

Chapter 8

Delcarte and Taylor were now in mid-stream, coming toward us, and I called to them to keep aloof until I knew whether the intentions of my captors were friendly or otherwise. My good men wanted to come on and annihilate the blacks. But there were upward of a hundred of the latter, all well armed, and so I commanded Delcarte to keep out of harm's way, and stay where he was till I needed him.

A young officer called and beckoned to them. But they refused to come, and so he gave orders that resulted in my hands being secured at my back, after which the company marched away, straight toward the east.

I noticed that the men wore spurs, which seemed strange to me. But when, late in the afternoon, we arrived at their encampment, I discovered that my captors were cavalymen.

In the center of a plain stood a log fort, with a blockhouse at each of its four corners. As we approached, I saw a herd of cavalry horses grazing under guard outside the walls of the post. They were small, stocky horses, but the telltale saddle galls proclaimed their calling. The flag flying from a tall staff inside the palisade was one which I had never before seen nor heard of.

We marched directly into the compound, where the company was dismissed, with the exception of a guard of four privates, who escorted me in the wake of the young officer. The latter led us across a small parade ground, where a battery of light field guns was parked, and toward a log building, in front of which rose the flagstaff.

I was escorted within the building into the presence of an old negro, a fine looking man, with a dignified and military bearing. He was a colonel, I was to learn later, and to him I owe the very humane treatment that was accorded me while I remained his prisoner.

He listened to the report of his junior, and then turned to question me, but with no better results than the former had accomplished. Then he summoned an orderly, and gave some instructions. The soldier saluted, and left the room, returning in about five minutes with a hairy old white man--just such a savage, primeval-looking fellow as I had discovered in the woods the day that Snider had disappeared with the launch.

The colonel evidently expected to use the fellow as interpreter, but when the savage addressed me it was in a language as foreign to me as was that of the

blacks. At last the old officer gave it up, and, shaking his head, gave instructions for my removal.

From his office I was led to a guardhouse, in which I found about fifty half-naked whites, clad in the skins of wild beasts. I tried to converse with them, but not one of them could understand Pan-American, nor could I make head or tail of their jargon.

For over a month I remained a prisoner there, working from morning until night at odd jobs about the headquarters building of the commanding officer. The other prisoners worked harder than I did, and I owe my better treatment solely to the kindness and discrimination of the old colonel.

What had become of Victory, of Delcarte, of Taylor I could not know; nor did it seem likely that I should ever learn. I was most depressed. But I whiled away my time in performing the duties given me to the best of my ability and attempting to learn the language of my captors.

Who they were or where they came from was a mystery to me. That they were the outpost of some powerful black nation seemed likely, yet where the seat of that nation lay I could not guess.

They looked upon the whites as their inferiors, and treated us accordingly. They had a literature of their own, and many of the men, even the common soldiers, were omnivorous readers. Every two weeks a dust-covered trooper would trot his jaded mount into the post and deliver a bulging sack of mail at headquarters. The next day he would be away again upon a fresh horse toward the south, carrying the soldiers' letters to friends in the far off land of mystery from whence they all had come.

Troops, sometimes mounted and sometimes afoot, left the post daily for what I assumed to be patrol duty. I judged the little force of a thousand men were detailed here to maintain the authority of a distant government in a conquered country. Later, I learned that my surmise was correct, and this was but one of a great chain of similar posts that dotted the new frontier of the black nation into whose hands I had fallen.

Slowly I learned their tongue, so that I could understand what was said before me, and make myself understood. I had seen from the first that I was being treated as a slave--that all whites that fell into the hands of the blacks were thus treated.

Almost daily new prisoners were brought in, and about three weeks after I was brought in to the post a troop of cavalry came from the south to relieve one of the

troops stationed there. There was great jubilation in the encampment after the arrival of the newcomers, old friendships were renewed and new ones made. But the happiest men were those of the troop that was to be relieved.

The next morning they started away, and as they were forced upon the parade ground we prisoners were marched from our quarters and lined up before them. A couple of long chains were brought, with rings in the links every few feet. At first I could not guess the purpose of these chains. But I was soon to learn.

A couple of soldiers snapped the first ring around the neck of a powerful white slave, and one by one the rest of us were herded to our places, and the work of shackling us neck to neck commenced.

The colonel stood watching the procedure. Presently his eyes fell upon me, and he spoke to a young officer at his side. The latter stepped toward me and motioned me to follow him. I did so, and was led back to the colonel.

By this time I could understand a few words of their strange language, and when the colonel asked me if I would prefer to remain at the post as his body servant, I signified my willingness as emphatically as possible, for I had seen enough of the brutality of the common soldiers toward their white slaves to have no desire to start out upon a march of unknown length, chained by the neck, and driven on by the great whips that a score of the soldiers carried to accelerate the speed of their charges.

About three hundred prisoners who had been housed in six prisons at the post marched out of the gates that morning, toward what fate and what future I could not guess. Neither had the poor devils themselves more than the most vague conception of what lay in store for them, except that they were going elsewhere to continue in the slavery that they had known since their capture by their black conquerors--a slavery that was to continue until death released them.

My position was altered at the post. From working about the headquarters office, I was transferred to the colonel's living quarters. I had greater freedom, and no longer slept in one of the prisons, but had a little room to myself off the kitchen of the colonel's log house.

My master was always kind to me, and under him I rapidly learned the language of my captors, and much concerning them that had been a mystery to me before. His name was Abu Belik. He was a colonel in the cavalry of Abyssinia, a country of which I do not remember ever hearing, but which Colonel Belik assured me is the oldest civilized country in the world.

Colonel Belik was born in Adis Abeba, the capital of the empire, and until recently had been in command of the emperor's palace guard. Jealousy and the ambition and intrigue of another officer had lost him the favor of his emperor, and he had been detailed to this frontier post as a mark of his sovereign's displeasure.

Some fifty years before, the young emperor, Menelek XIV, was ambitious. He knew that a great world lay across the waters far to the north of his capital. Once he had crossed the desert and looked out upon the blue sea that was the northern boundary of his dominions.

There lay another world to conquer. Menelek busied himself with the building of a great fleet, though his people were not a maritime race. His army crossed into Europe. It met with little resistance, and for fifty years his soldiers had been pushing his boundaries farther and farther toward the north.

"The yellow men from the east and north are contesting our rights here now," said the colonel, "but we shall win--we shall conquer the world, carrying Christianity to all the benighted heathen of Europe, and Asia as well."

"You are a Christian people?" I asked.

He looked at me in surprise, nodding his head affirmatively.

"I am a Christian," I said. "My people are the most powerful on earth."

He smiled, and shook his head indulgently, as a father to a child who sets up his childish judgment against that of his elders.

Then I set out to prove my point. I told him of our cities, of our army, of our great navy. He came right back at me asking for figures, and when he was done I had to admit that only in our navy were we numerically superior.

Menelek XIV is the undisputed ruler of all the continent of Africa, of all of ancient Europe except the British Isles, Scandinavia, and eastern Russia, and has large possessions and prosperous colonies in what once were Arabia and Turkey in Asia.

He has a standing army of ten million men, and his people possess slaves--white slaves--to the number of ten or fifteen million.

Colonel Belik was much surprised, however, upon his part to learn of the great nation which lay across the ocean, and when he found that I was a naval officer, he was inclined to accord me even greater consideration than formerly. It was

difficult for him to believe my assertion that there were but few blacks in my country, and that these occupied a lower social plane than the whites.

Just the reverse is true in Colonel Belik's land. He considered whites inferior beings, creatures of a lower order, and assuring me that even the few white freemen of Abyssinia were never accorded anything approximating a position of social equality with the blacks. They live in the poorer districts of the cities, in little white colonies, and a black who marries a white is socially ostracized.

The arms and ammunition of the Abyssinians are greatly inferior to ours, yet they are tremendously effective against the ill-armed barbarians of Europe. Their rifles are of a type similar to the magazine rifles of twentieth century Pan-America, but carrying only five cartridges in the magazine, in addition to the one in the chamber. They are of extraordinary length, even those of the cavalry, and are of extreme accuracy.

The Abyssinians themselves are a fine looking race of black men--tall, muscular, with fine teeth, and regular features, which incline distinctly toward Semitic mold--I refer to the full-blooded natives of Abyssinia. They are the patricians--the aristocracy. The army is officered almost exclusively by them. Among the soldiery a lower type of negro predominates, with thicker lips and broader, flatter noses. These men are recruited, so the colonel told me, from among the conquered tribes of Africa. They are good soldiers--brave and loyal. They can read and write, and they are endowed with a self-confidence and pride which, from my readings of the words of ancient African explorers, must have been wanting in their earliest progenitors. On the whole, it is apparent that the black race has thrived far better in the past two centuries under men of its own color than it had under the domination of whites during all previous history.

I had been a prisoner at the little frontier post for over a month, when orders came to Colonel Belik to hasten to the eastern frontier with the major portion of his command, leaving only one troop to garrison the fort. As his body servant, I accompanied him mounted upon a fiery little Abyssinian pony.

We marched rapidly for ten days through the heart of the ancient German empire, halting when night found us in proximity to water. Often we passed small posts similar to that at which the colonel's regiment had been quartered, finding in each instance that only a single company or troop remained for defence, the balance having been withdrawn toward the northeast, in the same direction in which we were moving.

Naturally, the colonel had not confided to me the nature of his orders. But the rapidity of our march and the fact that all available troops were being hastened

toward the northeast assured me that a matter of vital importance to the dominion of Menelek XIV in that part of Europe was threatening or had already broken.

I could not believe that a simple rising of the savage tribes of whites would necessitate the mobilizing of such a force as we presently met with converging from the south into our trail. There were large bodies of cavalry and infantry, endless streams of artillery wagons and guns, and countless horse-drawn covered vehicles laden with camp equipage, munitions, and provisions.

Here, for the first time, I saw camels, great caravans of them, bearing all sorts of heavy burdens, and miles upon miles of elephants doing similar service. It was a scene of wondrous and barbaric splendor, for the men and beasts from the south were gaily caparisoned in rich colors, in marked contrast to the gray uniformed forces of the frontier, with which I had been familiar.

The rumor reached us that Menelek himself was coming, and the pitch of excitement to which this announcement raised the troops was little short of miraculous--at least, to one of my race and nationality whose rulers for centuries had been but ordinary men, holding office at the will of the people for a few brief years.

As I witnessed it, I could not but speculate upon the moral effect upon his troops of a sovereign's presence in the midst of battle. All else being equal in war between the troops of a republic and an empire, could not this exhilarated mental state, amounting almost to hysteria on the part of the imperial troops, weigh heavily against the soldiers of a president? I wonder.

But if the emperor chanced to be absent? What then? Again I wonder.

On the eleventh day we reached our destination--a walled frontier city of about twenty thousand. We passed some lakes, and crossed some old canals before entering the gates. Within, beside the frame buildings, were many built of ancient brick and well-cut stone. These, I was told, were of material taken from the ruins of the ancient city which, once, had stood upon the site of the present town.

The name of the town, translated from the Abyssinian, is New Gondar. It stands, I am convinced, upon the ruins of ancient Berlin, the one time capital of the old German empire, but except for the old building material used in the new town there is no sign of the former city.

The day after we arrived, the town was gaily decorated with flags, streamers, gorgeous rugs, and banners, for the rumor had proved true--the emperor was coming.

Colonel Belik had accorded me the greatest liberty, permitting me to go where I pleased, after my few duties had been performed. As a result of his kindness, I spent much time wandering about New Gondar, talking with the inhabitants, and exploring the city of black men.

As I had been given a semi-military uniform which bore insignia indicating that I was an officer's body servant, even the blacks treated me with a species of respect, though I could see by their manner that I was really as the dirt beneath their feet. They answered my questions civilly enough, but they would not enter into conversation with me. It was from other slaves that I learned the gossip of the city.

Troops were pouring in from the west and south, and pouring out toward the east. I asked an old slave who was sweeping the dirt into little piles in the gutters of the street where the soldiers were going. He looked at me in surprise.

"Why, to fight the yellow men, of course," he said. "They have crossed the border, and are marching toward New Gondar."

"Who will win?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows?" he said. "I hope it will be the yellow men, but Menelek is powerful--it will take many yellow men to defeat him."

Crowds were gathering along the sidewalks to view the emperor's entry into the city. I took my place among them, although I hate crowds, and I am glad that I did, for I witnessed such a spectacle of barbaric splendor as no other Pan-American has ever looked upon.

Down the broad main thoroughfare, which may once have been the historic Unter den Linden, came a brilliant cortege. At the head rode a regiment of red-coated hussars--enormous men, black as night. There were troops of riflemen mounted on camels. The emperor rode in a golden howdah upon the back of a huge elephant so covered with rich hangings and embellished with scintillating gems that scarce more than the beast's eyes and feet were visible.

Menelek was a rather gross-looking man, well past middle age, but he carried himself with an air of dignity befitting one descended in unbroken line from the Prophet--as was his claim.

His eyes were bright but crafty, and his features denoted both sensuality and cruelty. In his youth he may have been a rather fine looking black, but when I saw him his appearance was revolting--to me, at least.

Following the emperor came regiment after regiment from the various branches of the service, among them batteries of field guns mounted on elephants.

In the center of the troops following the imperial elephant marched a great caravan of slaves. The old street sweeper at my elbow told me that these were the gifts brought in from the far outlying districts by the commanding officers of the frontier posts. The majority of them were women, destined, I was told, for the harems of the emperor and his favorites. It made my old companion clench his fists to see those poor white women marching past to their horrid fates, and, though I shared his sentiments, I was as powerless to alter their destinies as he.

For a week the troops kept pouring in and out of New Gondar--in, always, from the south and west, but always toward the east. Each new contingent brought its gifts to the emperor. From the south they brought rugs and ornaments and jewels; from the west, slaves; for the commanding officers of the western frontier posts had naught else to bring.

From the number of women they brought, I judged that they knew the weakness of their imperial master.

And then soldiers commenced coming in from the east, but not with the gay assurance of those who came from the south and west--no, these others came in covered wagons, blood-soaked and suffering. They came at first in little parties of eight or ten, and then they came in fifties, in hundreds, and one day a thousand maimed and dying men were carted into New Gondar.

It was then that Menelek XIV became uneasy. For fifty years his armies had conquered wherever they had marched. At first he had led them in person, lately his presence within a hundred miles of the battle line had been sufficient for large engagements--for minor ones only the knowledge that they were fighting for the glory of their sovereign was necessary to win victories.

One morning, New Gondar was awakened by the booming of cannon. It was the first intimation that the townspeople had received that the enemy was forcing the imperial troops back upon the city. Dust covered couriers galloped in from the front. Fresh troops hastened from the city, and about noon Menelek rode out surrounded by his staff.

For three days thereafter we could hear the cannonading and the spitting of the small arms, for the battle line was scarce two leagues from New Gondar. The city

was filled with wounded. Just outside, soldiers were engaged in throwing up earthworks. It was evident to the least enlightened that Menelek expected further reverses.

And then the imperial troops fell back upon these new defenses, or, rather, they were forced back by the enemy. Shells commenced to fall within the city. Menelek returned and took up his headquarters in the stone building that was called the palace. That night came a lull in the hostilities--a truce had been arranged.

Colonel Belik summoned me about seven o'clock to dress him for a function at the palace. In the midst of death and defeat the emperor was about to give a great banquet to his officers. I was to accompany my master and wait upon him--I, Jefferson Turck, lieutenant in the Pan-American navy!

In the privacy of the colonel's quarters I had become accustomed to my menial duties, lightened as they were by the natural kindness of my master, but the thought of appearing in public as a common slave revolted every fine instinct within me. Yet there was nothing for it but to obey.

I cannot, even now, bring myself to a narration of the humiliation which I experienced that night as I stood behind my black master in silent servility, now pouring his wine, now cutting up his meats for him, now fanning him with a large, plumed fan of feathers.

As fond as I had grown of him, I could have thrust a knife into him, so keenly did I feel the affront that had been put upon me. But at last the long banquet was concluded. The tables were removed. The emperor ascended a dais at one end of the room and seated himself upon a throne, and the entertainment commenced. It was only what ancient history might have led me to expect--musicians, dancing girls, jugglers, and the like.

Near midnight, the master of ceremonies announced that the slave women who had been presented to the emperor since his arrival in New Gondar would be exhibited, that the royal host would select such as he wished, after which he would present the balance of them to his guests. Ah, what royal generosity!

A small door at one side of the room opened, and the poor creatures filed in and were ranged in a long line before the throne. Their backs were toward me. I saw only an occasional profile as now and then a bolder spirit among them turned to survey the apartment and the gorgeous assemblage of officers in their brilliant dress uniforms. They were profiles of young girls, and pretty, but horror was indelibly stamped upon them all. I shuddered as I contemplated their sad fate, and turned my eyes away.

I heard the master of ceremonies command them to prostrate themselves before the emperor, and the sounds as they went upon their knees before him, touching their foreheads to the floor. Then came the official's voice again, in sharp and peremptory command.

"Down, slave!" he cried. "Make obeisance to your sovereign!"

I looked up, attracted by the tone of the man's voice, to see a single, straight, slim figure standing erect in the center of the line of prostrate girls, her arms folded across her breast and little chin in the air. Her back was toward me--I could not see her face, though I should like to see the countenance of this savage young lioness, standing there defiant among that herd of terrified sheep.

"Down! Down!" shouted the master of ceremonies, taking a step toward her and half drawing his sword.

My blood boiled. To stand there, inactive, while a negro struck down that brave girl of my own race! Instinctively I took a forward step to place myself in the man's path. But at the same instant Menelek raised his hand in a gesture that halted the officer. The emperor seemed interested, but in no way angered at the girl's attitude.

"Let us inquire," he said in a smooth, pleasant voice, "why this young woman refuses to do homage to her sovereign," and he put the question himself directly to her.

She answered him in Abyssinian, but brokenly and with an accent that betrayed how recently she had acquired her slight knowledge of the tongue.

"I go on my knees to no one," she said. "I have no sovereign. I myself am sovereign in my own country."

Menelek, at her words, leaned back in his throne and laughed uproariously. Following his example, which seemed always the correct procedure, the assembled guests vied with one another in an effort to laugh more noisily than the emperor.

The girl but tilted her chin a bit higher in the air--even her back proclaimed her utter contempt for her captors. Finally Menelek restored quiet by the simple expedient of a frown, whereupon each loyal guest exchanged his mirthful mien for an emulative scowl.

"And who," asked Menelek, "are you, and by what name is your country called?"

"I am Victory, Queen of Grabritin," replied the girl so quickly and so unexpectedly that I gasped in astonishment.