

The Eternal Lover



by Edgar Rice Burroughs

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CHAPTER II.

TO have looked at her merely you would never have thought Victoria Custer of Kentrice, Neb., at all the sort of girl she really was. Her large, dreamy eyes and the graceful lines of her slender figure gave one an impression of timidity, which we have grown to take for granted as an inherent characteristic of the truly womanly woman.

Yet I dare say there were only two things on God's green earth that Victoria Custer feared, or beneath it or above it, for that matter—mice and earthquakes.

She readily admitted the fearful terror which the former aroused within her, but of earthquakes she seldom if ever would speak. To her brother Barney, her cousin and confidant, she had on one or two occasions unburdened her soul.

The two were guests now of Lord and Lady Greystone upon the Englishman's vast estate in equatorial Africa, on the coast of the Waziri, to which Barney Custer had come to hunt big game—and forget.

But all that has nothing to do with this story, nor has John Clayton, Lord Greystone, who was once upon a time "Tarzan of the Apes," except that his having chanced to be a guest of his at the same time as the Custers makes it possible for me to give you a story that otherwise might never have been told.

South of Uziri, the country of the Waziri, lies a chain of rugged mountains, at the foot of which stretches a broad plain where antelope, zebra, giraffe, rhino and elephant abound, and here are lion and leopard and hyena preying, each after his own fashion, upon the sleek, fat herds of antelope, zebra and giraffe. Here, too, are buff, hair-trifling, savage beasts, more formidable than the lion himself. Clayton says:

It is indeed a hunter's paradise, and scarce a day passed that did not find a party absent from the low, rambling bungalow of the Greystones in search of game and adventure, nor seldom was it that Victoria Custer failed to be of the party.

Already she had bagged two leopards, in addition to numerous antelope and zebra, and on foot had faced a



"Barney, there is something about those hills that fills me with terror."

bull buffalo's charge, bringing him down with a perfect shot within ten paces of where she stood.

At first she had kept her brother in a state bordering on nervous collapse, for the risks she took were such as few men would care to undertake.

After he had discovered, however, that she possessed perfect coolness in the face of danger and that the accuracy of her aim was so almost uncanny as to win unstinted praise from the oldest hunters among them he commenced to lend a little too far in the other direction, so that Victoria was often in positions where she found herself entirely separated from the other members of the party—a complaint, since women and gentlemen were equally surrounded by precautions and guards, through which it was difficult to get within firing distance of any sort of game.

As they were riding homeward one evening after a hunt in the foothills Barney noted that his sister was unusually quiet and apparently depressed. "What's the matter, Vic?" he asked. "Dead tired, eh?"

The girl looked up with a bright smile, which was immediately followed by an expression of puzzled bewilderment.

"Barney," she said, after a moment of silence, "there is something about those hills back there that fills me with the strangest sensation of terror imaginable. Today I passed an outcropping of volcanic rock that gave evidence of a frightful convulsion of nature in some bygone age. At sight of it I commenced to tremble from head to foot, a cold perspiration breaking out all over me."

"But that part is not so strange—you know I have always been subject to these silly attacks of unreasoning terror at sight of any evidence of the mighty forces that have wrought changes in the earth's crust or of the slightest tremor of an earthquake."

But today the feeling of unutterable personal loss which overwhelmed me though one whom I loved above all others had been taken from me."

"And yet," she continued, "through all my inexplicable sorrow there shone a ray of brilliant hope as remarkable and unfathomable as the deeper and depressing emotion which still stirred me."

For some time neither spoke, but rode silently stirrup to stirrup as their ponies picked their ways through the knee-high grass. The girl was thinking, trying to puzzle out an explanation of the rather weird sensations which had so recently claimed her.

Barney Custer was one of those unusual and delightful people who do not scoff at whatever they cannot understand—the reason, doubtless, that his sister as well as others chose him as the recipient of their confidences. Not understanding her emotion, he had nothing to offer, and so remained silent.

He was, however, not a little puzzled, as he had always been, at each new manifestation of Victoria's uncanny reaction of every indication of the great upheaval which marked the physical changes in the conformation of the earth's crust.

He recalled former occasions upon which his sister had confided in him something of similar terrors.

Once in the Garden of the Gods and again during a trip through the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and very vivid to-day was the recollection of Victoria's nervous collapse following the reading of the press dispatches describing the San Francisco earthquake. In all other respects his sister was an exceptionally normal, well-balanced young American woman—which fact, doubtless, rendered her one weakness the more apparent.

But Victoria Custer's terror of earthquakes was not her only peculiarity. The other was her strange contempt for the men who had sued for her hand—and of these there had been many. Her brother had thought several of them the salt of the earth and Victoria herself had liked them too. But as for loving them—perish the thought!

Oddly enough, recollection of this other phase of her character obtruded itself upon Barney's memory as the two rode on toward the Clayton bungalow, and with it he recalled a persistent dream which Victoria had said recurred after each reminder of a great convulsion of nature. At the thought he broke the silence.

"Has your—ah—avatar made his customary 'appearance'?" he asked, smiling.

The girl extended her hand toward her brother and hid it on his, where it rested upon his thigh as he rode, looking up at him with half-frightened half-longing eyes.

"Oh, Barney," she cried, "you are such a dear never to have laughed at my silly dreams! I'm sure I should quite mind did I not leave you in whom to confide, but lately I have hesitated to speak of it even to you—he has been coming so often!"

"Every night since we first hunted in the vicinity of the hills I have waited hand in hand with him beneath a great equatorial moon beside a rest, less sea, and more clearly than ever in the past have I seen his form and features in his clear eyes."

"He is very handsome, Barney, and very tall and strong and clean limbed—I wish that I might meet such a man in real life. I know it is a ridiculous thing to say, but I can never love any of the pusillanimous weaklings who are forever failing in love with me—not after having with a hand in hand with such as he, and read the love in his clear eyes."

"And yet, Barney, I am afraid of him. Is it not, Barney?"

At this juncture they were joined by other members of the party, so that no further reference to the subject was made by either.

At the Claytons' they found that an addition had been made to the number of guests by the unheralded advent of two kinkid and young men, one of whom rose and came forward to meet the returning hunters while they were

yet a hundred yards away. He was a tall, athletic appearing man. As Victoria Custer recognized his features she did not know whether to be pleased or angry. There was the one man she had ever met who came nearest to the realization of her dream man, and this one of all the others had never spoken a word of love to her. His companion, who had now risen from the cool shade of the low veranda, was also coming forward, but more slowly, the set of his shoulders and the swing of his stride betokening his military vocation.

"Mr. Curtiss," exclaimed Victoria and looking past him. "And Lieutenant Bülow? Where in the world did you come from?"

"The world left us," replied the officer, smiling. "and we have followed her to the equatorial Africa."

"We found Nebraska a very tame place after you and Barney left," explained Mr. Curtiss, "and when I discovered that Bülow would accompany me we lost no time in following you, and here we are throwing ourselves upon the mercy and hospitality of Lady Greystone."

"I have been trying to convince them," said that lady, who had now joined the party at the foot of the veranda steps, "that the obligation is all upon our side. It taxes our ingenuity and the generosity of our friends to keep the house even half full of 'edgenial' companions."

It was not until after dinner that night that Mr. William Curtiss had an opportunity to draw Victoria Custer away from the others upon some more or less hazy pretext that he might explain for her ears alone just why he had suddenly found Bar-ney, Neb., such a desolate place and had realized that it was imperative to the salvation of his life and happiness that he travel halfway round the world in search of a certain slender bit of femininity.

This usually self-possessed young man stammered and stammered like a bashful schoolboy speaking his Friday afternoon piece, but finally he managed to expel from his system more or less coherently the fact that he was very much in love with Victoria Custer and that he should never again rest or sleep until she had promised to be his wife.

There was a strong appeal to the girl in the masterful thing the man had done in searching her out, in the wilds of Africa to tell her of his love, for it seemed that he and Bülow had forced their way through a very savage section of the jungle because it was the shortest route from the coast to the Greystone ranch.

Then there was that about him which appealed to the same attributes of her nature to which the young giant of her dreams appeared—a primitive strength and masterfulness that left her both frightened and happily helpless in the presence of both these strong loves, for the love of her dream man was to Victoria Custer a real and living love.

Curtiss saw assent in the silence which followed his outbreak, and, taking advantage of this tacit encouragement, he seized her hands in his and drew her toward him.

"Oh, Victoria," he whispered, "tell me that thing I wish to hear from your dear lips! Tell me that even a tenth part of my love is returned and I shall be happy!"

She looked up into his eyes, shining down upon her in the moonlight, and on her lips trembled an avowal of the love she honestly believed she could at last bestow upon the man of her choice.

In the past few moments she had thrashed out the question of that other—unreal and intangible love that had held her chained to a dream for years, and in the cold light of twentieth century American rationality she had found it possible to put her hallucinations in the love of this very real and very earnest young man.

"Billy," she said, "I—"

But she got no further. Even as the words that would have bound her to him were forming upon her tongue there came a low, sullen rumbling from the bowels of the earth—the ground rose and fell beneath them as the swell of the sea rises and falls.

Then there came a violent trembling and shaking and a final deafening crash in the distance that might have accompanied the birth of mountain ranges.

With a little moan of terror the girl drew away from Curtiss, and then, before he could restrain her, she had turned and fled toward the bungalow.

At the veranda steps she was met by the other members of the house party and by the Greystones and numerous servants, who had rushed out at the first premonition of the coming shock.

Barney Custer saw his sister running toward the house and, knowing her terror of such phenomena, ran to meet her.

Close behind her came Curtiss, just in time to see the girl swoon in her brother's arms.

Barney carried her to her room, where Lady Greystone, abandoning the youthful Jack to his black mammy, Emerald, ministered to her.

CHAPTER III.
The Young Hunter.

HE awoke that had been felt as plainly in the valley had been such more severe—in the mountains to the south.

one place an overhanging cliff had split and fallen away from the face of the mountain, tumbling with a mighty roar into the valley below.

As it hurtled down the mountain side the moonlight, shining upon the fresh scar that it had left behind it upon the

mountain, revealed the mouth of a gully, from which there tumbled the inert figure of an animal, which rolled down the steep declivity in the wake of the mass of rock that had preceded it, the tearing away of which had opened up the cavern to which it had fled.

For a hundred feet perhaps the body, coming to a stop upon a broad ledge. For some time it lay perfectly motionless, but at last a feeble movement of the limbs was describable. Then, for another brief period it was quiet.

Minutes dragged into hours, and still the lonely thing lay upon the lonely mountain side, while upon the plain below it hungry lions roared and roared and all the twinkling life of the savage wilds took up their search for food their sleeping and their love making where they had dropped them in the fright of the earthquake.

At last the stars paled and the eastern horizon glowed to a new day, and then the thing upon the ledge sat up. It was a man. Still partly dazed, he drew his hand across his eyes and looked about him in bewilderment, then, staggering a little, he rose to his feet, and as he came erect, the new sun shining on his bronzed limbs and his shock of black hair, roughly cropped between sharpened stones, his youth and beauty became startlingly apparent.

He looked about him upon the ground, and not finding that which he sought, turned his eyes upward toward the mountain, where they fell upon the cave mouth he had just quitted so precipitately. Quickly he clambered back to the cavern, his stone hatchet and knife beating against his bare hips as he climbed.

For a moment he was lost to view within the cave, but presently he emerged, in one hand a stone tipped spear, which seemed recently to have been broken and roughly spliced with raw tendons, and in the other the severed head of an enormous beast, which more nearly resembled the royal tiger of Asia than it did any other beast, though that resemblance was little closer than the resemblance of the royal Bengal to a house kitten.

The young man was Nu, the son of Nu.

For a hundred thousand years he had lain buried beneath in his rocky tomb, as time seemed in his pensive animation for similar periods of time. The earthquake had unsealed his sepulcher, and the rough tumble down the mountain side had induced respiration.

His heart had responded to the pumping of his lungs, and simultaneously the other organs of his body had resumed their various functions.

As he stood upon the threshold of the cave of Nu, the man hunter, the look of bewilderment grew upon his features as his eyes roved over the panorama of the unfamiliar world which lay spread below him. There was scarce an object to remind him of the world that had been but a brief instant before, for Nu could not know that ages had rolled by since he took hasty refuge in the lair of the great beast he had slain.

He thought that he might be dreaming, and so he rubbed his eyes and looked again; but still he saw the unfamiliar trees and bushes about him and, further down in the valley, the odd appearing vegetation of the jungle. Nu could not fathom the mystery of it.

Slowly he stepped from the cave and began the descent toward the valley for he was very thirsty and very hungry. Below him he saw animals grazing upon the broad plain, but even at that distance he realized that they were such as no mortal eye had ever before rested upon.

Warily he advanced, every sense alert against whatever new form of danger might lurk in this strange new world. Had he had any conception of

which Ora winks, the questionings of the primitive.

He saw the sun, but to him it was a different sun from the great, swollen orb that had shone through the thick, humid atmosphere of the Noocene.

From Ora's lair only the day before he had been able to see in the distance the shimmering surface of the restive sea, but now so far as eye could reach there stretched an interminable jungle of gently waving tree tops, except for the rolling plain at his feet, where yesterday the black jungle of the ape people had reared its lofty fronts.

Nu shook his head. It was all quite beyond him, but there were certain things which he could comprehend, and so, after the manner of the self-reliant, he set about to wrest his livelihood from nature under the new conditions which had been imposed upon him while he slept.

First of all, his spear must be attended to. It would never do to trust to that crude patch longer than it would take him to find and fit a new haft. His meat must wait until that time was accomplished.

In the meantime he might pick up what fruit was available in the forest toward which he was heading his steps in search of a long straight shoot of the hard wood which some would meet his requirements.

In the days that had been Nu's there had grown in isolated patches a few lone clumps of very straight hardwood trees. The smaller of these the men of the tribe would cut down and split lengthwise with stone wedges and pull from a single tree they might have produced material for a score or more spear shafts, but now Nu must seek the very smallest of saplings, for he had no time to waste in splitting a larger tree, even had he had the necessary wedges and hammers.

Into the forest the youth crept, for though 100,000 years had elapsed since his birth, he was still to all intent and purpose a youth. Upon all sides he saw strange and wonderful trees, the like of which had never been in the forests of yesterday.

The growths were not so luxuriant or prodigious, but for the most part the trees offered suggestions of alluring possibilities to the nonbarboreal Nu, for the branches were much heavier and more solid than those of the great tree ferns of his own epoch and commenced much nearer the ground. Catlike he leaped into the lower branches of them, reveling in the ease with which he could travel from tree to tree.

Gay colored birds of strange appearance screamed and scolded at him. Little monkeys hurried, chattering, from his path. Nu laughed. What a quaint, diminutive world it was indeed! No monsters had he yet seen a tree or creature that might compare in size to the monsters among which he had traveled the preceding day.

The fruits, too, were small and strange. He scarcely dared venture to eat of them lest they be poisonous.

If the lesser ape folk would only let him come close enough to speak with them he might ascertain from them which were safe, but for some unaccountable reason they seemed to fear and mistrust him. Thus, above all other considerations, argued to Nu that he had come in some mysterious way into another world.

Presently the troglodyte discovered a slender, straight young sapling. He came to the ground and tested its strength by bending it back and forth. Apparently it met the requirements of a new shaft.

With his stone hatchet he hewed it off close to the ground, stripped it of branches, and climbing to the safety of the trees again, where he need fear no interruption from the huge monsters of the world he knew, set to work with his stone knife to remove the bark and shape the end to receive his spearhead.

First he split it down the center for four or five inches, and then he cut notches in the surface upon either side of the split portion. Now he carefully unwrapped the rawhide that binds the spearhead into his old haft, and for want of water to moisten it crammed the whole unfragrant mass into his mouth, that it might be softened by warmth and saliva.

For several minutes he busied himself in shaping the point of the new shaft that it might exactly fit the inequalities in the shank of the spearhead. By the time this was done the rawhide had been sufficiently moistened to permit him to wind it tightly about the new shaft into which he had set the spearhead.

As he worked he heard the noises of the jungle about him. There were many familiar voices, but more strange ones. Not once had the cave bear spoken; nor Zor, the mighty lion of the Noocene; nor Ora, the saber-toothed tiger. He missed the howling of the bull-bos and the hissing and whistling of monster saurian and amphibian.

To Nu it seemed a silent world. Propped up against the bole of the tree before him grinned the hideous head of the man hunter, the only familiar object in all the world about him.

Presently he became aware that the lesser apes were creeping really closer to have a better look at him. He waited silently until from the tall of his eye he glimpsed one quite near, and then in a low voice he spoke in the language that his allies of yesterday had understood; and though ages had elapsed since that long gone day, the little monkey above him understood, for the language of the apes can never change.

"Why do you fear Nu, the son of Nu?" asked the man. "When has he ever harmed the ape people?"

"The hairless ones kill us with sharp sticks that they thrust through the atr," replied the monkey, "or with little sticks that make a great noise that kills us from afar. But you seem not to be of these. We have never seen one like you until now. Do you not wish to kill us?"

"Why should I?" replied Nu. "It is better that we be friends than that I wish of you as that you tell me of the fruits that grow here be safe for me to eat and then direct me to the best place which dwell the tribe of Nu, my father."

The monkeys had gathered in front of him, seeing that the strange white ape offered no harm to the law, and when they learned his words they scampered about in all directions to gather nuts and fruits and berries for him.

It is true that some of them began what they had intended doing before the task was half completed, and ended by pulling one another's tails and frolicking among the higher branches, or else ate the fruit they had gone to gather for their new friend, but a few there were with greater powers of concentration than their fellows, who returned with fruit and berries and caterpillars, all of which Nu devoured with the avidity of the half famished.

Of the whereabouts of the tribe of his father, they could tell him nothing, for they had never heard of such a people, or of the great sea beside which he told them that his people dwelled.

His breakfast finished and his spear repaired, Nu set out toward the plain, bringing down one of the beasts he had seen grazing there, for his stomach called aloud for flesh. Fruit and bugs might be all right for children and ape people, but a full grown man must have meat, warm and red and dripping.

Closest to him as he emerged from the jungle browsed a small herd of zebra. They were directly up wind and between him and them were patches of tall grass and clumps of trees scattered about the surface of the plain.

Nu wondered at the strange beast, admiring their gaudy markings as he came closer to them. Upon the edge of the herd nearest him a plump stallion stood swiveling his tail against the annoying flies, occasionally raising his head from his feeding to search the horizon for signs of danger, sniffing the air for the telltale scent of an enemy. It was he that Nu selected for his prey.

Stealthily the cave man crept through the tall grass, scarce a blade moving to the sinuous advance of his sleek body. Within fifty feet of the zebra Nu stopped, for the stallion was giving evidence of restlessness, as though sensing intuitively the near approach of a foe he could neither see nor hear nor smell.

The man still prone upon his belly, drew his spear into his throwing grasp. With the utmost caution he wormed his legs beneath him, and then, like lightning, and all with a single movement, he leaped to his feet and cast the stone-tipped weapon at his quarry.

With a snort of terror the stallion reared to plunge away, but the spear had found the point behind his shoulder even as he saw the figure of the man rise from the tall grass. As the balance of the herd galloped madly off, their leader pitched headlong to the earth.

Nu ran forward with ready knife but the animal was dead before he reached its side. The great spear had passed through its heart and was protruding upon the opposite side of the body. The man removed the weapon and with his knife cut several long strips of meat from the plump haunches.

Ever and anon he raised his head to scan the plain and jungle for evidence of danger, sniffing the breeze just as he had the stallion he had killed.

His work was but partially completed when he caught the scent of man yet a long way off. He knew that he could not be mistaken, yet never had he sensed so strange an odor. There were men coming, he knew, but of the other odors that accompanied them he could make nothing. For khaki and guns and sweaty saddle blankets and the odor of tanned leather were to Nu's nostrils as would Greek have been to his ears.

It would be best, thought Nu, to retreat to the safety of the forest until he could ascertain the number and kind of beings that were approaching, and so, taking but careless advantage of the handier shelter, the cave man croutered toward the forest, for now he was not stalking game, and never yet had he shown fear in the presence of an enemy.

If their numbers were too great for him to cope with single handed he would not show himself, but none might ever say that they had seen Nu the son of Nu, run away from danger.

In his hand still swung the head of the zebra, and as the man leaped to the low branches of a tree at the jungle's edge to spy upon the men he knew to be advancing from the far side of the plain he fell to wondering how he was to find his way back to Nat-ji that he might place the trophy at her feet and claim her as his mate.

Only the previous evening they had walked together hand in hand along the beach, and now he had not the remotest conception of where that beach lay.

Straight across the plain should be the direction of it, for from that direction had come to find the lair of Ora. But now all was changed.

There was no single familiar landmark to guide him. Not even the ape people knew of any sea nearby, and he himself had no conception as to whether he was in the same world that he had traversed when last the sun shone upon him.

(To be continued.)

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