

THE TEMPLE OF THE BEAST.

By T. C. BRIDGES.



O I took him by the neck and nearly flogged the life out of him!" finished Denyer.

Aveling had listened quietly, though the lines on his thin, brown face had deepened slightly. Now he

rose and, leaning across the bare table, stared straight at the other.

"Look here, Denyer, I don't often interfere, but I've told you before that you'll never get any good out of these fellows by thrashing them. These Matabele are men; they're not like your wretched, lying, half-civilised Cape Kaffirs. Once and for all, you've got to stop it. Do you quite understand?"

Aveling seldom spoke like this, but when he did, Denyer knew that he meant it. Aveling was his superior officer, being manager and part-owner of the mine.

Denyer scowled, opened his mouth as if about to retort angrily, thought better of it, and, getting up, marched out of the room, slamming the door so that all the rickety frame-built shanty rattled.

Through the wide-open window Aveling saw him fling himself down with unnecessary violence in a long cane chair, and caught vague mutterings of sulky discontent.

"What a life!" muttered the young manager, as he turned the ill-trimmed paraffin lamp a little higher, and reached for his writing-case. "Beastly country, beastly climate, a mine that don't pay and never will, and penned here, for Heaven knows how long, with a brute like that!"

"Pon my soul," he continued to himself, staring idly out through the window, "I feel positively murderous at times! I've half a mind to chuck the whole business, go back to England, and take my chance."

There came the light thud of bare feet outside, and a tap at the door, which was opened by a young negro. As he entered, he cast a quick, sidelong glance at Denyer, who was sitting scowling in the verandah,

and an expression half of fear, half of hate, flitted across his face. Without a word he laid a letter on the table and stood quietly by.

Aveling took up the letter. It was addressed in pencil, and the writing was shaky and indistinct.

Inside was a half sheet of note-paper, with these words scrawled in the same feeble hand: "Come up at once. I have something of great importance to say to you. Don't wait till morning, or it will be too late.—G. Staniforth."

Aveling tore the note in pieces, and, crumpling them up, flung them on the floor.

"Thank you, Maputa," he said. "There is no answer."

The man glided away silent as a shadow. Aveling took his hat from a nail in the wall, lit a pipe, and stepped out through the verandah. Denyer looked up as he passed, but said nothing.

It was an uphill pull of about a mile to the lonely house where "Old Stand-off," as the mine staff called him, lived his solitary life.

With long, even steps Aveling strode on through the stifling bush, and soon gained the comparative coolness of the hill-top. An uneasy suspicion that Staniforth was ill troubled his mind.

On reaching the latter's house, he rapped on the door with his stick.

The queer old Mashona who was Staniforth's only servant let him in.

"Baas pretty sick," he volunteered cheerfully.

Aveling could see that for himself. The old man lay on his cot by the open window, breathing heavily. At first Aveling thought he was unconscious, but, as he crossed the room, Staniforth opened his eyes.

"That you, Aveling?" he asked weakly.

"Yes," said the latter, pulling up a chair and seating himself beside the cot. "What's the trouble, old man?"

With an effort Staniforth raised himself on the pillow. "I'm done!" he muttered hoarsely. "This cursed lung of mine——" He sank back again, gasping for breath.

Aveling pulled a flask of brandy from his pocket and held it to the sick man's lips.

Staniforth drank greedily, and a faint flush of colour stole into his cheeks.

"Listen here," he said, plucking at Aveling's sleeve. "You've been a pal to me—the only white man in all South Africa that I'd raise a finger to help. They're all the same but you—all sniffin' round to borrow money, and then laugh at 'Old Standorf' behind his back. Eh, I know 'em—curse 'em!"

A violent fit of coughing interrupted his speech.

"It's all right," he went on, feebly putting aside Aveling's hand, as the Englishman attempted to lift him. "You can't do nothin' for me. I've got my ticket straight enough. Your job's to sit still and listen. Give us another drink."

He grasped the flask again, and Aveling heard the spirit gurgle down his throat.

"Bend over," he muttered; "my shoutin' time's past. I'm dyin', Avelin', but I'll make your fortune for you—I swear I will! Listen here. You know the Mabunda country—eh? Yes, that's right. Well, keep up the Kwanda river till you strike Lomba. Then thirty miles nor' nor'-west, and you'll find yourself in a karoo, with a muddle of hills away to the north. There's one—square-topped—higher than the rest. Foller the dry gorge, and you come to the lake. It's all dead—no blacks, no birds, not a sign o' life! You'll see a great cave on the further shore. I found it twent— What's the matter? I'm—I'm dyin, Avelin'! It's gold—cups—pots—tons of it—but there's somethin'—the natives—tagati—don't—" With a sudden gasp he fell back.

Aveling snatched up the flask, but it was too late. Staniforth rolled over, twisted once in a hideous convulsion, and then lay still.

Aveling stood by the bedside a moment in silence. The story which the dead man had gasped out seemed wildly improbable. Gold—tons of it lying in a cave! Surely it was nonsense—the ravings of delirium. And yet the old man's deadly earnestness had impressed him. There had been an unmistakable ring of sincerity in those muttered words.

Suppose the story was genuine, after all! Staniforth must have got his money from somewhere. His mysterious silence on the subject had long been a matter for gossip throughout the countryside.

Pulling himself together, he stooped to close the dead eyes. As he did so, the bushes below the open window rustled sharply.

With one spring Aveling was outside, and stood listening intently. But the only sounds were the harsh rattle of the crickets, the bleating of the tree-frogs, and the churring cry of a night-jar.

"I wonder!" said Aveling thoughtfully, as he went back into the house.

An hour later, as he neared the compound of the Maxim Hill Mine, a shadowy figure rose out of the long grass by the path. It was Maputa who stood there, with his fingers to his lips.

"Baas Denyer, him follow," he whispered. "Him just come home."

"Good lad," said Aveling. "You were right to tell me. But, mind, not a word to anyone else. This complicates matters," he muttered, as he passed through the gate. "I wonder how much the beggar heard?"

When he got into the sitting-room, he looked on the floor. The torn fragments of old Staniforth's note were gone.

Aveling sat down, lit his pipe, and began to think matters over. Was it worth going? Was it a wild-goose chase, or was there anything in it? If appearances were to be trusted, Denyer was on the track. Ten to one he had heard the whole story, and meant to have a try for old Staniforth's treasure. A smile flickered across Aveling's face as he pictured a race between himself and Denyer for this rainbow gold.

He got out a map and began to trace the route. He found that the journey would take him about a week. There would be no difficulty in being away for a fortnight, for at the present moment there was practically nothing doing at the mine. When at last he rose and turned into his sleeping-room, Aveling's mind was made up. He would have a try for the treasure, and—he would get the start of Denyer.

The sun was just touching the eastern hills with a rim of crimson when Aveling, riding his favourite horse, Billy, left the mine. As soon as he was out of sight of the buildings, he put his horse to a canter.

For three days he rode hard, sleeping but little, and very lightly at that. When, on the fourth, he crossed the Zambesi, his spirits began to rise. At midday he off-saddled long enough to shoot a buck and replenish his fast-failing larder.

There followed two slow and toilsome days through twisty bush paths deep in red mud. Aveling had to steer by compass, and he breathed more freely when, on the seventh day from home, he found himself once more

on open veldt, cut here and there by deep, heavily-wooded kloofs.

By this time he was beginning to feel the strain severely, and the redoubtable Billy was showing unmistakable signs of the journey. At midday Aveling climbed a hill and carefully scanned the south-eastern horizon.

"Shaken him off, I fancy," he said, as he walked down to where he had left his horse. "Billy, old man, we'll camp early to-night, and you shall have a chance for once to fill your poor old tummy. Won't do for you to crack up."

The horse whinnied and thrust its soft muzzle into its master's hand.

About five that evening Aveling reached a kloof with good water and grass, and after eating an early supper, rolled himself in his blanket and lay drowsily watching Billy as the latter cropped the rich pasture.

The next thing he knew he had awakened with a sharp start. "A shot!" he muttered, as he scrambled to his feet and rapidly took cover behind a tree. It was grey dawn, and the still world a-drip with dew.

Aveling stared round, but all was quiet. He smiled. "It must have been a brauking bough, or perhaps Billy trod on a stick."

By the by, where was Billy? Aveling moved cautiously through the bush. Presently he caught sight of his horse lying down close by the river, some three hundred yards away.

"Billy!" he called, as he walked towards him. But Billy did not stir. A sudden horrid fear tightened across Aveling's heart. Reckless of danger, he plunged forward through the undergrowth.

As he reached his horse's side, a low cry of rage and grief broke from his lips. Billy lay in a pool of his own blood, which was still trickling slowly from a small bullet-hole behind the shoulder.

Two days later, footsore and hungry, Aveling reached the native village of Lomba, and there traded his rifle for a pony and a three days' stock of mealies and bananas. Without pausing for so much as a night's rest, he pushed on across the open veldt beyond the town; and so well did his wiry little beast travel, that morning found him on the desert plain of which Staniforth had told him, with the bald hills blue on the northern horizon.

A narrow native track ran across the plain. On it were a horse's footprints—a shod horse's. Hastily Aveling leapt down and examined them. They were not more than two hours old. A grim smile flickered across his face.

"Denyer, my friend," he muttered, "you were a fool to dawdle; it wasn't healthy."

Pushing his pony to the top of its speed, Aveling travelled fast across the glaring waste of sand and salt bush, and with every mile the gaunt hills climbed higher across the western horizon.

With every mile, too, the desolation increased, until, when he reached the foot of the range, he seemed to be gazing at the broken fragments of some forgotten world.

The rocks which towered abruptly out of the desert were of a nature entirely different from anything within Aveling's experience. They were black and evidently extremely dense and hard, and the sun, beating fiercely on their dull surface, reverberated a sullen heat like that from a blast furnace.

Yet, in spite of the terrific temperature, a cold shudder shook the man as he checked his pony a moment before entering the pass. There was no doubt about the way. The track which had led him all across the plain ran straight into the mouth of a narrow gap, and crawled upwards in steep, stone-strewn curves.

At the point where the sand changed to rock, the hoof-marks of Denyer's horse were distinctly visible.

Again Aveling smiled. Then, loosening his revolver in its heat-cracked holster, he rode straight into the pass.

As he mounted slowly upwards, his pony slipping and stumbling among the loose rocks, the surroundings became ever more gloomy and repulsive. The sides of the gorge grew higher, and closed in until the sky was a mere rift of blue, and at the bottom reigned an everlasting twilight. The silence was horrible, unbroken even by the chirp of a cricket or the cry of a bird. There was not a living thing in sight—not a scorpion, a spider, or a snake. The very stinging flies had ceased their buzzing. A hideous, unnatural stagnation brooded over the entire gorge.

He had covered about a mile of this unpromising road when suddenly the pass made a sharp bend to the left and broke away into nothingness. Near the edge of the gap, with its bridle flung over a projecting spike of rock, stood a horse. Aveling recognised it instantly as Denyer's.

But of its rider there was no sign. Springing from his saddle, Aveling tethered his own pony, then, pistol in hand and with his heart beating a little faster than usual, walked towards the opening.

Prepared as he was for strange sights, the

reality surpassed his wildest imaginings. He found himself looking straight down into a gigantic pit or crater, at the bottom of which lay a sheet of water black as ink and smooth as oil. This pit was roughly oval in shape, and the pass by which Aveling had come pierced it at the narrow eastern end. On every side but one sheer walls of the same strange ebony rock of which the whole range was composed dropped to the surface of the black, stagnant lake.

The exception was the opposite end, where the cliff was broken by an immense arch of rock, which seemed to form a roof for that portion of the lake.

Across the rock-face, to the right of this arch, crawled slowly a figure, looking hardly larger than a fly.

It was Denyer, making direct for the cavern mouth.

At first Aveling could not make out how the man had reached his present position. Then, peering over the sheer edge, he saw that a path, a mere ledge not a yard wide, led in a long downward curve towards the mouth of the cave.

Quivering with impatience, Aveling waited till his enemy had reached the mouth of the black arch and passed out of sight. Then, dropping over the ledge, he hurried in pursuit. Plainly the path had been made by man. Some ancient race had with infinite labour carved this ledge in the living rock for the purpose of reaching the mysterious opening in the far wall of the crater lake.

At any other time Aveling would have used infinite caution in creeping down this narrow, slippery footway, where there was no hand-hold to save him from the fatal consequences of a stumble. Now his whole mind was so savagely concentrated on the idea of foiling Denyer that he leapt recklessly down the dangerous slope, and reached the cave mouth within less than ten minutes after the other had disappeared within its recesses.

Here he paused a moment before entering. In spite of his excitement, the weird horror of the place impressed him powerfully. Above him the black cliffs towered towards the pale blue sky; at his feet lay the oily surface of the apparently fathomless lake, unbroken by a single ripple. Over all brooded that awful unbroken silence. A sudden chill fear gripped him. A horror of some unknown danger seemed to be closing in upon him.

He gave himself an impatient shake, and leapt lightly over a large knob of rock which carried the path round the sharp angle into the mouth of the cave.

Aveling's first sensation was of a disgusting and almost overpowering musky stench. Then, as his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he saw that the ledge continued inwards, and, running just above the level of the murky water, led to a great square table carved out of the solid rock at the further end of the cave.

The rock of which this table or altar was composed was highly polished, and on its surface were deeply-graven strange figures of human beings with the heads of animals. But it was not the altar itself which held Aveling's eyes. Its flat top was covered with heavy metal utensils, bowls, platters, and in the centre an enormous vase, which caught some faint reflection from the outer air, and glowed like old dull bronze.

Upon the ledge in front of the altar stood Denyer, greedily gathering a number of the platters, which clanked heavily as he stacked them in one pile.

The grim humour of the situation appealed to Aveling, and he stood quite still, awaiting the inevitable moment when Denyer must turn and face the man whom he had tricked and tried to rob.

Suddenly his eye was attracted by a movement of the water beneath him. Looking down, he saw that its surface was beginning to heave and bubble, as though something were stirring in its depths. Every moment the acrid odour became stronger and more pungent.

The movement of the water increased. Greasy ripples lapped noiselessly against the sides of the cavern. Something huge, dim, formless, was rising out of the dusky recesses. Horror seized Aveling—a nightmare dread that paralysed his muscles and held him helpless and motionless.

A pale phosphorescent glimmer broke the blackness of the horrible pool, and then, almost opposite the spot where Aveling stood, the water parted, and out of its depths there rose a form more hideous than in his wildest dreams he had ever conceived.

In shape it resembled a crocodile of the sort with which Aveling's experience of African rivers had already made him familiar. But whereas the colour of the crocodile is dull brownish-green, this creature was of a ghastly livid white, and was fully three times the size of the largest crocodile which Aveling had ever set eyes on. Its head and such of its monstrous back as was visible above the black water were covered with innumerable scales, and down its spine ran a ridge of horny excrescences like the blunted

teeth of some gigantic saw. Its head alone was longer than a man's body, and its terrible feature. Set high on the head below huge horny prominences, they glowed in



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immense pointed jaws were armed with hooked yellow fangs nearly a foot in length.

But its eyes—they were by far its most

the thick gloom red as coals from the heart of a furnace, and were fixed with a malignant unwinking stare upon the man who, all

unconscious of his peril, stood on the narrow ledge before the altar, still greedily absorbed in his task of gathering the golden treasure.

Aveling strove to cry out, but only a dry chatter came through his parched lips. Overpowered by the horrible sight, half suffocated by the reek of musk, he could only cling dizzily to the ledge behind him, and watch helplessly the tragedy which he was powerless to avert.

Then—it was all so rapid that eye could hardly follow—its vast webbed feet shot the monster forward, and, as a fly-catcher plucks an insect from mid-air, its long, beak-like jaws picked Denyer from the ledge.

There rang out one hideous scream, that sent wild echoes wailing out across the lake, and beating back from the iron cliffs which bound it, then the beast drew down its prey, and, but for the sullen wave that broke over his feet, Aveling might have fancied himself the victim of some hideous nightmare.

Of a sudden his own awful danger flashed across his mind, and instinctively he turned to fly. But before he had gone three steps he stopped. What? With fortune literally in his grasp, abandon it? Return penniless, as he had come, leaving those piles of gold to glimmer for ever upon the altar in the grim keeping of their awful guardian?

No, a thousand times no! Better perish like Denyer than turn coward.

Aveling set his teeth, and, pulling the heavy pistol from his belt, moved with noiseless steps back along the ledge towards the altar.

There on the ledge at its foot lay, scattered in wild profusion, Denyer's golden load. Aveling did not stoop to gather it, but with shaking fingers snatched up the enormous vase which stood in the centre of the altar. It was crusted with gems, and in itself as heavy as one man could carry.

With this under his left arm, and his pistol ready in his right hand, he ran rapidly back along the narrow ledge towards the mouth of the cave.

He had almost reached it, when behind came the same rush and gurgle of parted water which he had heard before. With a gasping cry he leaped wildly for the knob of rock at the mouth of the cave. As he gained it and stumbled to his knees, there came behind him a clash like the slam of a steel door.

Whirling round, Aveling saw that the force of the huge brute's rush had brought it right up against the ledge, upon which its great gnarled forefeet were actually resting.

Lashing the water into foam with its powerful hind legs and vast tail, the creature forced itself forward in a frantic effort to reach him, while its vast jaws gaped like the mouth of the pit.

Filled with cold fury, Aveling thrust the muzzle of the pistol almost between the double rows of curved fangs, and pulled the trigger once, twice, thrice, in rapid succession. The heavy reports crashed back from the vault of rock above, and the echoes boomed deafeningly from cliff to cliff around the crater lake. Then the monstrous crocodile rolled over, and, with a sullen plunge, sank writhing beneath the oily foam, while Aveling, turning, staggered away as fast as his shaking legs would carry him.

Still clutching his precious burden, the great gem-studded vase, he hurried onwards and upwards, and never once stopped or looked back until he had reached the summit of the cliff. Then, flinging the vase over the verge, he struggled after it, threw himself flat on his face upon the baking rock, and lay there gasping.

When at last he was able to pull himself together and rise to his feet, it was characteristic of the man that, instead of jumping on his horse and galloping away at once from the accursed spot, he faced round coolly and once more gazed down into the depths from which he had so narrowly escaped.

As his eyes roved across the ebony surface of the pool, now calm and placid as though it had never been disturbed, they were caught by something resembling the freshly-barked trunk of a huge tree which lay floating livid white against the black water, just outside the mouth of the cavern. For many seconds he stood staring at it, shielding his eyes with his hand from the fierce glare of the sun.

"It's the crocodile, right enough," he muttered at last in a tone of incredulous triumph. "And dead as poor Denyer himself. I wonder if the brute's got a mate?"

His lips set and he considered a moment. "No, it's hardly likely, and, whether it has or no, I'm going to risk it, especially as I've got Denyer's horse to carry the stuff back. Here goes for the rest of the treasure."

So saying, he clambered once more over the edge of the cliff, and with steady steps made his way back down the steep footway towards the mouth of the cave.

Three weeks later, Aveling left Cape Town, bound for England, with a bank balance which many a so-called millionaire might have envied.