

CHAPTER XII

THE SISTER QUEENS

The big rowing-boat glided on up the cutting that ran almost to the foot of the vast stairway, and then halted at a flight of steps leading to the landing-place. Here the old gentleman disembarked, and invited us to do so likewise, which, having no alternative, and being nearly starved, we did without hesitation -- taking our rifles with us, however. As each of us landed, our guide again laid his fingers on his lips and bowed deeply, at the same time ordering back the crowds which had assembled to gaze on us. The last to leave the canoe was the girl we had picked out of the water, for whom her companion was waiting. Before she went away she kissed my hand, I suppose as a token of gratitude for having saved her from the fury of the hippopotamus; and it seemed to me that she had by this time quite got over any fear she might have had of us, and was by no means anxious to return in such a hurry to her lawful owners. At any rate, she was going to kiss Good's hand as well as mine, when the young man interfered and led her off. As soon as we were on shore, a number of the men who had rowed the big boat took possession of our few goods and chattels, and started with them up the splendid staircase, our guide indicating to us by means of motions that the things were perfectly safe. This done, he turned to the

right and led the way to a small house, which was, as I afterwards discovered, an inn. Entering into a good-sized room, we saw that a wooden table was already furnished with food, presumably in preparation for us. Here our guide motioned us to be seated on a bench that ran the length of the table. We did not require a second invitation, but at once fell to ravenously on the viands before us, which were served on wooden platters, and consisted of cold goat's-flesh, wrapped up in some kind of leaf that gave it a delicious flavour, green vegetables resembling lettuces, brown bread, and red wine poured from a skin into horn mugs. This wine was peculiarly soft and good, having something of the flavour of Burgundy. Twenty minutes after we sat down at that hospitable board we rose from it, feeling like new men. After all that we had gone through we needed two things, food and rest, and the food of itself was a great blessing to us. Two girls of the same charming cast of face as the first whom we had seen waited on us while we ate, and very nicely they did it. They were also dressed in the same fashion namely, in a white linen petticoat coming to the knee, and with the toga-like garment of brown cloth, leaving bare the right arm and breast. I afterwards found out that this was the national dress, and regulated by an iron custom, though of course subject to variations. Thus, if the petticoat was pure white, it signified that the wearer was unmarried; if white, with a straight purple stripe round the edge, that she was married and a first or legal wife; if with a black stripe, that she was a widow. In the same way

the toga, or 'kaf', as they call it, was of different shades of colour, from pure white to the deepest brown, according to the rank of the wearer, and embroidered at the end in various ways. This also applies to the 'shirts' or tunics worn by the men, which varied in material and colour; but the kilts were always the same except as regards quality. One thing, however, every man and woman in the country wore as the national insignia, and that was the thick band of gold round the right arm above the elbow, and the left leg beneath the knee. People of high rank also wore a torque of gold round the neck, and I observed that our guide had one on.

So soon as we had finished our meal our venerable conductor, who had been standing all the while, regarding us with inquiring eyes, and our guns with something as like fear as his pride would allow him to show, bowed towards Good, whom he evidently took for the leader of the party on account of the splendour of his apparel, and once more led the way through the door and to the foot of the great staircase. Here we paused for a moment to admire two colossal lions, each hewn from a single block of pure black marble, and standing rampant on the terminations of the wide balustrades of the staircase. These lions are magnificently executed, and it is said were sculptured by Rademas, the great prince who designed the staircase, and who was without doubt, to judge from the many beautiful examples of his art that we saw afterwards, one of the finest sculptors who ever lived, either

in this or any other country. Then we climbed almost with a feeling of awe up that splendid stair, a work executed for all time and that will, I do not doubt, be admired thousands of years hence by generations unborn unless an earthquake should throw it down. Even Umslopogaas, who as a general rule made it a point of honour not to show astonishment, which he considered undignified, was fairly startled out of himself, and asked if the 'bridge had been built by men or devils', which was his vague way of alluding to any supernatural power. But Alphonse did not care about it. Its solid grandeur jarred upon the frivolous little Frenchman, who said that it was all 'tres magnifique, mais triste -- ah, triste!' and went on to suggest that it would be improved if the balustrades were gilt.

On we went up the first flight of one hundred and twenty steps, across the broad platform joining it to the second flight, where we paused to admire the glorious view of one of the most beautiful stretches of country that the world can show, edged by the blue waters of the lake. Then we passed on up the stair till at last we reached the top, where we found a large standing space to which there were three entrances, all of small size. Two of these opened on to rather narrow galleries or roadways cut in the face of the precipice that ran round the palace walls and led to the principal thoroughfares of the city, and were used by the inhabitants passing up and down from the docks. These were defended by gates of bronze, and also, as we afterwards

learnt, it was possible to let down a portion of the roadways themselves by withdrawing certain bolts, and thus render it quite impracticable for an enemy to pass. The third entrance consisted of a flight of ten curved black marble steps leading to a doorway cut in the palace wall. This wall was in itself a work of art, being built of huge blocks of granite to the height of forty feet, and so fashioned that its face was concave, whereby it was rendered practically impossible for it to be scaled. To this doorway our guide led us. The door, which was massive, and made of wood protected by an outer gate of bronze, was closed; but on our approach it was thrown wide, and we were met by the challenge of a sentry, who was armed with a heavy triangular-bladed spear, not unlike a bayonet in shape, and a cutting sword, and protected by breast and back plates of skilfully prepared hippopotamus hide, and a small round shield fashioned of the same tough material. The sword instantly attracted our attention; it was practically identical with the one in the possession of Mr Mackenzie which he had obtained from the ill-starred wanderer. There was no mistaking the gold-lined fretwork cut in the thickness of the blade. So the man had told the truth after all. Our guide instantly gave a password, which the soldier acknowledged by letting the iron shaft of his spear fall with a ringing sound upon the pavement, and we passed on through the massive wall into the courtyard of the palace. This was about forty yards square, and laid out in flower-beds full of lovely shrubs and plants, many of which were quite new to me. Through the centre of this garden ran

a broad walk formed of powdered shells brought from the lake in the place of gravel. Following this we came to another doorway with a round heavy arch, which is hung with thick curtains, for there are no doors in the palace itself. Then came another short passage, and we were in the great hall of the palace, and once more stood astonished at the simple and yet overpowering grandeur of the place.

The hall is, as we afterwards learnt, one hundred and fifty feet long by eighty wide, and has a magnificent arched roof of carved wood. Down the entire length of the building there are on either side, and at a distance of twenty feet from the wall, slender shafts of black marble springing sheer to the roof, beautifully fluted, and with carved capitals. At one end of this great place which these pillars support is the group of which I have already spoken as executed by the King Rademas to commemorate his building of the staircase; and really, when we had time to admire it, its loveliness almost struck us dumb. The group, of which the figures are in white, and the rest is black marble, is about half as large again as life, and represents a young man of noble countenance and form sleeping heavily upon a couch. One arm is carelessly thrown over the side of this couch, and his head reposes upon the other, its curling locks partially hiding it. Bending over him, her hand resting on his forehead, is a draped female form of such white loveliness as to make the beholder's breath stand still. And as for the calm glory that shines upon

her perfect face -- well, I can never hope to describe it. But there it rests like the shadow of an angel's smile; and power, love, and divinity all have their part in it. Her eyes are fixed upon the sleeping youth, and perhaps the most extraordinary thing about this beautiful work is the success with which the artist has succeeded in depicting on the sleeper's worn and weary face the sudden rising of a new and spiritual thought as the spell begins to work within his mind. You can see that an inspiration is breaking in upon the darkness of the man's soul as the dawn breaks in upon the darkness of night. It is a glorious piece of statuary, and none but a genius could have conceived it. Between each of the black marble columns is some such group of figures, some allegorical, and some representing the persons and wives of deceased monarchs or great men; but none of them, in our opinion, comes up to the one I have described, although several are from the hand of the sculptor and engineer, King Rademas.

In the exact centre of the hall was a solid mass of black marble about the size of a baby's arm-chair, which it rather resembled in appearance. This, as we afterwards learnt, was the sacred stone of this remarkable people, and on it their monarchs laid their hand after the ceremony of coronation, and swore by the sun to safeguard the interests of the empire, and to maintain its customs, traditions, and laws. This stone was evidently exceedingly ancient (as indeed all stones are), and was scored down its sides with long marks or lines, which Sir Henry said

proved it to have been a fragment that at some remote period in its history had been ground in the iron jaws of glaciers. There was a curious prophecy about this block of marble, which was reported among the people to have fallen from the sun, to the effect that when it was shattered into fragments a king of alien race should rule over the land. As the stone, however, looked remarkably solid, the native princes seemed to have a fair chance of keeping their own for many a long year.

At the end of the hall is a dais spread with rich carpets, on which two thrones are set side by side. These thrones are shaped like great chairs, and made of solid gold. The seats are richly cushioned, but the backs are left bare, and on each is carved the emblem of the sun, shooting out his fiery rays in all directions. The footstools are golden lions couchant, with yellow topazes set in them for eyes. There are no other gems about them.

The place is lighted by numerous but narrow windows, placed high up, cut on the principle of the loopholes to be seen in ancient castles, but innocent of glass, which was evidently unknown here.

Such is a brief description of this splendid hall in which we now found ourselves, compiled of course from our subsequent knowledge of it. On this occasion we had but little time for observation, for when we entered we perceived that a large number of men were gathered together in front of the two thrones, which were unoccupied.

The principal among them were seated on carved wooden chairs ranged to the right and the left of the thrones, but not in front of them, and were dressed in white tunics, with various embroideries and different coloured edgings, and armed with the usual pierced and gold-inlaid swords. To judge from the dignity of their appearance, they seemed one and all to be individuals of very great importance. Behind each of these great men stood a small knot of followers and attendants.

Seated by themselves, in a little group to the left of the throne, were six men of a different stamp. Instead of wearing the ordinary kilt, they were clothed in long robes of pure white linen, with the same symbol of the sun that is to be seen on the back of the chairs, emblazoned in gold thread upon the breast. This garment was girt up at the waist with a simple golden curb-like chain, from which hung long elliptic plates of the same metal, fashioned in shiny scales like those of a fish, that, as their wearers moved, jingled and reflected the light. They were all men of mature age and of a severe and impressive cast of features, which was rendered still more imposing by the long beards they wore.

The personality of one individual among them, however, impressed us at once. He seemed to stand out among his fellows and refuse to be overlooked. He was very old -- eighty at least -- and extremely tall, with a long snow-white beard that hung nearly to his waist. His features were aquiline and deeply cut, and

his eyes were grey and cold-looking. The heads of the others were bare, but this man wore a round cap entirely covered with gold embroidery, from which we judged that he was a person of great importance; and indeed we afterwards discovered that he was Agon, the High Priest of the country. As we approached, all these men, including the priests, rose and bowed to us with the greatest courtesy, at the same time placing the two fingers across the lips in salutation. Then soft-footed attendants advanced from between the pillars, bearing seats, which were placed in a line in front of the thrones. We three sat down, Alphonse and Umslopogaas standing behind us. Scarcely had we done so when there came a blare of trumpets from some passage to the right, and a similar blare from the left. Next a man with a long white wand of ivory appeared just in front of the right-hand throne, and cried out something in a loud voice, ending with the word Nyleptha, repeated three times; and another man, similarly attired, called out a similar sentence before the other throne, but ending with the word Sorais, also repeated thrice. Then came the tramp of armed men from each side entrance, and in filed about a score of picked and magnificently accoutred guards, who formed up on each side of the thrones, and let their heavy iron-handled spears fall simultaneously with a clash upon the black marble flooring. Another double blare of trumpets, and in from either side, each attended by six maidens, swept the two Queens of Zu-Vendis, everybody in the hall rising to greet them as they came.

I have seen beautiful women in my day, and am no longer thrown into transports at the sight of a pretty face; but language fails me when I try to give some idea of the blaze of loveliness that then broke upon us in the persons of these sister Queens. Both were young -- perhaps five-and-twenty years of age -- both were tall and exquisitely formed; but there the likeness stopped. One, Nyleptha, was a woman of dazzling fairness; her right arm and breast bare, after the custom of her people, showed like snow even against her white and gold-embroidered 'kaf', or toga. And as for her sweet face, all I can say is, that it was one that few men could look on and forget. Her hair, a veritable crown of gold, clustered in short ringlets over her shapely head, half hiding the ivory brow, beneath which eyes of deep and glorious grey flashed out in tender majesty. I cannot attempt to describe her other features, only the mouth was most sweet, and curved like Cupid's bow, and over the whole countenance there shone an indescribable look of loving-kindness, lit up by a shadow of delicate humour that lay upon her face like a touch of silver on a rosy cloud.

She wore no jewels, but on her neck, arm, and knee were the usual torques of gold, in this instance fashioned like a snake; and her dress was of pure white linen of excessive fineness, plentifully embroidered with gold and with the familiar symbols of the sun.

Her twin sister, Sorais, was of a different and darker type of

beauty. Her hair was wavy like Nyleptha's but coal-black, and fell in masses on her shoulders; her complexion was olive, her eyes large, dark, and lustrous; the lips were full, and I thought rather cruel. Somehow her face, quiet and even cold as it is, gave an idea of passion in repose, and caused one to wonder involuntarily what its aspect would be if anything occurred to break the calm. It reminded me of the deep sea, that even on the bluest days never loses its visible stamp of power, and in its murmuring sleep is yet instinct with the spirit of the storm. Her figure, like her sister's, was almost perfect in its curves and outlines, but a trifle more rounded, and her dress was absolutely the same.

As this lovely pair swept onwards to their respective thrones, amid the deep attentive silence of the Court, I was bound to confess to myself that they did indeed fulfil my idea of royalty. Royal they were in every way -- in form, in grace, and queenly dignity, and in the barbaric splendour of their attendant pomp. But methought that they needed no guards or gold to proclaim their power and bind the loyalty of wayward men. A glance from those bright eyes or a smile from those sweet lips, and while the red blood runs in the veins of youth women such as these will never lack subjects ready to do their biddings to the death.

But after all they were women first and queens afterwards, and therefore not devoid of curiosity. As they passed to their seats I saw both of them glance swiftly in our direction. I saw, too,

that their eyes passed by me, seeing nothing to charm them in the person of an insignificant and grizzled old man. Then they looked with evident astonishment on the grim form of old Umslopogaas, who raised his axe in salutation. Attracted next by the splendour of Good's apparel, for a second their glance rested on him like a humming moth upon a flower, then off it darted to where Sir Henry Curtis stood, the sunlight from a window playing upon his yellow hair and peaked beard, and marking the outlines of his massive frame against the twilight of the somewhat gloomy hall. He raised his eyes, and they met the fair Nyleptha's full, and thus for the first time the goodliest man and woman that it has ever been my lot to see looked one upon another. And why it was I know not, but I saw the swift blood run up Nyleptha's skin as the pink lights run up the morning sky. Red grew her fair bosom and shapely arm, red the swanlike neck; the rounded cheeks blushed red as the petals of a rose, and then the crimson flood sank back to whence it came and left her pale and trembling.

I glanced at Sir Henry. He, too, had coloured up to the eyes.

'Oh, my word!' thought I to myself, 'the ladies have come on the stage, and now we may look to the plot to develop itself.' And I sighed and shook my head, knowing that the beauty of a woman is like the beauty of the lightning -- a destructive thing and a cause of desolation. By the time that I had finished my reflections both the Queens were on the thrones, for all this

had happened in about six seconds. Once more the unseen trumpets blared out, and then the Court seated itself, and Queen Sorais motioned to us to do likewise.

Next from among the crowd whither he had withdrawn stepped forward our guide, the old gentleman who had towed us ashore, holding by the hand the girl whom we had seen first and afterwards rescued from the hippopotamus. Having made obeisance he proceeded to address the Queens, evidently describing to them the way and place where we had been found. It was most amusing to watch the astonishment, not unmixed with fear, reflected upon their faces as they listened to his tale. Clearly they could not understand how we had reached the lake and been found floating on it, and were inclined to attribute our presence to supernatural causes. Then the narrative proceeded, as I judged from the frequent appeals that our guide made to the girl, to the point where we had shot the hippopotami, and we at once perceived that there was something very wrong about those hippopotami, for the history was frequently interrupted by indignant exclamations from the little group of white-robed priests and even from the courtiers, while the two Queens listened with an amazed expression, especially when our guide pointed to the rifles in our hands as being the means of destruction. And here, to make matters clear, I may as well explain at once that the inhabitants of Zu-Vendis are sun-worshippers, and that for some reason or another the hippopotamus is sacred among them. Not that they do not kill it, because

at a certain season of the year they slaughter thousands -- which are specially preserved in large lakes up the country -- and use their hides for armour for soldiers; but this does not prevent them from considering these animals as sacred to the sun. {Endnote 11}

Now, as ill luck would have it, the particular hippopotami we had shot were a family of tame animals that were kept in the mouth of the port and daily fed by priests whose special duty it was to attend to them. When we shot them I thought that the brutes were suspiciously tame, and this was, as we afterwards ascertained, the cause of it. Thus it came about that in attempting to show off we had committed sacrilege of a most aggravated nature.

When our guide had finished his tale, the old man with the long beard and round cap, whose appearance I have already described, and who was, as I have said, the High Priest of the country, and known by the name of Agon, rose and commenced an impassioned harangue. I did not like the look of his cold grey eye as he fixed it on us. I should have liked it still less had I known that in the name of the outraged majesty of his god he was demanding that the whole lot of us should be offered up as a sacrifice by means of being burnt alive.

After he had finished speaking the Queen Sorais addressed him in a soft and musical voice, and appeared, to judge from his gestures of dissent, to be putting the other side of the question before him. Then Nyleptha spoke in liquid accents. Little did

we know that she was pleading for our lives. Finally, she turned and addressed a tall, soldierlike man of middle age with a black beard and a long plain sword, whose name, as we afterwards learnt, was Nasta, and who was the greatest lord in the country; apparently appealing to him for support. Now when Sir Henry had caught her eye and she had blushed so rosy red, I had seen that the incident had not escaped this man's notice, and, what is more, that it was eminently disagreeable to him, for he bit his lip and his hand tightened on his sword-hilt. Afterwards we learnt that he was an aspirant for the hand of this Queen in marriage, which accounted for it. This being so, Nyleptha could not have appealed to a worse person, for, speaking in slow, heavy tones, he appeared to confirm all that the High Priest Agon had said. As he spoke, Sorais put her elbow on her knee, and, resting her chin on her hand, looked at him with a suppressed smile upon her lips, as though she saw through the man, and was determined to be his match; but Nyleptha grew very angry, her cheek flushed, her eyes flashed, and she did indeed look lovely. Finally she turned to Agon and seemed to give some sort of qualified assent, for he bowed at her words; and as she spoke she moved her hands as though to emphasize what she said; while all the time Sorais kept her chin on her hand and smiled. Then suddenly Nyleptha made a sign, the trumpets blew again, and everybody rose to leave the hall save ourselves and the guards, whom she motioned to stay.

When they were all gone she bent forward and, smiling sweetly,

partially by signs and partially by exclamations made it clear to us that she was very anxious to know where we came from. The difficulty was how to explain, but at last an idea struck me. I had my large pocket-book in my pocket and a pencil. Taking it out, I made a little sketch of a lake, and then as best I could I drew the underground river and the lake at the other end. When I had done this I advanced to the steps of the throne and gave it to her. She understood it at once and clapped her hands with delight, and then descending from the throne took it to her sister Sorais, who also evidently understood. Next she took the pencil from me, and after examining it with curiosity proceeded to make a series of delightful little sketches, the first representing herself holding out both hands in welcome, and a man uncommonly like Sir Henry taking them. Next she drew a lovely little picture of a hippopotamus rolling about dying in the water, and of an individual, in whom we had no difficulty in recognizing Agon the High Priest, holding up his hands in horror on the bank. Then followed a most alarming picture of a dreadful fiery furnace and of the same figure, Agon, poking us into it with a forked stick. This picture perfectly horrified me, but I was a little reassured when she nodded sweetly and proceeded to make a fourth drawing -- a man again uncommonly like Sir Henry, and of two women, in whom I recognized Sorais and herself, each with one arm around him, and holding a sword in protection over him. To all of these Sorais, who I saw was employed in carefully taking us all in -- especially Curtis --

signified her approval by nodding.

At last Nyleptha drew a final sketch of a rising sun, indicating that she must go, and that we should meet on the following morning; whereat Sir Henry looked so disappointed that she saw it, and, I suppose by way of consolation, extended her hand to him to kiss, which he did with pious fervour. At the same time Sorais, off whom Good had never taken his eyeglass during the whole indaba [interview], rewarded him by giving him her hand to kiss, though, while she did so, her eyes were fixed upon Sir Henry. I am glad to say that I was not implicated in these proceedings; neither of them gave me her hand to kiss.

Then Nyleptha turned and addressed the man who appeared to be in command of the bodyguard, apparently from her manner and his frequent obeisances, giving him very stringent and careful orders; after which, with a somewhat coquettish nod and smile, she left the hall, followed by Sorais and most of the guards.

When the Queens had gone, the officer whom Nyleptha had addressed came forward and with many tokens of deep respect led us from the hall through various passages to a sumptuous set of apartments opening out of a large central room lighted with brazen swinging lamps (for it was now dusk) and richly carpeted and strewn with couches. On a table in the centre of the room was set a profusion of food and fruit, and, what is more, flowers. There was a delicious

wine also in ancient-looking sealed earthenware flagons, and beautifully chased golden and ivory cups to drink it from. Servants, male and female, also were there to minister to us, and whilst we ate, from some recess outside the apartment

'The silver lute did speak between
The trumpet's lordly blowing;'

and altogether we found ourselves in a sort of earthly paradise which was only disturbed by the vision of that disgusting High Priest who intended to commit us to the flames. But so very weary were we with our labours that we could scarcely keep ourselves awake through the sumptuous meal, and as soon as it was over we indicated that we desired to sleep. As a further precaution against surprise we left Umslopogaas with his axe to sleep in the main chamber near the curtained doorways leading to the apartments which we occupied respectively, Good and I in the one, and Sir Henry and Alphonse in the other. Then throwing off our clothes, with the exception of the mail shirts, which we considered it safer to keep on, we flung ourselves down upon the low and luxurious couches, and drew the silk-embroidered coverlids over us.

In two minutes I was just dropping off when I was aroused by Good's voice.

'I say, Quatermain,' he said, 'did you ever see such eyes?'

'Eyes!' I said, crossly; 'what eyes?'

'Why, the Queen's, of course! Sorais, I mean -- at least I think that is her name.'

'Oh, I don't know,' I yawned; 'I didn't notice them much: I suppose they are good eyes,' and again I dropped off.

Five minutes or so elapsed, and I was once more awakened.

'I say, Quatermain,' said the voice.

'Well,' I answered testily, 'what is it now?'

'Did you notice her ankle? The shape --'

This was more than I could stand. By my bed stood the veldtschoons I had been wearing. Moved quite beyond myself, I took them up and threw them straight at Good's head -- and hit it.

Afterwards I slept the sleep of the just, and a very heavy sleep it must be. As for Good, I don't know if he went to sleep or if he continued to pass Sorais' beauties in mental review, and,

what is more, I don't care.