

Allan Quatermain

By H. RIDER HAGGARD.

STORIES OF "KING SOLOMON'S MINES," "WOLF IN THE WOODS," "THE WITCH'S HEAD," ETC.



And stood there boldly facing the people.

"Now hand thou over this foreign wife, and those who come to prey here with him, to the doom of fire, for have they not committed the deadly sin against the Sun or Nyleptha, I give thee war—red war! Ay, I say to thee that the path of thy passion shall be marked out by the blazing of thy towns, and thy rights and the blood of those who cleave to thee. On thy head rest the burden of the dead, and in thy ears ring the groans of the dying and the cries of the widows and those who are left fatherless forever and forever.

"I tell thee I will tear thee, Nyleptha, the White Queen, from thy throne, and thou shalt be hurled—ay, hurled, even from the topmost stair of the great way to the foot thereof, in that thou hast covered the name of the house of him who built it with black shame. And I tell ye, strangers, all save thou, Bougwan, whom because thou didst me a service I will give alive if thou wilt leave these men and follow me! Here poor Good shook his head vigorously, and ejaculated, 'Can't be done,' in English, 'that I will wrap you in sheets of gold and hang you yet alive in chains from the four golden trumpets of the four angels that fly east and west, and north and south from the golden pinnacles of the temple, so that ye may be taken and awarded to the land. And as for thee, Incubus, thou shalt die in yet another fashion that I will not tell thee now.'

She ceased, panting for breath, for her passion shook her like a storm, and a murmur, partly of horror and partly of admiration, ran through the hall. Then Nyleptha answered calmly and with dignity.

"It would become my place and dignity, O sister, so to speak as thou hast spoken, and so to threaten as thou hast threatened. Yet if thou wilt make war, then will I strive to bear up against thee: for if my hand seem soft, yet shall thou find it of iron when its grips thine armies by the throat. Sorais, I fear thee not. I weep for that which thou wilt bring upon our people and myself, but for myself I say—I fear thee not. Yet thou, who but yesterday didst strive to win my lover and my lord from me, whom today thou dost call a 'foreign wife,' to be thy lover and thy lord, there was an immense sensation in the hall, 'thou who but last night, as I have learned but since, didst enter here, didst creep like a snake into my sleeping place—ay, even by a secret way, and wouldst have foully murdered me, thy sister, as I lay asleep!'

"'It is false! it is false!' rang out Agon's and a score of other voices.

"'It is not false,' said I, producing the broken point of the dagger and holding it up. 'Where is the haft from which this flew, Sorais?'

"'It is not false,' cried Good, determined at last to act like a loyal man. 'I took her by the queen's bed, and on my breast the dagger broke.'

"'Who is on my side?' cried Sorais, shaking her silver spear, for she saw that public sympathy was turning against her. 'What, Bougwan, thou consent not?' she said, addressing Good, who was standing close to her, in a low, concentrated voice. 'Thou pale soul of a coward, a reward thou shalt eat out thy heart with! I have seen thee when thou didst, and thou mightest have been my husband and king! At least I hold thee in chains that cannot be broken.'

"'War! war! war!' she cried. 'Here with my hand upon the sacred stone that shall ensure, so runs the prophecy, till the Zu-Vendis set their necks beneath the alien yoke, I declare war to the end. Who follows Sorais of the Night to victory and honor?'

Instantly the whole concourse began to break up in indescribable confusion. Many present hastened to throw in their lot with 'The Lady of the Night,' but some came from her following to us. Among the former was an under officer of Nyleptha's own guard, who suddenly turned and made a run for the doorway through which Sorais's people were already passing. Umslopogans, who was present and had taken the whole scene in, seeing with admirable presence of mind that if the soldier got away others would follow his example, seized the man, who drew his sword and struck at him. Thereupon the Zulu sprang back with a shout, and avoiding the sword cuts began to peck at his foe with his terrible ax, till in a few seconds the man's fate overtook him, and he fell with a clash heavily and quite dead upon the marble floor.

This was the first blood spilled in the war. 'Shut the gates!' I shouted, thinking that we might perhaps catch Sorais so. But the order came too late, her guards were already passing through them, and in another minute the streets echoed with the furious galloping of horses and the rolling of chariots.

So, drawing half the people after her, Sorais was soon passing like a whirlwind through the Frowning City on her road to her headquarters at M'Arstuna, a fortress situated 150 miles to the north of Milosis.

And after that the city was alive with the endless tramp of regiments and the preparations for war, and old Umslopogans once more began to sit in the sunshine and gaze through a show of sharpening Inkosikaa's razor edge.

CHAPTER XIX.

A STRANGE WEDDING.

One person, however, did not succeed in getting out in time before the gates were shut, and that was the high priest Agon, who, as we had every reason to believe, was Sorais's greatly and the heart and soul of her party. This cunning and ferocious old man had not forgiven us for those hippopotami, or rather that was what he said. What he meant was that he never would brook the introduction of our wider ways of thought and foreign learning and influence while there was a possibility of stamping us out. Also he knew that we possessed a different system of religion, and no doubt was in daily terror of our attempt-

ing to introduce it into Zu-Vendis. One day he asked me if we had any religion in our country, and I told him that so far as I could remember we had ninety-five different ones. You might have knocked him down with a feather; and really it is difficult not to pity a high priest of a well established cult who is haunted by the possibility of approach of one or all of ninety-five new religions.

When we knew that Agon was caught, Nyleptha, Sir Henry and I discussed what was to be done with him. I was for closely incarcerating him, but Nyleptha shook her head, saying that it would produce a disastrous effect throughout the country. 'Ah!' she added with a stamp of her foot, 'if I win, and am once really queen, I will break the power of those priests, with their rights and revels and dark secret ways.' I only wish that old Agon could have heard her, it would have frightened him.

'Well,' said Henry, 'if we are not to imprison him I suppose that we may as well let him go. He's no use here.'

Nyleptha looked at him in a curious way, and said, in a dry little voice, 'Thinkest thou so, my lord?'

'Eh?' said Curtis. 'No, I don't see what is the use of keeping him.'

She said nothing, but kept looking at him in a way that was as shy as it was sweet. Then at last he understood.

'Forgive me, Nyleptha,' he said, rather tremulously, 'dost thou mean that thou wilt marry me, even now?'

'Nay, I know not; let my lord say,' was her rapid answer; 'but if my lord wills, the priest is there and the altar is there—pointing to the entrance to a private chapel—and flowers are ready to do the will of my lord! Listen, oh my lord; in eight days or less thou must leave me and go down to war, for thou shalt lead my armies—and in war, men sometimes fall, and if so, I would for a little space have had thee all my own, if only for memory's sake!' and the tears overflowed her lovely eyes and rolled down her face like heavy drops of dew down the red heart of a rose.

'Mayhap, too,' she went on, 'I shall lose my crown, and with my crown my life and this also. Sorais is very strong and very bitter, and if she prevails she will not spare. Who can read the future? Happiness is the world's white bird, that alights seldom, and flies fast and far till one day he is lost in the clouds. Therefore should we hold him fast if by any chance he rests for a little space upon our hand. It is not wise to neglect the present for the future, for who knows what the future will be, Incubus! Let us pluck our wings while the dew is on them, for when the sun is up they wither, and on the morrow will others bloom that we shall never see.' And she lifted her sweet face to him and smiled into his eyes, and once more I felt a horrible pang of jealousy, and turned and went away. They never took much notice of whether I was there or not, thinking, I suppose, that I was an old fool, and that it did not matter one way or the other, and really I believe they were right.

So I went back to our quarters, and ruminated over things in general, and watched old Umslopogans whetting his ax outside the window, as a vulture whets his beak beside a dying ox.

And in about an hour's time Sir Henry came tearing over, looking very radiant and wildly excited, and found Good and myself, and even Umslopogans, and asked us if we should like to assist at a real wedding. Of course we said yes, and off we went to the chapel, where we found Agon looking as sally as any high priest possibly could; and no wonder. It appeared that he and Nyleptha had had a slight difference of opinion about the coming ceremony. He had flatly refused to celebrate it, or to allow any of his priests to do so, whereupon Nyleptha became very angry, and told him that she, as queen, was head of the church, and meant to be obeyed. Indeed, she played the part of a Zu-Vendis Henry VIII to perfection, and insisted that if she wanted to be married she would be married, and he should marry her. He still refused to go through the ceremony, so she clinched her argument thus:

'Well, I cannot execute a high priest, because there is an absurd prejudice against it, and I cannot imprison him, because all his subordinates would raise a crying that would bring the stars down on Zu-Vendis and crush it, but I can leave him to contemplate the altar of the Sun without anything to eat, because that is his natural vocation; and if thou wilt not marry me, O Agon, thou shalt not placed before the altar, yonder, night, but a little water till such time as thou hast reconsidered the matter.'

Now, as it happened, Agon had been hurried away that morning without his breakfast, and was already exceedingly hungry, so he presently modified his views and consented that he would wash his hands of all responsibility in the matter.

So it happened that presently, attended only by the two of her favorite maidens, came the queen Nyleptha, with happy blushing face and downcast eyes, dressed in pure white, without embroidery of any sort, as seemed to be the fashion on these occasions in most countries of the world. She did not wear a single ornament, even her gold circlet were removed, and I thought that if possible she looked more lovely than ever without them, as really superbly beautiful women do. She came, courtesied low to Sir Henry, and then took his hand and led him up before the altar, and after a little pause, in a slow, clear voice uttered the following words, which are customary in Zu-Vendis if the bride desires and the man consents:

'Thou dost swear by the Sun that thou wilt take no other woman to wife unless I lay my hand upon her and bid her come?'

'I swear it,' added Sir Henry, adding in English, 'One is quite enough for me.'

Then Agon, who had been sulling in a corner near the altar, came forward and gabbed off something into his beard at such a rate that I could not follow it, but it appeared to be an invocation to the Sun to bless the union and make it fruitful. I observed that Nyleptha listened very closely to every word, and afterward discovered that she was afraid lest Agon should play her a trick, and by going through the invocations backward divorce instead of marry them. At the end of the invocations they were asked, as in our service, if they took each other for husband and wife, and on their assenting, they kissed each other before the altar and the service was over, so far as their rites were concerned. But it seemed to me that there was yet something wanting, and so I produced a prayer book, which, together with the 'Jugolds Legends,' that I often read when I lie awake at night, accompanied me in all my later wanderings. I gave it to my poor brother Harry years ago, and after his death I found it among his things and took it back again.

'Curtis,' I said, 'I am not a clergyman, and I do not know if what I am going to propose is allowable—I know it is not legal—but if you and the queen have no objection, I should like to read the English marriage service over you. It is a solemn step which you are taking, and I think that you ought, as far as circumstances will allow, to give it the sanction of your own religion.'

'I have thought of that,' he said, 'and I wish you would. I do not feel half married yet.'

Nyleptha raised no objection, fully understanding that her husband wished to celebrate the marriage according to the rites prevailing in his own country, and so I set to work

and read the service from 'Dearly beloved' to 'amazement,' as well as I could; and when I came to 'I, Henry, take thee, Nyleptha,' I translated, and also 'I, Nyleptha, take thee, Henry,' which she repeated after me very well. Then Sir Henry took a plain gold ring from his little finger and placed it on hers, and so on to the end. The ring had been Curtis's mother's wedding ring, and I could not help thinking how astonished the dear old Yorkshire lady would have been if she could have foreseen that her wedding ring was to serve a similar purpose for Nyleptha, a queen of the Zu-Vendis.

As for the priest, he was with difficulty kept calm while the second ceremony was going on, for he at once understood that it was religious in its nature, and doubtless bethought him of the ninety-five new faiths which he loomed up ominously in his eyes. Indeed, he at once set me down as a rival high priest, and hated me accordingly. However, in the end he went, positively bristling with indignation, and I knew that he might look out for danger from his direction.

And off went Good and I, and old Umslopogans also, leaving the happy pair to themselves, and very low we all felt. Marriages are supposed to be cheerful things, but my experience is that they are very much the reverse to everybody except, perhaps, the two people who are engaged. They mean the breaking up of so many old ties as well as the undertaking of so many new ones, and there is always something sad about the passing away of the old order.

So Good and I went and ate in silence, and then indulged in an extra fine flagon of old Zu-Vendian to keep our spirits up, and presently one of our attendants came and told a story that gave us something to think about.

It may, perhaps, be remembered that after his quarrel with Umslopogans, Alphonse had gone off in an exceedingly ill temper to stalk over his scratches. Well, it appears that he was right past the temple to the Sun, down the wide road on the left side of the slope, and thence on into the beautiful park or pleasure gardens, which are laid out just beyond the outer wall. After wandering about there for a little he started to return, but was met near the outer gate by Sorais's furious army of chariots, which were galloping furiously along the great north-south road. When she caught sight of Alphonse, Sorais halted her train and called to him. On approaching he was instantly seized and dragged into one of the chariots and carried off, 'crying out loudly,' as our informant said, and as, from my general knowledge of him, I can well believe.

At first I was much puzzled to know what object Sorais could have in carrying off the little Frenchman. She could hardly stoop so low as to try to wreak her fury on one whom she knew was only a servant. It would not be in keeping with her character to do so. At last, however, an idea occurred to me. We three were the only ones who had seen Sorais, and she was so much loved and revered by the people of Zu-Vendis, and both because we were the first strangers they had ever seen, and because we were supposed to be the possessors of almost supernatural wisdom. Indeed, though Sorais's cry against the 'foreign wolves,' or, to translate it more accurately, 'foreign hyenas,' was sure to go down very well with the nobles and the priests, it was not, as we least of us were particularly effective among the bulk of the population. The Zu-Vendis people, like the Athenians of old, are ever seeking for some new thing, and just because we were so new our presence was, on the whole, acceptable to them.

Again, Sir Henry's magnificent personal appearance made a deep impression upon a race who possessed no other love of beauty than any other I have ever seen. In other countries, but in Zu-Vendis it is almost worshipped, as, indeed, the national love of statuary shows. The people said openly in the market places that there was not a man in the country to touch Curtis in personal appearance, as, with the exception of Sorais, there was no woman who could compete with Nyleptha, and that therefore it was meet that they should marry; and that he had been sent by the Sun as a husband for their queen. Now, from all this it will be seen that the country people were of considerable excitement, and nobody knew where Sorais herself. Consequently it struck me that it might have occurred to her that down in the country and among the country people it would be better to place the reason of her conflict with her sister upon other and more general grounds than Nyleptha's marriage with the stranger. It would be easy in a land where there had been so many marriages to rake out some old story that would stir up the recollection of buried feuds, and, indeed, she soon found an effectual one. This being so, it was of great importance to her to have one of the strangers with her whom she could trust, and whom she knew to be a great outlander, who had been struck by the justice of her cause that he had elected to leave his companions and follow her standard.

This, no doubt, was the cause of her anxiety to get a hold of Good, whom she would have used till the end of service and then cast off. But Good's presence in person was grasped at the opportunity of securing Alphonse, who was not unlike him in personal appearance, though smaller, no doubt with the object of showing him off in the cities and country as the great Bougwan himself. I told her that I thought that that was her plan, and his face was a sight to see, he was so horrified at the idea.

'What!' he said, 'dress up that little wretch to represent me? Why, I shall have to get out of the country! My reputation will be ruined forever.'

I consoled him as well as I could, but it is no use, I am afraid, to personate all over a strange country by an arrangement of that kind, and I can quite sympathize with his vexation.

Well, that night Good and I messed, as I have said, in solitary grandeur, feeling very much as though we had just returned from burying a friend instead of marrying one, and next morning the work began in good earnest. The messages and orders which had been dispatched by Nyleptha two days before now began to take effect, and multitudes of armed men came pouring into the city. We saw, as may be imagined, but very little of Nyleptha and not much of Curtis during those next few days, but Good and I sat daily with the council of generals and loyal lords, drawing up plans of action, arranging commissariat matters, the distribution of commands, and a hundred and one other things. Men came in freely, and all the day long the great roads leading to Milosis were spotted by the banners of lords arriving from their places to rally round Nyleptha.

After the first two days it became clear that we should be able to take the field with about forty thousand infantry and twenty thousand cavalry—a very respectable force, considering how short was the time we had to collect it, and that about half of the regular army had elected to follow Sorais.

But if our force was large, Sorais's was, according to the reports brought in day by day by her spies, much larger. She had taken up her headquarters at a very strong town called M'Arstuna, situated, as I have said, to the north of Milosis, and all the country side was looking to her standard. Nasta had poured down from his highlands, and was on his way to join her with no less than twenty-five thousand of his mountaineers—the most terrible soldiers to face in all Zu-Vendis. Another mighty lord, named Belu-

sha, who lived in the great horse breeding district, had come in with twelve thousand cavalry, and so on. Indeed, what between one thing and another, it seemed certain that she would gather a fully armed host of nearly one hundred thousand men.

And then came the news that she was proposing to break up her camp and march on the Frowning City itself, desolating the country as she came. Thereon arose the question whether it would be best to meet her at Milosis or to go out and give her battle. When our opinion was asked upon the subject, Good and I unhesitatingly gave it in favor of an advance. If we were to shut ourselves up in the city and wait to be attacked, it seemed to us that our inaction would be set down to fear. It is so very important, especially on an occasion of this sort, when a very little will suffice to turn men's opinions one way or the other, to be up and doing something. Ardor for a cause will soon evaporate if the cause does not move, but sits down to content. Therefore we cast our vote for moving out and giving battle in the open, instead of waiting till we were drawn from our walls like a badger from a hole.

Sir Henry's opinion coincided with ours, and so, needless to say, did that of Nyleptha, who, like a flint, was always ready to flash out fire. A great map of the country was brought and spread out before her. About thirty miles this side of M'Arstuna, where Sorais was, and ninety old miles from Milosis, the road ran over a neck of land some two and a half miles in width, and flanked on either side by forest clad hills, without being loffy, would be quite impracticable for a great army, and then, with a quickness of perception that in some way amounts almost to an instinct, she laid her finger upon this neck of rising ground, and turning to her husband, said, with a proud air of confidence and a toss of the golden head:

'Here shalt thou meet Sorais's armies. I know the spot; here shalt thou meet them, and drive them before thee like the dust before the storm.'

But Curtis looked grave and said nothing.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BATTLE OF THE PASS.

It was on the third morning after this incident of the map that Sir Henry and I started. With the exception of a small guard, all the great host had moved on the night before, leaving the Frowning City very silent and empty. Indeed, it was found impossible to leave any garrison, with the exception of a personal guard for Nyleptha and about 1,000 men who from sickness or one cause or another were unable to proceed with the army; but as the place was practically impregnable, and we were from within very silent and busy, this did not so much matter.

Good and Umslopogans had gone on with the army, but Nyleptha accompanied Sir Henry and myself to the city gates, riding a magnificent white horse called Daylight, which was supposed to be the fleetest and most enduring animal in Zu-Vendis. Her face bore traces of recent weeping, but there were no tears in her eyes now, indeed she was bearing up bravely against what must have been a bitter trial to her. At the gate she reined in her horse and bade us farewell. On the previous day she had reviewed and addressed the officers of the great army, speaking to them such high, eloquent words and expressing so confident a reliance in their valor and in their ultimate victory that they carried their hearts away, and as she rode from rank to rank they cheered her till the ground shook. And now today the same mood seemed to be on her.

'Remember, I trust to thy wits, which are as a needle to a spear handle compared to those of my people, to save us from Sorais. I know that thou wilt do thy duty.'

I bowed and explained to her my horror of fighting, and my fear lest I should lose my heart, at which she laughed gently and turned to Curtis.

'Fare thee well, my lord!' she said. 'Come back with victory, and as a king, or on thy soldier's spears.'

Sir Henry said nothing, but turned his horse to go; perhaps he had a bit of a lump in his throat. One gets over it afterwards, but these sort of partings are trying when one has only been married a week.

'Here,' added Nyleptha, 'will I greet ye when ye return in triumph. And now, my lords, once more farewell!'

Then we rode on, but when we had gone 150 yards or so, we turned and perceived her still sitting on her horse at the same spot, and looking out after us beneath her hand, and that was the last we saw of her, though a mile farther on, however, we heard galloping behind us, and looking round, saw a mounted soldier coming toward us, leading Nyleptha's matchless steed, Daylight.

Then we rode on.

'The queen sends the white stallion as a farewell gift to her Lord Incubus, and bids me tell my lord that he is the fleetest and the most enduring horse in all the land,' said the soldier, bending to his saddle bow before us.

At first Sir Henry did not want to take the horse, saying that he was too good for such rough work, but I persuaded him to do so, thinking that Nyleptha would be hurt if he did not. Little did I guess at the time what service that noble horse would render in our sorest need. It is curious to look back and realize upon what trivial and apparently accidental circumstances great events frequently turn, as easily and as naturally as a door on its hinges.

Well, we took the horse, and a beauty he was; it was a perfect pleasure to see him move; and Curtis having sent back his greetings and thanks, we proceeded on our journey.

By midday we overtook the rear guard of the great army, of which Sir Henry formally took over the command. It was a heavy responsibility, and it impressed him very much, but the queen's injunctions on the point were such as did not admit of being trifled with. He was beginning to find out that greatness has its responsibilities as well as its glories.

Then we marched on without meeting with any opposition, almost indeed without seeing anybody, for the populations of the towns and villages along our route had for the most part fled, fearing lest they should be caught between the two rival armies and ground to powder like grain between the upper and the nether stones.

On the evening of the fourth day—for the progress of so great a multitude was necessarily slow—we camped two miles this side of the neck or ridge I have spoken of, and our outposts brought us word that Sorais, with all her power, was rolling down upon us, and had camped that night ten miles the further side of the neck.

Accordingly, before dawn we sent forward 1,500 cavalry to seize the position. Scarcely had they occupied it, however, before they

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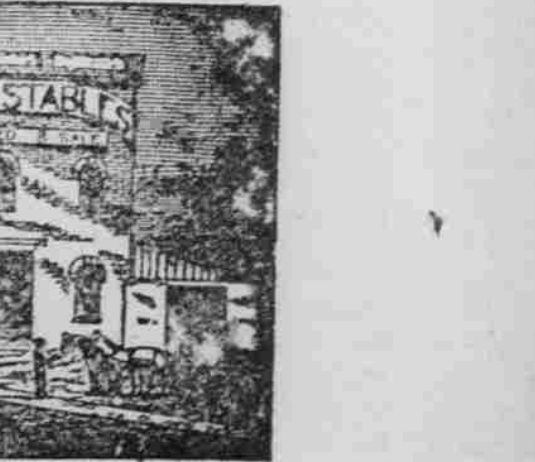
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