is she who loves; I, who am a queen, I kneel before thee; even at thy feet I do my homage;" and the lovely impassioned creature flung herself down on her knees on the cold marble before him. And after that I really do not know what happened, for I could stand it no longer, and cleared off to refresh myself with a little of old Umslopogaas' society, leaving them to settle it their own way, and a very long time they were about it.

Some three-quarters of an hour afterward the "pair of doves" came strolling toward us, Curtis looking slightly silly, and Nyleptha remarking calmly that the moonlight made very pretty effects on the marble. Then, for she was in a most gracious mood, she took my hand and said that I was "her lord's" dear friend, and therefore most dear to her—not a word for my own sake, you see. Next she lifted Umslopogaas' ax and examined it curiously, saying significantly as she did so that he might soon have cause to use it in defense of her.

After that she nodded prettily to us all, and casting one tender glance at her lover, glided off into the darkness like a beautiful vision.

When we got back to our quarters, which we did without accident, Curtis asked me, jocularly, what I was thinking about.

"I am wondering," I answered, "on what principle it is arranged that some people should find beautiful queens to fall in love with them, while others find nobody at all, or worse than nobody, and I am also wondering how many brave men's lives this night's work will cost." It was rather nasty of me, perhaps, but somehow all the feelings do not evaporate with age, and I could not help being a little jealous of my old friend's luck. Vanity, my sons, vanity of vanities!

On the following morning Good was informed of the happy occurrence, and positively rippled with smiles that, originating somewhere about the mouth, slowly traveled up his face like the rings in a duck pond, till they flowed over the brim of his eyeglass and went where sweet smiles go. The fact of the matter, however, was that not only was Good rejoiced about the thing on its own merits, but also for personal reasons. He adored Sorais quite as earnestly as Sir Henry adored Nyleptha, and his adoration had not altogether prospered. Indeed, it had seemed to him and to me also that the dark Cleopatra like queen favored Curtis in her own curious, inscrutable way much more than Good. Therefore it was a relief to him to learn that his unconscious rival was permanently and satisfactorily attached in another direction. His face fell a little, however, when he was told that the whole thing was to be kept as secret as the dead, above all from Sorais for the present, inasmuch as the political convulsion which would follow such an announcement at the moment would be altogether too great to face, and would very possibly, if prematurely made, shake Nyleptha from her throne.

That morning we again attended in the throne hall, and I could not help smiling to myself when I compared the visit to our last, and reflecting that if the walls could speak they would have strange tales to tell.

What actresses women are! There, high upon her golden throne, draped in her blazoned "kaf" or robe of state, sat the fair Nyleptha; and when Sir Henry came in a little late, dressed in the full uniform of an officer of her guard, and humbly bent himself before her, she merely acknowledged his salute with a careless nod and turned her head coldly aside. It was a very large court, for not only did the ceremony of the signing of the laws attract many outside of those whose duty it was to attend, but also the rumor that Nasta was going to publicly ask the hand of Nyleptha in marriage had gone abroad, with the result that the great hall was crowded to its utmost capacity. There were our friends the priests in force, headed by Agon, who regarded us with a vindictive eye; and a most imposing band they were, with their long white embroidered robes girt with a golden chain from which hung the fishlike scales. There, too, were a number of the lords, each with a band of brilliantly attired attendants, and prominent among them was Nasta, stroking his black beard meditatively and looking unusually unpleasant. It was a splendid and impressive sight, especially when the officer having read out each law it was handed to the queens to sign, whereon the trumpets blared out and the queens' guard grounded their spears with a crash in salute. This reading and signing of the laws took a long time, but at last it came to an end, the last one reciting that "whereas certain distinguished strangers, etc.," and proceeding to confer on the three of us the rank of "lords," together with certain military commands and large estates bestowed by the queens. When it was read the trumpets blared and the spears clashed down as usual; but I saw some of the lords turn and whisper to each other, while Nasta ground his teeth. They did not like the favor that was shown to us, which, under all the circumstances, was not perhaps unnatural.

Then there came a pause, and Nasta stepped forward, and bowing humbly, though with no humility in his eye, craved a boon at the hands of the Queen Nyleptha.

Nyleptha turned a little pale, but bowed graciously, and prayed the "well beloved lord" to speak on, whereon in a few straightforward, soldier like words he asked her hand in marriage.

Then, before she could find words to answer, the High Priest Agon took up the tale, and in a speech of real eloquence and power pointed out the many advantages of the proposed alliance—how it would consolidate the kingdom; for Nasta's dominions, of which he was virtually king, were to Zu-Vendis much what Scotland used to be to England; how it would gratify the wild mountaineers and be popular among the soldiery, for Nasta was a famous general; how it would set her dynasty firmly on the throne, and would gain the blessing and approval of the "Sun," i. e., of the office of high priest, and so on. Many of his arguments were undoubtedly valid; and there was, looking at it from a political point of view, everything to be said for the marriage. But, unfortunately, it is difficult to play the game of politics with the persons of young and lovely queens as though they were ivory effigies of themselves on a chess board. Nyleptha's face, while Agon spouted away, was a perfect study; she smiled, indeed, but beneath the smile it set like a stone, and her eyes began to flash ominously.

At last he stopped, and she prepared herself to answer. Before she did so, however, Sorais leaned toward her and said, in a voice sufficiently loud for me to catch what she said, "Bethink thee well, my sister, ere thou dost speak, for methinks that our thrones may hang upon thy words."

Nyleptha made no answer, and with a shrug and a smile, Sorais leaned back again and listened.

"Of a truth a great honor has been done to me," she said, "that my poor hand should not only have been asked in marriage, but that Agon here should be so swift to pronounce the blessing of the Sun upon my union. Methinks that in another minute he would have wed us fast ere the bride had said her say. Nasta, I thank thee, and I will bethink me of thy words, but now as yet I have no mind for marriage; that is a cup of which none know the taste until they begin to drink it. Again I thank thee, Nasta," and she made as though she would rise.

The great lord's face turned almost as black as his beard with fury, for he knew that the words amounted to a final refusal of his suit.

"Thanks be to the queen for her gracious words," he said, restraining himself with difficulty and looking anything but grateful, "my heart shall surely treasure them. And now I crave another boon, namely, the royal leave to withdraw myself to my own poor cities in the north until such time as the queen shall say my suit nay or yea. Mayhap," he added, with a sneer, "the queen will be pleased to visit me there, and to bring with her these stranger lords," and he scowled darkly toward us. "It is but a poor country and a rough, but we are a hardy race of mountaineers, and there shall be gathered 30,000 swordsmen to shout a welcome to her."

This speech, which was almost a declaration of rebellion, was received in complete silence, but Nyleptha flushed up and answered it with spirit.

"Oh, surely, Nasta, I will come, and the strange lords in my train, and for every man of thy mountaineers who calls thee prince will I bring two from the lowlands who call me queen, and we will see which is the stanchest breed. Till then farewell."

The trumpets blared out, the queens rose, and the great assembly broke up in murmuring confusion, and for myself I went home with a heavy heart, foreseeing civil war.

After this there was quiet for a few weeks. Curtis and the queen did not often meet, and exercised the utmost caution not to allow the true relation in which they stood to each other to leak out; but, do what they would, rumors as hard to trace as a buzzing fly in a dark room, and yet quite as audible, began to hum round and round, and at last to settle on her throne.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE STORM BREAKS.

And now it was that the trouble which at first had been but a cloud as large as a man's hand began to loom very black and big upon our horizon, namely, Sorais' preference for Sir Henry. I saw the storm drawing nearer and nearer; and so, poor fellow, did he. The affection of so lovely and highly placed a woman was not a thing that could in a general way be considered a calamity by any man; but, situated as Curtis was, it was a grievous burden to bear.

To begin with, Nyleptha, though altogether charming, was, it must be admitted, of a rather jealous disposition, and was somewhat apt to visit on her lover's head her indignation at the marks of what Alphonse would have called the "distinguished consideration" with which her royal sister favored him. Then the enforced secrecy of his relations to Nyleptha prevented Curtis from taking some opportunity of putting a stop, or trying to put a stop, to this false condition of affairs, by telling Sorais, in a casual but confidential way, that he was going to marry her sister. A third sting in Sir Henry's honey was that he knew that Good was honestly and sincerely attached to the ominous looking, but most attractive, Lady of the Night. Indeed, poor Bougwan was wasting himself to a shadow of his fat and jolly self about her, his face getting so thin that his eyeglass would scarcely stick in it; while she, with a sort of careless coquetry, just gave him encouragement enough to keep him going, thinking, no doubt, that he might be useful as a stalking horse. I tried to give him a hint, in as delicate a way as I could, but he flew into a huff and would not listen to me; so I determined to let ill alone, for fear of making it worse. Poor Good! he really was very ludicrous in his distress, and went in for all sorts of absurdities, under the belief that he was advancing his suit. One of them was the writing—with the assistance of one of the grave and reverend seigniors who instructed us, and who, whatever may have been the measure of his erudition, did not understand how to scan a line—of a most interminable Zu-Vendi love song, of which the continually recurring refrain was something about "I will kiss thee; oh yes, I will kiss thee!" Now among the Zu-Vendi it is a common and most harmless thing for young men to serenade ladies at night, as I believe they do in the southern countries of Europe, and sing all sorts of nonsensical songs to them.

Availing himself of this custom, Good bethought him that he would serenade Sorais, whose private apartments, together with those of her maidens, were exactly opposite our own, on the farther side of a narrow court yard which divided one section of the great palace from another. Accordingly, having armed himself with a native zither, on which, being an adept with the light guitar, he had easily learned to strum, he proceeded at midnight—the fashionable hour for this sort of caterwauling—to make night hideous with his amorous yells. I was fast asleep when they began, but they soon woke me up—for Good possesses a tremendous voice and has no notion of time—and I ran to my window place to see what was the matter. And there, standing in the full moonlight in the court yard, I perceived Good, adorned with an enormous ostrich feather headdress and a flowing silken cloak, which it is the right thing to wear upon these occasions, and shouting out the abominable song which he and the old gentleman had evolved, to a jerky, jingling accompaniment. From the direction of the quarters of the maids of honor came a succession of faint sniggerings; but the apartments of Sorais herself—whom I devoutly pitied if she happened to be there—were silent as the grave. There was absolutely no end to that awful song, with its eternal "I will kiss thee!" and at last neither I nor Sir Henry, whom I had summoned to enjoy the sight, could stand it any longer; so, remembering the dear old story, I put my head to the window opening and shouted, "For Heaven's sake, Good, don't go on talking about it, but kiss her and let's all go to sleep!" That chocked him off, and we had no more serenading.

The whole thing formed a laughable incident in a tragic business.

Well, the more Sir Henry held off the more Sorais came on, as is not uncommon in such cases, till at last things got very queer indeed. Evidently she was, by some strange perversity of mind, quite blinded to the true state of the case; and I, for one, greatly dreaded the moment of her awakening. Sorais was a dangerous woman to be mixed up with, either with or without one's own consent. At last the evil moment came, as I saw it must come. One fine day, Good having gone out hawking, Sir Henry and I were sitting quietly talking over the situation, especially with reference to Sorais, when a court messenger arrived with a written note, which we with some difficulty deciphered, and which was to the effect that "the Queen Sorais commanded the attendance of the Lord Incubu in her private apartments, whither he would be conducted by the bearer."

"On my word!" groaned Sir Henry. "Can't you go instead, old fellow?"

"Not if I know it," I said with vigor. "I had rather face a wounded elephant with a shot gun. Wash up your own dirty dishes, my boy. If you will be so fascinating you must take the consequences. Ain't you just in for it now, that's all!"

"You remind me of when I was going to be flogged at school and the other boys came to console me," he said, gloomily. "What right has this confounded queen to command my attendance, I should like to know? I won't go."

"But you must; you are one of her officers and bound to obey her, and she knows it. And after all it will soon be over."

"That's just what they used to say," he said again. "I only hope she won't put a knife into me. I believe that she is quite capable of it." And off he started very faintheartedly, and no wonder.

I sat and waited, and at the end of about forty-five minutes he returned, looking a good deal worse than when he went.

"Give me something to drink," he said hoarsely.

I got him a cup of wine, and asked what was the matter.

"What is the matter? Why, if ever there was trouble there's trouble now. You know when I left you? Well, I was shown straight into Sorais' private chamber, and a wonderful place it is; and there she sat, quite alone, upon a silken couch at the end of the room, playing gently upon that zither of hers. I stood before her, and for a while she took no notice of me, but kept on playing and singing a little, and very sweet music it was. At last she looked up and smiled.

"'So thou art come' she said. 'I thought that perchance thou hadst gone about the Queen Nyleptha's business. Thou art ever on her business, and I doubt not a good servant and a true.'

"To this I merely bowed and said I was there to receive the queen's word.

"'Ah, yes, I would talk with thee, but be thou seated. I cannot lift my neck so high,' and she made room for me beside her on the couch, placing herself with her back against the end, so as to have a view of my face.

"'It is not meet,' I said, 'that I should make myself equal with the queen.'

"'I said be seated,' was her answer; so I sat down, and she set to work to look at me with those dark eyes of hers. There she sat, like an incarnate spirit of beauty, hardly talking at all, and when she did, very low, but all the while looking at me. There was a white flower in her black hair, and I tried to keep my eyes on it and count the petals, but it was of no use. At last, whether it was her gaze, or the perfume on her hair, or what I do not know, but I began to feel as though I was being mesmerized. At last she roused herself.

"'Incubu,' she said, 'lovest thou power?'

"I replied that I supposed all men loved power of one sort or another.

"'Thou shalt have it,' she said. 'Lovest thou wealth?'

"I said I liked wealth for what it brought.

"'Thou shalt have it,' she said. 'And lovest thou beauty?'

"To this I replied that I was very fond of statuary and architecture, or something of that sort, at which she frowned, and there was a pause. By this time my nerves were on such a stretch that I was shaking like a leaf. I knew that something awful was going to happen, but she held me under a kind of spell, and I could not help myself.

"'Incubu,' she said at length 'wouldst thou be a king? Listen, wouldst thou be a king? Behold, stranger, I am minded to make thee king of all Zu-Vendisay and husband of Sorais of the Night. Nay, peace, and hear me. To no man among my people had I thus opened out my secret heart, but thou art an outlander, and therefore do I speak without shame, knowing all I have to offer and how hard it had been to thee to ask. See, a crown lies at thy feet, my lord Incubu, and with that fortune a woman whom some have wished to woo. Now mayst thou answer.'

"'Oh, Sorais,' I said, 'pray do not speak thus'—you see I had not time to pick and choose my words—'because you are putting us both in an awkward position. I am going to marry your sister Nyleptha, Sorais, and I love her.'

"Next moment it struck me that I had said an awful thing, and I looked up to see the results. When I spoke, Sorais' face was hidden in her hands, and as my words reached her she slowly raised it, and I shrank back dismayed. It was ashy white, and her eyes were flaming. She got on to her feet and seemed to be choking, but the awful thing was that she was so quiet about it all. Once she looked at a side table on which lay a dagger, and from it to me, as though she thought of killing me; but she did not take it up. At last she spoke one word, and one only—

"'Go!'

"And I went, and glad enough I was to get out of it, and here I am. Give me another cup of wine, there's a good fellow, and tell me what is to be done."

I shook my head, for the affair was indeed serious. As one of the poets says,

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,

more especially if the woman is a queen and a Sorais, and indeed I feared the very worst, including imminent danger to ourselves.

"Nyleptha must be told of all this at once," I said, "and perhaps I had better tell her; she might receive your account with suspicion. Who is captain of her guard to-night?"

"Good."

"Very well, then, there will be no chance of her being got at. Don't look surprised. I don't think that her sister would stick at that. I suppose one must tell Good of what has happened."

"Oh, I don't know," said Sir Henry. "It would hurt his feelings, poor fellow! You see, he takes a lively personal interest in Sorais."

"That's true; and after all perhaps there is no need to tell him. He will find out the truth soon enough. Now, you mark my words: Sorais will throw in her lot with Nasta, who is sulking up in the north there, and there will be such a war as has not been known in Zu-Vendis for centuries. Look there!" and I pointed to two court messengers who were speeding away from the door of Sorais' private apartments. "Now follow me," and I ran up a stairway into an outlook tower that rose from the roof of our quarters, taking the spy glass with me, and looked out over the palace wall. The first thing we saw was one of the messengers speeding towards the temple, bearing, without doubt, the queen's word to the High Priest Agon, but for the other I searched in vain. Presently, however, I spied a horseman rushing furiously through the northern gate of the city, and in him I recognized the other messenger.

"Ah!" I said, "Sorais is a woman of spirit. She is acting at once, and will strike quick and hard. You have insulted her, my boy, and blood will flow in rivers before the stain is washed away, and yours with it if she can get hold of you. Well, I'm off to Nyleptha. Just stop where you are, old fellow, and try to get your nerves straight again. You'll need them all, I can tell you, unless I have observed human nature in the rough for fifty years for nothing." And off I went accordingly.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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