

The Eternal Lover



by Edgar Rice Burroughs

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CHAPTER I.

A Hundred Thousand Years.

Nu, the son of Nu, his mighty muscles rolling beneath his smooth, bronzed skin, moved silently through the jungle primeval.

His handsome head, with its shock of black hair, roughly cropped between sharpened stones, was high held, the delicate nostrils questioning each vagrant breeze for word of Oo, hunter of men.

Now his trained senses catch the familiar odor of Ta, the great woolly rhinoceros, directly in his path, but Nu, the son of Nu, does not hunt Ta this day. Does not the hide of Ta's brother already hang before the entrance to Nu's cave?

No; today Nu hunts the gigantic cat, the fierce, saber-toothed tiger, Oo, for Nat-ul, wondrous daughter of old Ta, will mate with none but the mightiest of hunters.

Only so recently as the last darkness, as, beneath the great, equatorial moon, the two had walked hand in hand beside the restless sea, she had made it quite plain to Nu, the son of Nu, that not even he, son of the chief of chiefs, could claim her unless there hung at the thong of his loin cloth the fangs of Oo.

"Nat-ul," she had said to him, "wishes her man to be greater than other men. She loves Nu now better than her life, but if love is to walk at her side during life, pride and respect must walk with it."

Her slender hand reached up to stroke the young giant's black hair.

"I am proud of Nu," she continued. "Among the young men of the tribe there is no greater hunter or no mightier fighter than Nu, the son of Nu. Should you, single handed, slay Oo before a grown man's beard has darkened your cheek none will be greater in all the world than Nu's mate, Nu, the son of Nu."

The young man was still sensible to the sound of her soft voice and the caress of her gentle touch upon his brow. Even as these things had sent him speeding forth into the jungle in search of Oo while the day was still so young that the night prowling beasts were yet abroad, so they urged him forward deeper and deeper into the dark and trackless mazes of the tangled forest.

As he forged on the scent of Ta became stronger, until at last the huge, ungainly beast loomed large before Nu's eyes.

He was standing in a little clearing, in deep, rank jungle grasses, and had he not been head on toward Nu he would not have seen him, since even his hearing was far too dull to apprehend the noiseless tread of the cave man moving lightly up wind.

As the tiny, bloodshot eyes of the primordial beast discovered the man, the great head went down and Ta, ill-natured and bellicose progenitor of the equally ill-natured and bellicose rhinoceros of the twentieth century, charged the little giant who had disturbed his antediluvian meditation.

The creature's great bulk and awkward, uncouth lines belied his speed, for he tore cyclonically down upon Nu and had not the brain and muscle of the troglodyte been fitted by heritage and training to the successful meeting of such emergencies there would be no tale to tell today of Nu, the son of Nu.

But the young man was prepared, and, turning, he ran with the swiftness of a hare toward the nearest tree, a huge, arboreal fern, towering upon the verge of the little clearing.

Like a cat, the man ran up the perpendicular bole, his hands and feet seeming barely to touch the projecting knobs marking the remains of former fronds which converted the towering stem into an easy stairway for such as he.

About Nu's neck his stone tipped spear hung by its rawhide thong down his back, while stone hatchet and stone knife dangled from his girth, giving him free use of his hands for climbing. You or I, having once gained the seeming safety of the lowest fronds of the great tree, fifty feet above the ground, might have heaved a great sigh of relief that we had thus easily escaped the hideous monster beneath. But not so Nu, who was wise

to the ways of the creatures of his remote age.

Not one whit did he abate his speed as he neared the lowest branch, nor did he even waste a precious second in a downward glance at his enemy. What need indeed? Did he not know precisely what Ta would do?

Instead, he swung, monkey-like, to a broad leaf, and, though the chances he took would have paled the face of a brave man today, they did not cause Nu even to hesitate as he ran lightly and swiftly along the bending, swaying frond, leaping just at the right instant toward the bole of a nearby jungle giant.

Nor was he an instant too soon. The frond from which he had sprung had scarcely whipped up from beneath his weight when Ta, with all the force and momentum of a runaway locomotive, struck the base of the tree head on.

The jar of that terrific collision shook the earth. There was the sound of the splintering of wood, and the mighty tree toppled to the ground with a deafening crash.

Nu from an adjoining tree looked down and grinned. He was not hunting Ta that day, and so he sprang from tree to tree until he had passed around the clearing and then, coming to the surface once more, continued his way toward the distant lava cliffs, where Oo, the man hunter, made his grim lair.

From among the tangled creepers through which the man wormed his sinuous way ugly little eyes peered down upon him from beneath shaggy, beetling brows and great fighting tusks were bared as the hairy ones growled and threatened from above. But Nu paid not the slightest attention to the huge, ferocious creatures that menaced him upon every hand.

From earliest childhood he had been accustomed to the jabbering and scoldings of the ape people, and so he knew that if he went his way in peace, harming them not, they would offer

him no harm. One of lesser experience might have attempted to drive them away with menacing spear or well aimed hatchet and thus have drawn upon him a half dozen or more ferocious bulls, against which no single warrior, however doughty, might have lived long enough to count his antagonists.

Threatening and unfriendly as the apes seemed, the cave man really looked upon them as friends and allies, since between them and his own people there existed a species of friendly alliance, due, no doubt, to the similarity of their form and structure.

In that long gone age when the world was young and its broad bosom teemed with countless thousands of carnivorous beasts and reptiles and other myriads blackened the bosoms of its inland seas and filled its warm, moist air with the flutter of their mighty batlike wings man's battle for survival stretched from sun to sun—there was no respite.

His semiarboreal habits took him often into the domains of the great and lesser apes, and from this contact had risen what might best be termed an armed truce, for they alone of all the other inhabitants of the earth had spoken languages, both meager, it is true, yet sufficient to their primitive wants, and as both languages had been born of the same needs to deal with identical conditions there were many words and phrases identical to both.

Thus the troglodyte and the primordial ape could converse when necessity

demanded, and as Nu traversed their country he understood their grumbling and chattering merely as warnings to him against the performance of any overt act. Had danger lurked in his path the hairy ones would have warned him of that, too, for of such was their service to man, who, in return, hunted the more remorseless of their enemies, driving them from the land of the anthropoids.

On and on went Nu, occasionally questioning the hairy ones he encountered for word of Oo, and always the replies confirmed him in his belief that he should come upon the man eater before the sun crawled into its dark cave for the night.

And so he did.

He had passed out of the heavier vegetation and was ascending a gentle rise that terminated in low volcanic cliffs when there came down upon the breeze to his alert nostrils the strong scent of Oo. There was little or no cover now, other than the rank jungle grass that overgrew the slope and an occasional lofty fern, rearing its tufted pinnacle a hundred feet above the ground, but Nu was in no way desirous of cover. Cover that would protect him from the view of Oo would hide Oo from him.

He was not afraid that the saber-toothed tiger would run away from him—that was not Oo's way, but he did not wish to come unexpectedly upon the animal in the thick grass.

He had approached to within a hundred yards of the cliffs now, and the scent of Oo had become as a stench in the sensitive nostrils of the cave man. Just ahead he could see the openings to several caves in the face of the rocky barrier, and in one of these he knew must lie the lair of his quarry.

Fifty yards from the cliff the grasses ceased except for scattered tufts that had found foothold among the broken rocks that strewn the ground, and as Nu emerged into this clear space he breathed a sigh of relief, for during the past fifty yards a considerable portion of the way had been through a matted jungle that rose above his head. To have met Oo there would have meant almost certain death.

Now, as he bent his eyes toward the nearby cave mouths he discovered one before which was strewn such an array of gigantic bones that he needed no other evidence as to the identity of its occupant. Here indeed laired no lesser creature than the awesome Oo, the gigantic, saber-toothed tiger of antiquity.

Even as Nu looked there came a low and ominous growl from the dark mouth of the foul cavern, and then in the blackness beyond the entrance Nu saw two flaming blotches of yellow glaring out upon him.

A moment later the mighty beast itself sauntered majestically into the sunlight. There it stood, lashing its long tail from side to side, glaring with unblinking eyes straight at the rash man thing who dared venture thus near its abode of death.

The huge body, fully as large as that of a full grown bull, was beautifully marked with black stripes upon a vivid yellow ground, while the belly and breast were of the purest white.

As Nu advanced the great upper lip curled back, revealing in all their terrible ferocity the eighteen inch curved fangs that armed either side of the upper jaw, and from the cavernous throat came a fearsome scream of rage that brought frightened silence upon the jungle for miles round.

The hunter loosened the stone knife at his waist and transferred it to his mouth, where he held it firmly, ready for instant use, between his strong, white teeth. In his left hand he carried his stone tipped spear and in his right the heavy stone hatchet that was so effective both at a distance and at close range.

Oo was creeping upon him now. The grinning jaws dripped saliva. The yellow-green eyes gleamed bloodthirstily. Could it be possible that this fragile pygmy dreamed of meeting in hand to hand combat the terror of a world, the scourge of the jungle, the hunter of men and of mammoths?

"For Nat-ul," murmured Nu, for Oo was about to spring.

As the mighty hurling mass of bone and muscle, claws and fangs shot through the air the man swung his tiny stone hatchet with all the power behind his giant muscles, timing its release so nicely that it caught Oo in midleap squarely between the eyes with the terrific force of a powder sped projectile.

Then Nu, catlike as Oo himself, leaped agilely to one side as the huge bulk of the beast dashed, sprawling, to the ground at the spot where the man had stood.

Scarcely had the beast struck the earth than the cave man, knowing that his puny weapon could at best but momentarily stun the monster, drove his heavy spear deep into the glossy side just behind the giant shoulder.

Already Oo regained his feet, roaring and screaming in pain and rage. The air vibrated and the earth trembled to his hideous shrieks.

For miles around the savage densities of the jungle bristled in terror, sinking further into the depths of their dank and gloomy haunts, casting affrighted glances rearward in the direction of that awesome sound.

With gaping jaws and widespread talons the tiger lunged toward its rash tormentor, who stood gripping the haft of his primitive weapon. As the beast turned the spear turned also, and Nu was whipped about as a leaf at the extremity of a gale tossed branch.

Striking and cowering futilely, the colossal feline leaped hither and thither in prodigious bounds as he strove to reach the taunting figure that remained just beyond the zone of those destroying talons. But presently Oo

went more slowly, and then he stopped and crouched flat upon his belly. Slowly and cautiously he reached outward and backward with one huge paw until the torturing spear was within his grasp.

Meanwhile the man screamed taunts and insults into the face of his enemy, at the same time forcing the spear farther and farther into the vitals of the tiger, for he knew that once that paw encircled the spear's haft his chances for survival would be of the slenderest.

He had seen that Oo was weakening from loss of blood, but there were many fighting minutes left in the big carcass unless a happy twist of the spear sent its point through the wall of the great heart.

But at length the beast succeeded. The paw closed upon the spear. The tough wood bent beneath the weight of those steel teeth, then snapped short a foot from the tiger's body. At the same instant Oo reared and threw himself upon the youth, who had snatched his stone hunting knife from between his teeth and crouched, ready for the impact.

Down they went, the man entirely buried beneath the great body of his antagonist. Again and again the crude knife was buried in the snowy breast of the tiger even while Nu fell beneath the screaming, tearing incarnation of bestial rage.

At the instant it struck the man as strange that not once had the snapping jaws or frightful talons touched him, and then he was crushed to earth beneath the dead weight of Oo.

The beast gave one last, titanic struggle and was still.

With difficulty Nu wriggled from beneath the carcass of his kill. At the last moment the tiger itself had forced the spear's point into its own heart as it bent and broke the haft.

The man leaped to his feet and cut the great throat.

Then as the blood flowed he danced about the dead body of his vanquished foe, brandishing his knife and recovered hatchet and emitting now shrill shrieks in mimicry of Oo and now deep toned roars—the call of the victorious cave man.

From the surrounding cliffs and jungle came answering challenges from a hundred savage throats—the rumbling thunder of the cave bear's growl, the roar of Zor, the lion; the wail of the hyena, the trumpeting of the mammoth, the deep toned howling of the bull bos, and from distant swamp and sea came the hissing and whistling of saurian and amphibian.

His victory dance completed, Nu busied himself in the removal of the broken spear from the carcass of his kill. At the same time he removed several strong tendons from Oo's forearm, with which he roughly spliced the broken haft, for there was never an instant in the danger fraught existence of his kind when it was well to be without the service of a stone tipped spear.

This precaution taken, he busied himself with the task of cutting off Oo's head, that he might bear it in triumph to the cave of his love. With stone hatchet and knife he hacked and hewed for the better part of a half hour until at last he raised the dripping trophy above his head, as, leaping high in air, he screamed once more the gloating challenge of the victor, that all the world might know that there was no greater hunter than Nu, the son of Nu.

Even as the last note of his fierce cry rolled through the heavy, humid, superheated air of the Neocene there came a sudden hush upon the face of the world.

A strange darkness obscured the swollen sun. The ground trembled and shook. Deep rumblings muttered upward from the bowels of the young earth, and answering grumbings thundered down from the firmament above.

The startled troglodyte looked quickly in every direction, searching for the great beast who could thus cause the whole land to tremble and cry out in fear and the heavens above to moan and the sun to hide himself in terror.

In every direction he saw frightened beasts and birds and flying reptiles scurrying in panic stricken terror in search of hiding places, and moved by the same primitive instinct, the young giant grabbed up his weapon and his trophy and ran like an antelope for the sheltering darkness of the cave of Oo.

Scarcely had he reached the fancied safety of the interior when the earth's crust crumpled and rocked. There was a sickening sensation of sudden sinking, and amid the awful roar and thunder of rending rock the cave mouth closed, and in the impenetrable darkness of his living tomb Nu, the son of Nu—Nu of the Neocene—lost consciousness.

That was a hundred thousand years ago.

CHAPTER II.

Today.

To have looked at her merely you would never have thought Victoria Custer of Beatrice, Neb., at all the sort of girl she really was. Her large, dreamy eyes and the graceful lines of her slender figure gave one an impression of that timidity which we have grown to take for granted as an inherent characteristic of the truly womanly woman.

Yet I dare say there were only two things on God's green earth that Victoria Custer feared, or beneath it or above it, for that matter—nice and earthquakes.

She readily admitted the deadly terror which the former aroused within her, but of earthquakes she seldom if ever would speak. To her brother Barney, her chum and confidant, she had on one or two occasions unburdened her soul.

The two were guests now of Lord and Lady Greystoke upon the Englishman's vast estate in equatorial Africa, in the country of the Waziri, to which

Barney Custer had come to hunt big game—and forget.

But all that has nothing to do with this story, nor has John Clayton, Lord Greystoke, who was once upon a time "Tarzan of the Apes," except that my having chanced to be a guest of his at the same time as the Custers makes it possible for me to give you a story that otherwise might never have been told.

South of Uziri, the country of the Waziri, lies a chain of rugged mountains, at the foot of which stretches a broad plain where antelope, zebra, giraffe, rhino and elephant abound, and here are lion and leopard and hyena preying, each after his own fashion, upon the sleek, fat herds of antelope, zebra and giraffe. Here, too, are buffalo—irritable, savage beasts, more formidable than the lion himself, Clayton says.

It is indeed a hunter's paradise, and scarce a day passed that did not find a party absent from the low, rambling bungalow of the Greystokes in search of game and adventure, nor seldom was it that Victoria Custer failed to be of the party.

Already she had bagged two leopards, in addition to numerous antelope and zebra, and on foot had faced a



"Barney, there is something about those hills that fills me with terror."

bull buffalo's charge, bringing him down with a perfect shot within ten paces of where she stood.

At first she had kept her brother in a state bordering on nervous collapse, for the risks she took were such as few men would care to undertake.

After he had discovered, however, that she possessed perfect coolness in the face of danger and that the accuracy of her aim was so almost uncanny as to bring unstinted praise from the oldest hunters among them he commenced to lean a trifle too far in the other direction, so that Victoria was often in positions where she found herself entirely separated from the other members of the party—a compliment to her prowess which she greatly prized, since women and beginners were usually surrounded by precautions and guards, through which it was difficult to get within firing distance of any sort of game.

As they were riding homeward one evening after a hunt in the foothills Barney noticed that his sister was unusually quiet and apparently depressed.

"What's the matter, Vic?" he asked. "Dead tired, eh?"

The girl looked up with a bright smile, which was immediately followed by an expression of puzzled bewilderment.

"Barney," she said, after a moment of silence, "there is something about those hills back there that fills me with the strangest sensation of terror imaginable. Today I passed an outcropping of volcanic rock that gave evidence of a frightful convulsion of nature in some bygone age. At sight of it I commenced to tremble from head to foot, a cold perspiration breaking out all over me.

"But that part is not so strange—you know I have always been subject to these same silly attacks of unreasoning terror at sight of any evidence of the mighty forces that have wrought changes in the earth's crust or of the slightest tremor of an earthquake. But today the feeling of unutterable personal loss which overwhelmed me was almost unbearable. It was as though one whom I loved above all others had been taken from me.

"And yet," she continued, "through all my inexplicable sorrow there shone a ray of brilliant hope as remarkable and unfathomable as the deeper and depressing emotion which still stirred me."

For some time neither spoke, but rode silently stirrup to stirrup as their ponies picked their ways through the knee high grass. The girl was thinking, trying to puzzle out an explanation of the rather weird sensations which had so recently climaxed her.

Barney Custer was one of those unusual and delightful people who do not scoff at whatever they cannot understand—the reason, doubtless, that his sister as well as others chose him as the recipient of their confidences. Not understanding her emotion, he had nothing to offer, and so remained silent.

He was, however, not a little puz-

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sied, as he had always been, at each new manifestation of Victoria's uncanny reaction of every indication of the great upheaval which marked the physical changes in the conformation of the earth's crust.

He recalled former occasions upon which his sister had confided in him something of similar terrors.

Once in the Garden of the Gods and again during a trip through the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and very vivid indeed was the recollection of Victoria's nervous collapse following the reading of the press dispatches describing the San Francisco earthquake. In all other respects his sister was an exceptionally normal, well balanced young American woman—which fact, doubtless, rendered her one weakness the more apparent.

But Victoria Custer's terror of earthquakes was not her only peculiarity. The other was her strange contempt for the men who had sued for her hand—and of these there had been many. Her brother had thought several of them the salt of the earth and Victoria herself had liked them too. But as for loving them—perish the thought!

Oddly enough, recollection of this other phase of her character obtruded itself upon Barney's memory as the two rode on toward the Clayton bungalow, and with it he recalled a persistent dream which Victoria had said recurred after each reminder of a great convulsion of nature. At the thought he broke the silence.

"Has your—ah!—avatar made his customary appearance?" he asked, smiling.

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