

The Eternal Lover

By EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

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CHAPTER IV. The Dream Mate.

THE following morning the earthquake found Victoria Custer still a-bed. She told Lady Grey-stoke that she felt weak from the effects of the nervous shock, but the truth of the matter was that she dreaded to meet Curtiss and undergo the ordeal which she knew confronted her.

How was she to explain to him the effect that the subterranean rumblings and the shaking of the outer crust had had upon her and her sentiments toward him?

When her brother came in to see her she drew his head down upon the pillow beside hers and whispered something of the horrible hallucinations that had haunted her since the previous evening.

"Oh, Barney," she cried, "what can it be? What can it be? The first deep rumblings that preceded the shock seemed to awake me as from a lethargy, and as plainly as I see you beside me now I saw the half naked creature of my dreams, and when I saw him I knew that I could never wed Mr. Curtiss or any other."

"It is awful to have to admit it, even you, Barney; but I—I knew when I saw him that I loved him—that I was in love with him. Not his wife, Barney, but his man—his mate—and I had to fight myself to keep from rushing into the terrible blackness of the night and throw myself into his arms."

"It was then that I managed to control myself long enough to run to you, here I fainted. And last night, in my dreams, I saw him again—alone and helplessly searching through a strange and hostile world to find and claim me. You cannot know, Barney, how real it is to me. It is not as other dreams. I instead I really see him—the satin texture of his smooth, bronzed skin, the lordly poise of his perfect head, the tousled shock of coal black hair that I have learned to love and rough which I know I have lovingly run my fingers as he stooped to kiss me."

He carries a great spear, stone tipped—I should know it the moment that I saw it—and a knife and hatchet of some flinty material, and in his left hand he bears the severed head of a mighty beast.

He is a noble figure, but of another world or of another age. Somewhere wanders, so lonely and alone that his heart weeps at the thought of him.

Oh, Barney, either he is true and I shall find him or I am gone mad. Tell me, Barney, for the love of heaven, you believe that I am sane!"

Barney Custer drew his sister's face close to his and kissed her tenderly.

"Of course you're sane, Vic," he reassured her. "You've just allowed that old dream of yours to become a sort of obsession with you, and now it's got on your nerves until you are commencing to believe it even against your better judgment. Take a good grip on yourself, get up and join Curtiss in a long ride."

"Have it out with him. Tell him just what you have told me, and then tell him you'll marry him, and I'll warrant that you'll be dreaming about him instead of that young giant that you have stolen out of some fairy tale."

"I'll get up and take a ride, Barney," replied the girl, "but as for marrying Mr. Curtiss—well, I'll have to think it over."

She did not join the party, however, that were riding toward the hills that morning, for the thought of seeing the torn and twisted stratum of a bygone age that lifted its scoured head above the surface of the plain at the base of the mountains was more than she felt equal to. They did not urge her, and, as she insisted that Mr. Curtiss accompany the other men, she was left alone at the bungalow with Lady Grey-stoke, the baby and the servants.

As the party trotted across the rolling land that stretched before them to the foothills they sighted a herd of zebras coming toward them in mad stampede.

"Something is hunting ahead of us," remarked one of the men.

"We may get a shot at a lion from the looks of it," replied another.

A short distance farther on they came upon the carcass of a zebra stalled. Barney and Butzow dismounted to examine it in an effort to determine the nature of the enemy that had dispatched it.

At the first glance Barney called to one of the other members of the party, an experienced big game hunter.

"What do you make of this, Brown?" he asked, pointing to the exposed haunch.

"It is a man's kill," replied the other. "Look at that gaping hole over the heart, that would tell the story were it not for the evidence of the knife that cut away these strips from the rump. The carcass is still warm. The kill must have been made within the past few minutes."

"Then it couldn't have been a man," spoke up another, "or we should have heard the shot. Wait, here's Grey-stoke; let's see what he thinks of it."

The ape man, who had been riding a couple of hundred yards in the rear of the others with one of the older men, now reined in close to the dead zebra.

"What have we here?" he asked, swinging from his saddle.

"Brown says this looks like the kill of a man," said Barney; "but none of us heard any shot."

Tarzan grasped the zebra by a front and hind pastern and rolled him over upon his other side.

"It went away through, whatever it was," said Butzow as the hole behind this shoulder was exposed to view.

"Must have been a bullet, even if we didn't hear the report of the gun."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Tarzan, and then he glanced casually at

the ground about the carcass, and



"It is a man's kill."

bending lower, brought his sensitive nostrils close to the outflung haunch and then to the trampled grasses at the zebra's side. When he straightened up the others looked at him questioningly.

"A man," he said—"a white man has been here since the zebra died. He cut these steaks from the haunches. There is not the slightest odor of gunpowder about the wound. It was not made by a powder sped projectile. It is too large and too deep for an arrow wound."

"The only other weapon that could have inflicted it is a spear; but to cast a spear entirely through the carcass of a zebra at the distance to which a man could approach one in the open presupposes a mightiness of muscle and an accuracy of aim little short of superhuman."

"And you think"—commenced Brown.

"I think nothing," interrupted Tarzan, "except that my judgment tells me that my senses are in error. There is no naked white giant hunting through the country of the Waziri."

"Come, instead of speculating on the impossible, let's ride on to the hills and see if we can't locate the old villain who has been stealing my sheep. From his spoor I'll venture to say that when we bring him down we shall see the largest lion that any of us has ever seen."

As the party remounted and rode away toward the foothills two wondering black eyes watched them from the safety of the jungle.

Nu was utterly nonplused. What sort of men were these who rode upon beasts the like of which Nu had never dreamed?

At first he thought their pith helmets and khaki clothing a part of them, but when one of them removed his helmet and another unbuttoned his jacket Nu saw that they were merely covering

for the head and body, though why men should wish to hamper themselves with such foolish and cumbersome contraptions the troglodyte could not imagine.

As the party rode toward the foot hills Nu paralleled them, keeping all day during their fruitless search for the lion that had been entering Grey-stoke's compound and stealing his sheep, and as they retraced their way toward the bungalow late in the afternoon Nu lurked in their rear.

Never in his life had he been so deeply interested in anything as he was in these strange creatures, and when halfway across the plain the party came unexpectedly upon a band of antelope grazing in a little hollow and Nu heard the voice of one of the little black sticks the men carried and saw a burk leap into the air and then come heavily to the ground quite dead, deep respect was added to his interest and possibly a trace of awe as well. Fear he knew not.

In a clump of bushes a quarter of a mile from the bungalow Nu came to a halt. The strange odors that assailed his nostrils as he approached the ranch warned him to caution.

The black servants and the Waziri warriors, some of whom were always visiting their former chief, presented to Nu's nostrils an unfamiliar scent—one which made the black shock upon his head stiffen as you have seen the hair upon the neck of a white man's bound stiffen when for the first time his nose detects the odor of an Indian. As darkness came on Nu approached closer to the hummock, always careful, however, to keep down wind from it.

Filled with wonder as he was, the troglodyte had become a prey to the liveliest sort of curiosity concerning the identity and habits of these strange beings. Particularly was he interested in some one whom he had not seen, yet of whose hidden presence he was vaguely aware. In some way this unknown individual reminded him of Nat-ul, the beautiful girl with whom he had walked but yesterday beneath the shade of the tree ferns—Nat-ul, the girl he loved.

Through the windows he could see people moving about within the lighted interior, but he was not close enough to distinguish features. He saw men and women sitting about a long table, eating with strange weapons upon which they impaled tiny morsels of food which lay upon round, flat stones before them.

There was much laughter and talking, which floated through the open windows to the cave man's eager ears, but throughout it all there came to him no single word which he could interpret.

After these men and women had eaten they came out and sat in the shadows before the entrance to their strange cave, and here again they laughed and chattered, for all the world, thought Nu, like the ape people; and yet, though it was different from the ways of his own people, the troglodyte could not help but note within his own breast a strange yearning to take part in it—a longing for the company of these strange, new people.

He had crept quite close to the veranda now, and presently there floated down to him upon the almost stagnant air a message as clear as word of mouth, which told him that Nat-ul, the daughter of Tha, sat among these strange people before the entrance to

their wonderful cave.

And yet Nu could not believe the evidence of his own senses. What could Nat-ul be doing among such as these? How, between two men, could she have learned the language and the ways of these strangers?

It was impossible. And then a man upon the veranda, who sat close beside Victoria Custer, struck a match to light a cigarette and the flare of the blaze lit up the girl's features. At the sight of them the cave man involuntarily sprang to his feet. A half smothered exclamation broke from his lips. "Nat-ul!"

"What was that?" exclaimed Barney Custer. "I thought I heard some one speak out there near the rose bushes."

He rose as though to investigate, but his sister laid her hand upon his arm. "Don't go, Barney," she whispered.

He turned toward her with a questioning look. Her eyes were dilated with wonder and fear, her hands were trembling and she was so agitated her brother was deeply concerned about her, remembering as he did the strange hallucinations to which she was subject.

"Why?" he asked, eyeing her fixedly. "There is no danger. Did you not hear it too?"

"Yes," she answered in a low voice, "I heard it, Barney. Please don't leave me."

He felt the trembling of her hand where it rested upon his sleeve. One of the other men heard the conversation, but of course he could not guess what it carried any peculiar significance. It was merely an expression of the natural timidity of the civilized white woman in the midst of the savage African night.

"It's nothing, Miss Custer," he said. "I'll just walk down there to reassure you—a prowling hyena, perhaps, but nothing more."

The girl would have been glad to deter him, but she felt that she had already evinced more perturbation than the occasion warranted, and so she but forced a laugh, remarking that it was not at all worth while. Yet in her ears rang the familiar name that had so often fallen from the lips of her dream man.

When one of the others suggested that the investigator had better take an express rifle with him on the chance that the intruder might be Old Raffles, the sheep thief, the girl started up as though to object, but realizing how ridiculous such an attitude would be, and how impossible to explain, she turned instead and entered the house.

Several of the men walked down into the garden, but though they searched about for the better part of half an hour they came upon no indication that any savage beast was lurking near by.

Always in front of them a silent figure moved just outside the range of their vision. When they returned again to the veranda it took up its position once more behind the rose bushes, nor until all had entered the bungalow and sought their beds did the figure stir.

(to be continued.)

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