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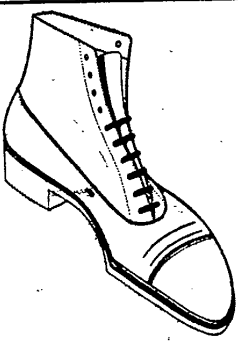
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The Eternal Lover

By EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

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CHAPTER VII.
The Lonely Man.

VICTORIA stooped to fill her hat at the spring. First she leaned far down to quench her own thirst.

A sudden warning growl from Terkoz brought her head-up, and there, not ten paces from her, she saw a dozen white-robed Arabs and behind them half a hundred blacks. All were armed; evil looking fellows they were, and one of the Arabs had covered her with his long gun.

Now he spoke to her, but in a tongue she did not understand, though she knew that his message was unfriendly, and imagined that it warned her not to attempt to use her own rifle which lay beside her. Next he spoke to those behind him, and two of them approached the girl, one from either side, while the leader continued to keep his piece leveled at her.

As the two came toward her she heard a menacing growl from the wolfhound and then saw him leap for the nearest Arab. The fellow clubbed his gun and swung it full upon Terkoz's skull, so that the faithful hound collapsed in a silent heap at their feet.

Then the two rushed in and seized Victoria's rifle. A moment later she was roughly dragged toward the leader of the ill-favored gang.

Through one of the blacks, a west coast negro who had picked up a smattering of pidgin English, the leader questioned the girl, and when he found that she was a guest of Lord Greystone an ugly grin crossed his evil face, for the fellow recalled what had befallen another Arab slave and ivory caravan at the hands of the Englishmen and his Waziri warriors. There was an opportunity for partial revenge.

He motioned for his followers to bring her along. There was no time to tarry in this country of their ene-

mies, into which they had accidentally stumbled after being lost in the jungle for the better part of a month.

Victoria asked what their intentions toward her were, but all that she could learn was that they would take her north with them. She offered to arrange the payment of a suitable ransom if they would return her to her friends unharmed, but the Arab only laughed at her.

"You will bring a good price," he said, "at the court of the sultan of Fulad, north of Tagwara, and for the rest I shall have partly settled, the score which I have against the Englishman."

So Victoria Custer disappeared from the sight of men at the border of the land of the Waziri, nor was there any other than her captors to know the devious route that they followed to gain the country north of Zair.

When at last Nu, the son of Nu, opened his eyes from the deep slumber that had refreshed and invigorated him he looked up expectantly for the face that had been hovering above his, and as he realized that the cave was tenantless except for himself a sigh that was half sob broke from the depths of his lonely heart, for he knew that Nu had been with him only in his dreams.

-Yet it had been so real! Even now he could feel the touch of her cool hand upon his forehead and her slim fingers ruffling through his hair. His cheek glowed to her hot kisses, and in his nostrils was the sweet aroma of her dear presence.

The disillusionment of his waking brought with it bitter disappointment and a return of the fever. Again Nu lapsed into semiconsciousness and delirium, so that he was not aware of the khaki clad white man that crept warily into the half darkness of his lair shortly after noon.

It was Barney Custer, and behind him came Curtiss, Butzow and a half dozen others of the searching party. They had stumbled upon the half dead Terkoz beside the spring, and there also they had found Victoria Custer's hat, and plainly in the soft earth between the boulders of the hillside they had seen the new made path to the cave higher up.

When Barney saw that the prostrate figure within the cavern did not stir at his entrance a sizzling fear rose in his throat, for he was sure that he had found the dead body of his sister, but as his eyes became more accustomed to the dim light of the interior he realized his mistake—at first with a sense of infinite relief and later with misgivings that amounted almost to a wish that it had been Victoria, safe in custody, for among the savage men of savage Africa there are fates worse than death for women.

The others had crowded in beside him, and one had lighted a torch of dry twigs, which for a few seconds illuminated the interior of the cave brightly. In that time they saw that

the cave was the only occupant and that he was helpless from fever.

Beside him lay the stone spear that had slain Old Raffles. Each of them recognized it. How could it have been brought to him?

"The zebra killer," said Brown. "What's that beneath his head? Looks like a khaki coat."

Barney drew it out and held it up.

"God!" cried Curtiss. "It's hers!"

"He must have come down there after we left, got his spear and stolen your sister," said Brown.

Curtiss drew his revolver and pushed closer toward the unconscious Nu.

"The beast!" he growled. "Shoot- ing's too good for him. Get out of the way, Barney; I'm going to give him all six chambers."

"No," said Barney quietly.

"Why?" demanded Curtiss, trying to push past Custer.

"Because I don't believe that he harmed Victoria," replied Barney. "That's sufficient reason for waiting until we know the truth. Then I won't stand for the killing of an unconscious man, anyway."

"He's nothing but a beast—a mad dog," insisted Curtiss. "He should be killed for what he is. I'd never have thought to see you defending the man who killed your sister."

"Don't be a fool, Curtiss," snapped Barney. "We don't know that Victoria's dead. The chances are that this man has been a helpless from fever for a long time. There's a wound in his head that was probably made by your shot last night."

"If he recovers from that he may be able to throw some light on Victoria's disappearance. If it develops that he has harmed her—I'm the one to demand an accounting—not you. As I said before, I do not believe that this man would have harmed a half of my sister's head."

"What do you know about him?" demanded Curtiss.

"I never saw him before," replied Barney. "I don't know who he is or where he came from, but I know—Well, never mind what I know, except that there isn't anybody going to kill him other than Barney Custer."

"Custer's right," broke in Brown. "It would be murder to kill this fellow in cold blood. You have jumped to the conclusion, Curtiss, that Miss Custer is dead. If we let you kill this man we might be destroying our best chance to locate and rescue her."

As they talked the gaunt figure of the wolfhound, Terkoz, crept into the cave. He had not been killed by the Arab's blow, and a liberal dose of cold water poured over his head had helped to hasten returning consciousness.

He nosed, whining, about the cavern as though in search of Victoria.

(Continued next week.)

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