

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE FLOWER TEMPLE

It was half-past eight by my watch when I woke on the morning following our arrival at Milosis, having slept almost exactly twelve hours, and I must say that I did indeed feel better.

Ah, what a blessed thing is sleep! and what a difference twelve hours of it or so makes to us after days and nights of toil and danger. It is like going to bed one man and getting up another.

I sat up upon my silken couch -- never had I slept upon such a bed before -- and the first thing that I saw was Good's eyeglass fixed on me from the recesses of his silken couch. There was nothing else of him to be seen except his eyeglass, but I knew from the look of it that he was awake, and waiting till I woke up to begin.

'I say, Quatermain,' he commenced sure enough, 'did you observe her skin? It is as smooth as the back of an ivory hairbrush.'

'Now look here, Good,' I remonstrated, when there came a sound at the curtain, which, on being drawn, admitted a functionary, who signified by signs that he was there to lead us to the bath. We gladly consented, and were conducted to a delightful marble

chamber, with a pool of running crystal water in the centre of it, into which we gaily plunged. When we had bathed, we returned to our apartment and dressed, and then went into the central room where we had supped on the previous evening, to find a morning meal already prepared for us, and a capital meal it was, though I should be puzzled to describe the dishes. After breakfast we lounged round and admired the tapestries and carpets and some pieces of statuary that were placed about, wondering the while what was going to happen next. Indeed, by this time our minds were in such a state of complete bewilderment that we were, as a matter of fact, ready for anything that might arrive. As for our sense of astonishment, it was pretty well obliterated. Whilst we were still thus engaged, our friend the captain of the guard presented himself, and with many obeisances signified that we were to follow him, which we did, not without doubts and heart-searchings -- for we guessed that the time had come when we should have to settle the bill for those confounded hippopotami with our cold-eyed friend Agon, the High Priest. However, there was no help for it, and personally I took great comfort in the promise of the protection of the sister Queens, knowing that if ladies have a will they can generally find a way; so off we started as though we liked it. A minute's walk through a passage and an outer court brought us to the great double gates of the palace that open on to the wide highway which runs uphill through the heart of Milosis to the Temple of the Sun a mile away, and thence down the slope on the farther side of the temple to the outer

wall of the city.

These gates are very large and massive, and an extraordinarily beautiful work in metal. Between them -- for one set is placed at the entrance to an interior, and one at that of the exterior wall -- is a fosse, forty-five feet in width. This fosse is filled with water and spanned by a drawbridge, which when lifted makes the palace nearly impregnable to anything except siege guns. As we came, one half of the wide gates were flung open, and we passed over the drawbridge and presently stood gazing up one of the most imposing, if not the most imposing, roadways in the world. It is a hundred feet from curb to curb, and on either side, not cramped and crowded together, as is our European fashion, but each standing in its own grounds, and built equidistant from and in similar style to the rest, are a series of splendid, single-storied mansions, all of red granite. These are the town houses of the nobles of the Court, and stretch away in unbroken lines for a mile or more till the eye is arrested by the glorious vision of the Temple of the Sun that crowns the hill and heads the roadway.

As we stood gazing at this splendid sight, of which more anon, there suddenly dashed up to the gateway four chariots, each drawn by two white horses. These chariots are two-wheeled, and made of wood. They are fitted with a stout pole, the weight of which is supported by leathern girths that form a portion of the harness.

The wheels are made with four spokes only, are tired with iron, and quite innocent of springs. In the front of the chariot, and immediately over the pole, is a small seat for the driver, railed round to prevent him from being jolted off. Inside the machine itself are three low seats, one at each side, and one with the back to the horses, opposite to which is the door. The whole vehicle is lightly and yet strongly made, and, owing to the grace of the curves, though primitive, not half so ugly as might be expected.

But if the chariots left something to be desired, the horses did not. They were simply splendid, not very large but strongly built, and well ribbed up, with small heads, remarkably large and round hoofs, and a great look of speed and blood. I have often wondered whence this breed, which presents many distinct characteristics, came, but like that of its owners, its history is obscure. Like the people the horses have always been there. The first and last of these chariots were occupied by guards, but the centre two were empty, except for the driver, and to these we were conducted. Alphonse and I got into the first, and Sir Henry, Good, and Umslopogaas into the one behind, and then suddenly off we went. And we did go! Among the Zu-Vendi it is not usual to trot horses either riding or driving, especially when the journey to be made is a short one -- they go at full gallop. As soon as we were seated the driver called out, the horses sprang forward, and we were whirled away at a speed sufficient

to take one's breath, and which, till I got accustomed to it, kept me in momentary fear of an upset. As for the wretched Alphonse, he clung with a despairing face to the side of what he called this 'devil of a fiacre', thinking that every moment was his last. Presently it occurred to him to ask where we were going, and I told him that, as far as I could ascertain, we were going to be sacrificed by burning. You should have seen his face as he grasped the side of the vehicle and cried out in his terror.

But the wild-looking charioteer only leant forward over his flying steeds and shouted; and the air, as it went singing past, bore away the sound of Alphonse's lamentations.

And now before us, in all its marvellous splendour and dazzling loveliness, shone out the Temple of the Sun -- the peculiar pride of the Zu-Vendi, to whom it was what Solomon's, or rather Herod's, Temple was to the Jews. The wealth, and skill, and labour of generations had been given to the building of this wonderful place, which had been only finally completed within the last fifty years. Nothing was spared that the country could produce, and the result was indeed worthy of the effort, not so much on account of its size -- for there are larger fanes in the world -- as because of its perfect proportions, the richness and beauty of its materials, and the wonderful workmanship. The building (that stands by itself on a space of some eight acres of garden ground on the hilltop, around which are the dwelling-places of

the priests) is built in the shape of a sunflower, with a dome-covered central hall, from which radiate twelve petal-shaped courts, each dedicated to one of the twelve months, and serving as the repositories of statues reared in memory of the illustrious dead. The width of the circle beneath the dome is three hundred feet, the height of the dome is four hundred feet, and the length of the rays is one hundred and fifty feet, and the height of their roofs three hundred feet, so that they run into the central dome exactly as the petals of the sunflower run into the great raised heart. Thus the exact measurement from the centre of the central altar to the extreme point of any one of the rounded rays would be three hundred feet (the width of the circle itself), or a total of six hundred feet from the rounded extremity of one ray or petal to the extremity of the opposite one. {Endnote 14}

The building itself is of pure and polished white marble, which shows out in marvellous contrast to the red granite of the frowning city, on whose brow it glistens indeed like an imperial diadem upon the forehead of a dusky queen. The outer surface of the dome and of the twelve petal courts is covered entirely with thin sheets of beaten gold; and from the extreme point of the roof of each of these petals a glorious golden form with a trumpet in its hand and widespread wings is figured in the very act of soaring into space. I really must leave whoever reads this to imagine the surpassing beauty of these golden roofs flashing when the sun strikes -- flashing like a thousand fires aflame

on a mountain of polished marble -- so fiercely that the reflection can be clearly seen from the great peaks of the range a hundred miles away.

It is a marvellous sight -- this golden flower upborne upon the cool white marble walls, and I doubt if the world can show such another. What makes the whole effect even more gorgeous is that a belt of a hundred and fifty feet around the marble wall of the temple is planted with an indigenous species of sunflower, which were at the time when we first saw them a sheet of golden bloom.

The main entrance to this wonderful place is between the two northernmost of the rays or petal courts, and is protected first by the usual bronze gates, and then by doors made of solid marble, beautifully carved with allegorical subjects and overlaid with gold. When these are passed there is only the thickness of the wall, which is, however, twenty-five feet (for the Zu-Vendi build for all time), and another slight wall also of white marble, introduced in order to avoid causing a visible gap in the inner skin of the wall, and you stand in the circular hall under the great dome. Advancing to the central altar you look upon as beautiful a sight as the imagination of man can conceive. You are in the middle of the holy place, and above you the great white marble dome (for the inner skin, like the outer, is of polished marble throughout) arches away in graceful curves something

like that of St Paul's in London, only at a slighter angle, and from the funnel-like opening at the exact apex a bright beam of light pours down upon the golden altar. At the east and the west are other altars, and other beams of light stab the sacred twilight to the heart. In every direction, 'white, mystic, wonderful', open out the ray-like courts, each pierced through by a single arrow of light that serves to illumine its lofty silence and dimly to reveal the monuments of the dead. {Endnote 15}

Overcome at so awe-inspiring a sight, the vast loveliness of which thrills the nerves like a glance from beauty's eyes, you turn to the central golden altar, in the midst of which, though you cannot see it now, there burns a pale but steady flame crowned with curls of faint blue smoke. It is of marble overlaid with pure gold, in shape round like the sun, four feet in height, and thirty-six in circumference. Here also, hinged to the foundations of the altar, are twelve petals of beaten gold. All night and, except at one hour, all day also, these petals are closed over the altar itself exactly as the petals of a water-lily close over the yellow crown in stormy weather; but when the sun at midday pierces through the funnel in the dome and lights upon the golden flower, the petals open and reveal the hidden mystery, only to close again when the ray has passed.

Nor is this all. Standing in semicircles at equal distances from each other on the north and south of the sacred place are

ten golden angels, or female winged forms, exquisitely shaped and draped. These figures, which are slightly larger than life-size, stand with bent heads in an attitude of adoration, their faces shadowed by their wings, and are most imposing and of exceeding beauty.

There is but one thing further which calls for description in this altar, which is, that to the east the flooring in front of it is not of pure white marble, as elsewhere throughout the building, but of solid brass, and this is also the case in front of the other two altars.

The eastern and western altars, which are semicircular in shape, and placed against the wall of the building, are much less imposing, and are not enfolded in golden petals. They are, however, also of gold, the sacred fire burns on each, and a golden-winged figure stands on either side of them. Two great golden rays run up the wall behind them, but where the third or middle one should be is an opening in the wall, wide on the outside, but narrow within, like a loophole turned inwards. Through the eastern loophole stream the first beams of the rising sun, and strike right across the circle, touching the folded petals of the great gold flower as they pass till they impinge upon the western altar. In the same way at night the last rays of the sinking sun rest for a while on the eastern altar before they die away into darkness. It is the promise of the dawn to the evening and the evening

to the dawn.

With the exception of those three altars and the winged figures about them, the whole space beneath the vast white dome is utterly empty and devoid of ornamentation -- a circumstance that to my fancy adds greatly to its splendour.

Such is a brief description of this wonderful and lovely building, to the glories of which, to my mind so much enhanced by their complete simplicity, I only wish I had the power to do justice. But I cannot, so it is useless talking more about it. But when I compare this great work of genius to some of the tawdry buildings and tinsel ornamentation produced in these latter days by European ecclesiastical architects, I feel that even highly civilized art might learn something from the Zu-Vendi masterpieces. I can only say that the exclamation which sprang to my lips as soon as my eyes first became accustomed to the dim light of that glorious building, and its white and curving beauties, perfect and thrilling as those of a naked goddess, grew upon me one by one, was, 'Well! a dog would feel religious here.' It is vulgarly put, but perhaps it conveys my meaning more clearly than any polished utterance.

At the temple gates our party was received by a guard of soldiers, who appeared to be under the orders of a priest; and by them we were conducted into one of the ray or 'petal' courts, as the

priests call them, and there left for at least half-an-hour.

Here we conferred together, and realizing that we stood in great danger of our lives, determined, if any attempt should be made upon us, to sell them as dearly as we could -- Umslopogaas announcing his fixed intention of committing sacrilege on the person of Agon, the High Priest, by splitting his head with Inkosi-kaas. From where we stood we could perceive that an immense multitude were pouring into the temple, evidently in expectation of some unusual event, and I could not help fearing that we had to do with it. And here I may explain that every day, when the sunlight falls upon the central altar, and the trumpets sound, a burnt sacrifice is offered to the Sun, consisting generally of the carcass of a sheep or ox, or sometimes of fruit or corn. This event comes off about midday; of course, not always exactly at that hour, but as Zu-Vendis is situated not far from the Line, although -- being so high above the sea it is very temperate -- midday and the falling of the sunlight on the altar were generally simultaneous. Today the sacrifice was to take place at about eight minutes past twelve.

Just at twelve o'clock a priest appeared, and made a sign, and the officer of the guard signified to us that we were expected to advance, which we did with the best grace that we could muster, all except Alphonse, whose irrepressible teeth instantly began to chatter. In a few seconds we were out of the court and looking at a vast sea of human faces stretching away to the farthest

limits of the great circle, all straining to catch a glimpse of the mysterious strangers who had committed sacrilege; the first strangers, mind you, who, to the knowledge of the multitude, had ever set foot in Zu-Vendis since such time that the memory of man runneth not to the contrary.

As we appeared there was a murmur through the vast crowd that went echoing away up the great dome, and we saw a visible blush of excitement grow on the thousands of faces, like a pink light on a stretch of pale cloud, and a very curious effect it was.

On we passed down a lane cut through the heart of the human mass, till presently we stood upon the brazen patch of flooring to the east of the central altar, and immediately facing it.

For some thirty feet around the golden-winged figures the space was roped off, and the multitudes stood outside the ropes. Within were a circle of white-robed gold-cinctured priests holding long golden trumpets in their hands, and immediately in front of us was our friend Agon, the High Priest, with his curious cap upon his head. His was the only covered head in that vast assemblage.

We took our stand upon the brazen space, little knowing what was prepared for us beneath, but I noticed a curious hissing sound proceeding apparently from the floor for which I could not account. Then came a pause, and I looked around to see if there was any sign of the two Queens, Nyleptha and Sorais, but they were not there. To the right of us, however, was a bare space that I guessed was reserved for them.

We waited, and presently a far-off trumpet blew, apparently high up in the dome. Then came another murmur from the multitude, and up a long lane, leading to the open space to our right, we saw the two Queens walking side by side. Behind them were some nobles of the Court, among whom I recognized the great lord Nasta, and behind them again a body of about fifty guards. These last I was very glad to see. Presently they had all arrived and taken their stand, the two Queens in the front, the nobles to the right and left, and the guards in a double semicircle behind them.

Then came another silence, and Nyleptha looked up and caught my eye; it seemed to me that there was meaning in her glance, and I watched it narrowly. From my eye it travelled down to the brazen flooring, on the outer edge of which we stood. Then followed a slight and almost imperceptible sidelong movement of the head. I did not understand it, and it was repeated.

Then I guessed that she meant us to move back off the brazen floor. One more glance and I was sure of it -- there was danger in standing on the floor. Sir Henry was placed on one side of me, Umslopogaas on the other. Keeping my eyes fixed straight before me, I whispered to them, first in Zulu and then in English, to draw slowly back inch by inch till half their feet were resting on the marble flooring where the brass ceased. Sir Henry whispered on to Good and Alphonse, and slowly, very very slowly, we shifted backwards; so slowly that nobody, except Nyleptha and Sorais,

who saw everything seemed to notice the movement. Then I glanced again at Nyleptha, and saw that, by an almost imperceptible nod, she indicated approval. All the while Agon's eyes were fixed upon the altar before him apparently in an ecstasy of contemplation, and mine were fixed upon the small of his back in another sort of ecstasy. Suddenly he flung up his long arm, and in a solemn and resounding voice commenced a chant, of which for convenience' sake I append a rough, a very rough, translation here, though, of course, I did not then comprehend its meaning. It was an invocation to the Sun, and ran somewhat as follows: --

There is silence upon the face of the Earth and the waters thereof  
Yea, the silence doth brood on the waters like a nesting bird;  
The silence sleepeth also upon the bosom of the profound darkness,  
Only high up in the great spaces star doth speak unto star,  
The Earth is faint with longing and wet with the tears of her desire;  
The star-girdled night doth embrace her, but she is not comforted.  
She lies enshrouded in mists like a corpse in the grave-clothes,  
And stretches her pale hands to the East.

Lo! away in the farthest East there is the shadow of a light;  
The Earth seeth and lifts herself. She looks out from beneath  
the hollow of her hand.  
Then thy great angels fly forth from the Holy Place, oh Sun,  
They shoot their fiery swords into the darkness and shrivel it up.

They climb the heavens and cast down the pale stars from their thrones;  
Yea, they hurl the changeful stars back into the womb of the night;  
They cause the moon to become wan as the face of a dying man,  
And behold! Thy glory comes, oh Sun!

Oh, Thou beautiful one, Thou drapest thyself in fire.  
The wide heavens are thy pathway: thou rollest o'er them as a chariot.  
The Earth is thy bride. Thou dost embrace her and  
she brings forth children;  
Yea, Thou favourest her, and she yields her increase.  
Thou art the All Father and the giver of life, oh Sun.  
The young children stretch out their hands and grow in thy brightness;  
The old men creep forth and seeing remember their strength.  
Only the dead forget Thee, oh Sun!

When Thou art wroth then Thou dost hide Thy face;  
Thou drawest around Thee a thick curtain of shadows.  
Then the Earth grows cold and the Heavens are dismayed;  
They tremble, and the sound thereof is the sound of thunder:  
They weep, and their tears are outpoured in the rain;  
They sigh, and the wild winds are the voice of their sighing.  
The flowers die, the fruitful fields languish and turn pale;  
The old men and the little children go unto their appointed place  
When Thou withdrawest thy light, oh Sun!

Say, what art Thou, oh Thou matchless Splendour --

Who set Thee on high, oh Thou flaming Terror?  
When didst Thou begin, and when is the day of Thy ending?  
Thou art the raiment of the living Spirit. {Endnote 16}  
None did place Thee on high, for Thou was the Beginning.  
Thou shalt not be ended when thy children are forgotten;  
Nay, Thou shalt never end, for thy hours are eternal.  
Thou sittest on high within thy golden house and  
measrest out the centuries.  
Oh Father of Life! oh dark-dispelling Sun!

He ceased this solemn chant, which, though it seems a poor enough thing after going through my mill, is really beautiful and impressive in the original; and then, after a moment's pause, he glanced up towards the funnel-sloped opening in the dome and added --

Oh Sun, descend upon thine Altar!

As he spoke a wonderful and a beautiful thing happened. Down from on high flashed a splendid living ray of light, cleaving the twilight like a sword of fire. Full upon the closed petals it fell and ran shimmering down their golden sides, and then the glorious flower opened as though beneath the bright influence. Slowly it opened, and as the great petals fell wide and revealed

the golden altar on which the fire ever burns, the priests blew a blast upon the trumpets, and from all the people there rose a shout of praise that beat against the domed roof and came echoing down the marble walls. And now the flower altar was open, and the sunlight fell full upon the tongue of sacred flame and beat it down, so that it wavered, sank, and vanished into the hollow recesses whence it rose. As it vanished, the mellow notes of the trumpets rolled out once more. Again the old priest flung up his hands and called aloud --

We sacrifice to thee, oh Sun!

Once more I caught Nyleptha's eye; it was fixed upon the brazen flooring.

'Look out,' I said, aloud; and as I said it, I saw Agon bend forward and touch something on the altar. As he did so, the great white sea of faces around us turned red and then white again, and a deep breath went up like a universal sigh.

Nyleptha leant forward, and with an involuntary movement covered her eyes with her hand. Sorais turned and whispered to the officer of the royal bodyguard, and then with a rending sound the whole of the brazen flooring slid from before our feet, and there in its place was suddenly revealed a smooth marble shaft terminating in a most awful raging furnace beneath the altar, big enough

and hot enough to heat the iron stern-post of a man-of-war.

With a cry of terror we sprang backwards, all except the wretched Alphonse, who was paralysed with fear, and would have fallen into the fiery furnace which had been prepared for us, had not Sir Henry caught him in his strong hand as he was vanishing and dragged him back.

Instantly there arose the most fearful hubbub, and we four got back to back, Alphonse dodging frantically round our little circle in his attempts to take shelter under our legs. We all had our revolvers on -- for though we had been politely disarmed of our guns on leaving the palace, of course these people did not know what a revolver was. Umslopogaas, too, had his axe, of which no effort had been made to deprive him, and now he whirled it round his head and sent his piercing Zulu war-shout echoing up the marble walls in fine defiant fashion. Next second, the priests, baffled of their prey, had drawn swords from beneath their white robes and were leaping on us like hounds upon a stag at bay. I saw that, dangerous as action might be, we must act or be lost, so as the first man came bounding along -- and a great tall fellow he was -- I sent a heavy revolver ball through him, and down he fell at the mouth of the shaft, and slid, shrieking frantically, into the fiery gulf that had been prepared for us.

Whether it was his cries, or the, to them, awful sound and effect

of the pistol shot, or what, I know not, but the other priests halted, paralysed and dismayed, and before they could come on again Sorais had called out something, and we, together with the two Queens and most of the courtiers, were being surrounded with a wall of armed men. In a moment it was done, and still the priests hesitated, and the people hung in the balance like a herd of startled buck as it were, making no sign one way or the other.

The last yell of the burning priest had died away, the fire had finished him, and a great silence fell upon the place.

Then the High Priest Agon turned, and his face was as the face of a devil. 'Let the sacrifice be sacrificed,' he cried to the Queens. 'Has not sacrilege enough been done by these strangers, and would ye, as Queens, throw the cloak of your majesty over evildoers? Are not the creatures sacred to the Sun dead? And is not a priest of the Sun also dead, but now slain by the magic of these strangers, who come as the winds out of heaven, whence we know not, and who are what we know not? Beware, oh Queens, how ye tamper with the great majesty of the God, even before His high altar! There is a Power that is more than your power; there is a Justice that is higher than your justice. Beware how ye lift an impious hand against it! Let the sacrifice be sacrificed, oh Queens.'

Then Sorais made answer in her deep quiet tones, that always seemed to me to have a suspicion of mockery about them, however serious the theme: 'Oh, Agon, thou hast spoken according to thy desire, and thou hast spoken truth. But it is thou who wouldst lift an impious hand against the justice of thy God. Bethink thee the midday sacrifice is accomplished; the Sun hath claimed his priest as a sacrifice.'

This was a novel idea, and the people applauded it.

'Bethink thee what are these men? They are strangers found floating on the bosom of a lake. Who brought them here? How came they here? How know you that they also are not servants of the Sun? Is this the hospitality that ye would have our nation show to those whom chance brings to them, to throw them to the flames? Shame on you! Shame on you! What is hospitality? To receive the stranger and show him favour. To bind up his wounds, and find a pillow for his head, and food for him to eat. But thy pillow is the fiery furnace, and thy food the hot savour of the flame. Shame on thee, I say!'

She paused a little to watch the effect of her speech upon the multitude, and seeing that it was favourable, changed her tone from one of remonstrance to one of command.

'Ho! place there,' she cried; 'place, I say; make way for the

Queens, and those whom the Queens cover with their "kaf" (mantle).'

'And if I refuse, oh Queen?' said Agon between his teeth.

'Then will I cut a path with my guards,' was the proud answer;  
'ay, even in the presence of thy sanctuary, and through the bodies  
of thy priests.'

Agon turned livid with baffled fury. He glanced at the people as though meditating an appeal to them, but saw clearly that their sympathies were all the other way. The Zu-Vendi are a very curious and sociable people, and great as was their sense of the enormity that we had committed in shooting the sacred hippopotami, they did not like the idea of the only real live strangers they had seen or heard of being consigned to a fiery furnace, thereby putting an end for ever to their chance of extracting knowledge and information from, and gossiping about us. Agon saw this and hesitated, and then for the first time Nyleptha spoke in her soft sweet voice.

'Bethink thee, Agon,' she said, 'as my sister Queen has said, these men may also be servants of the Sun. For themselves they cannot speak, for their tongues are tied. Let the matter be adjourned till such time as they have learnt our language. Who can be condemned without a hearing? When these men can plead for themselves, then it will be time to put them to the proof.'

Here was a clever loophole of escape, and the vindictive old priest took it, little as he liked it.

'So be it, oh Queens,' he said. 'Let the men go in peace, and when they have learnt our tongue then let them speak. And I, even I, will make humble supplication at the altar lest pestilence fall on the land by cause of the sacrilege.'

These words were received with a murmur of applause, and in another minute we were marching out of the temple surrounded by the royal guards.

But it was not till long afterwards that we learnt the exact substance of what had passed, and how hardly our lives had been wrung out of the cruel grip of the Zu-Vendi priesthood, in the face of which even the Queens were practically powerless. Had it not been for their strenuous efforts to protect us we should have been slain even before we set foot in the Temple of the Sun. The attempt to drop us bodily into the fiery pit as an offering was a last artifice to attain this end when several others quite unsuspected by us had already failed.