Ayesha the Obeyed

Matt Constable

A dry hot wind drove scents across the plains. They were scents of the wild, of dust and grass, animals and their droppings, and the stench of rotting flesh.

After a long day the blazing sun had reached the horizon. Enormous animals roamed the plain their long shadows moving across the arid ground. Calls and roars echoed like distant thunder, a reminder of the power that the living beings of this continent possessed. Fear was a real thing in this place and it was not just a pride of lions that could evoke it. Herds of elephants with their bulks of grey flesh or charging herds of hippopotamuses could arouse a sense of terror along with wonder.

A solitary figure, standing on a rocky outcrop, experienced these feelings as he stared out at the spectacular sight presented before him like a vast canvas spread out and painted by the Lord Himself.

Up above the sky had caught fire, burning the deepest scarlet as the orange globe sank beyond the infinite horizon. Below the plains had become a dark shade of lavender as the shadows merged to become one. Here in these latitudes twilight was a swift transition as quick as a striking predator.

Darkness descended and the stars appeared. Brighter than anywhere else on earth, they were beyond mere points of white, they were red, yellow, a few blue. A huge streak of these emerged in the sky appearing like an elegant stream of water reflecting sunlight. And the night became cooler as the day was dry with heat the night was frosted with cold. The animals of the plains continued to call out, as the full moon ascended the distant mountains. Black clouds danced across it, blocking the light, indifferent to its silvery beauty. Time had slipped away from this place like a handful of red earth carried on the wind.

A knock on his office door brought Horace Holly back from his daydream and to his present reality. Thoughts of the travels he had experienced through Africa, that strange Dark Continent, would come back later. For now he turned to the door of his office to see who had interrupted him.

‘Leo,’ he said when he saw who stood at the open door. ‘Come in, please. How can I help you?’
‘Afternoon, Uncle Holly,’ Leo greeted.

Although he referred to him as Uncle, Leo was not related to Horace by blood. Their relationship had commenced twenty years previous, as Horace was busy studying to gain his fellowship to Cambridge as a professor of archaeology. At this time his only friend Mark Vincey, knowing he was about to die, had instructed Horace to raise his son, Leo, as his own. Alone and unmarried, Horace had taken what he saw as the only opportunity to have a family and successfully raised Leo to become an academic and a gentlemen in his own right. Along with raising the boy, Horace had also taken charge of a Vincey family heirloom. On Leo’s twenty-fifth birthday, both men had opened the heirloom, a chest containing directions to an unexplored area of Africa’s eastern coast. And thus their adventure of discovery had begun.

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'You gave me a letter to read,' Leo declared. He walked into the university office and sat down in one of the spare chairs in front of the desk. He took out of his jacket pocket a folded piece of paper and handed it to Holly. ‘You wanted my opinion. I hope I haven’t interrupted anything.’

‘No, these student papers have made me particularly bored. I was just remembering an African sunset. But to the letter, what did you think?’

‘Interesting, both subject and sender,’ Leo began. ‘I thought the man had died and yet here he is writing to you of all people, no offense meant, and asking about the most peculiar of individuals. Where is he now?’

‘Dom Pedro the Second, last Emperor of Brazil, is living his days of exile in France. Alone and forgotten it would seem from his letters.’

‘How many are there? Letters?’

‘Several, and they are here if you want to look at them.’ Holly retrieved the rest of the letters that had been sent to him by Pedro II and handed them over to his ward. Leo took them enthusiastically. ‘We have been in correspondence for a time now,’ Holly continued. ‘But I wish to end it today.’

‘The reason?’ Leo was examining the letters.

‘I have lied on many occasions in order to hide the whole truth,’ Holly confessed. ‘I believe it would be too dangerous to do so but he has been persistent and, I admit, persuasive. Pedro undoubtedly enjoyed my recount of our journey and has taken the story of Ayesha, as she told it to us, to heart. Her story has the potential to rewrite history, religion, and our entire knowledge of life; and that has taken his attention and compelled him to reach out.

‘Who would believe any of it though? Most think your work is fiction, a fable of a made-up past. I was there and I hardly believe it.’

‘The Emperor has all too willingly accepted her story as fact. I am afraid that I have been giving the man comfort in place of proper information. There seemed no harm in my doing so. I exaggerated the truth and in some cases created pure fantasies. There is no doubt that he is confused on some matters. I do not know whether to set him straight or continue to present falsities to him.’

‘He would appreciate only the truth,’ Leo speculated. ‘Any man in that position would. But we swore never to reveal fully what we encountered. People would react dangerously in their confusion and paranoia; they always have in cases of the supernatural.’

‘He wants to know about Ayesha,’ Horace stated. ‘Nothing else.’

‘The woman who must be obeyed.’

‘Surely I can provide answers about how she ruled her tribe, what she had to say on history,’ Holly said. ‘Anyone would want to know more about her, it’s only natural.’

‘She was too unreal to be true,’ Leo stated.

‘The Emperor has been quite taken by her,’ Holly replied. ‘It would not be right to shatter his delusion of her.’

‘Especially if we share it.’ Leo had become very tense. ‘She was real, I do not doubt that, but how much of her story was, her past?’ He held his breath and watched as his adopted father started searching his desk for a clean sheet of paper and pen, finding both, refusing to answer the question.

‘I had the dream again,’ Leo finally confessed and it was at once a relief and a
death sentence. He breathed deeper and his body relaxed.
‘I know,’ Holly replied
‘Are you sure it is Tibet?’
‘My sources are faultless,’ Holly said.
‘Is it her?’
‘Who else could it be?’
‘Her story may be more true than we imagined. What are we going to do then?’
‘My choice,’ Holly replied ‘is that we do nothing. We have no obligation to do anything in the matter of shared dreams. If you still doubt what she told us of her past, then it would be a fool’s errand to track her down. However if you wish to believe everything she told us, accept as fact all that we saw, then perhaps my choice is wrong and we should leave everything behind, track her down, finally reveal her to the world for all to see. But I think not. I have one more letter to write.’ He dipped his pen in the ink bottle and began to write. ‘I owe this Emperor that much.’
‘What are you going to write?’ Leo asked.
‘Half-truths, lies, comforts,’ Holly listed. ‘Goodbye.’
Leo sat in silence as his stepfather wrote his final letter to Emperor Pedro II. He looked through the other letters and his thoughts were all on Ayesha. What had been real about her? What had been false, if indeed any of it had been false? She had died when she stepped into the flames; the same flames she claimed had given her two thousand years of youthful existence. Had the flames taken back what they had once gifted? Leo thought about the mysterious woman as only the sound of the pen gliding across the paper could be heard.

Once Horace Holly had written the last words, he read through the letter, folded it, and nodded in satisfaction. He slipped it into an envelope already addressed to the hotel the Emperor had made his home in his exile.
‘Would you do me a favour and send it for me?’ Holly asked handing the envelope over. Leo took it without hesitation.
‘Is there anything else you want me to do?” he asked.
“Yes,’ Holly said and he opened the lowest drawer on his desk, staring down at the lock of black hair, its only contents. ‘Once you have sent the letter, pack for a long journey. I’ve changed my mind and we’ve an old friend to find.’
*

8th November 1891

Dear Pedro II, Emperor
Previously I have spoken of my regrets, the times when I made the wrong decision or took a course of action I shouldn’t have. And now I feel regret writing this letter. I am to leave soon, perhaps forever, for this shall be a journey into unknown places in pursuit of a mystery. Although I wish that this correspondence could continue and that you yourself may want to write back, there will be no way for me to send another letter or receive one. This then is the last letter. As such I wish to reflect on our correspondence before explaining in more detail my imminent departure.

Although it has never completely left me, Africa has been on my mind lately. Your enthusiasm for the Dark Continent and your curiosity about its many buried secrets gave me a refreshing perspective. I have been most eager in our correspondence when detailing the land I left long ago. You would understand the

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urge to return to a place more than I would ever know. Brazil sounds like a unique and wonderful place. I believe this from all you have said of the empire you ruled. Thank you for making me reflect on the time I spent in Africa. I have been delighted to answer all your questions about the time I spent in Africa and on that most mysterious of women, Ayesha.

In the land that she ruled, she was known as she-who-must-be-obeyed, a remarkable woman who, according to the history she told us, has seen the empires of the world rise up only to collapse back into nothing. There is a quality to her charisma and presence that no one else possesses and a uniqueness that makes her at once awesome and terrible. And she is most definitely a being that originates from a place beyond what we as mortal men could ever imagine. She commands her people with nothing more than her looks and her will, and her knowledge demonstrates an understanding of place and time that no one else has ever experienced. You are quite right to be fascinated. I confess that I have kept much secret from you in my early letters.

There are aspects to Ayesha’s personality and supernatural elements surrounding her that even I have trouble believing, and I spent more time with her then most people have. You may recall from the story I wrote on her that she possessed a water basin that could show images of the past, the present and the future? This was not a fabrication, this basin was real, and I saw the impossible. Whether she truly was as old as she claimed, no one can ever tell, but I know the manner of her death was real. She climbed into the flames as a young woman and emerged an aged wreck. A trick? A deception? Or did she truly pass from this world? I do not know, but from her corpse I retrieved a lock of her black hair just in time just before she turned to ash before our eyes. At that moment I believed she was dead.

In your last letter you referred to dreams that had disturbed your sleep and I confess that I have suffered the same. I cannot explain or fathom the extent of their meaning and the effect is rather troubling. They begin in darkness a single flame grows into a tongue and from it a vision of a woman forms. She quickly glides away from sight and I find myself following her. We glide together through the air, crossing the seas, the deserts, until we come to the frozen mountains of Tibet, and find ourselves on a plain with a solitary hill. Another fire births the symbol of life of the Egyptians. I awaken.

In telling you of my dreams, I have given you the reason for why I am leaving my home. You may find it strange that I would travel the globe in search of a vision of a woman but Leo has had them too. Nothing in our daily activities has contributed to our dreams, they are vision sent to us by something more powerful than anyone can imagine. We are sharing the same visions and it is by mutual agreement that we believe the woman born in flames to be that magnificent Ayesha. To us it would appear that she has not perished from this world and may yet be seen again in another form. Though this is a rather thin reason to risk one’s life, we are strongly compelled to act. Further it must be said that we have seen far stranger things in this world and so perhaps our ambition may not be so foolish.

In the years that have followed since our return from Africa and our experiences there, my son Leo Vincey and myself have been preoccupied with thoughts of Ayesha. That she has clearly entered both our sleeping minds indicates that we are either obsessed to the point of psychosis or that she, through a spiritual

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realm, is showing us where we can find her. You can see why I have taken the time to describe my dreams, what they might mean, and what action Leo and I must take in response. In your initial letters you expressed a desire to discover more of the world and chose me in the belief that I have seen more than any other; I now declare that I have. There is more to the world than what we see, feel, hear, and perceive.

I am now ready to meet my fate in the further unknown parts of this world. I am left with a feeling of gratitude towards you and your interest in me. Yours sincerely,

Ludwig Horace Holly, adventurer

Life had streamlined into a single continuation with no perceptible digressions. A strict adherence to routine had become the former Emperor’s comfort, a pattern of constants that allowed for just enough rest for him to remain alert and just enough stimulation to remain active without over exertion. It was an existence, uneventful and uninteresting to the outside observer. For the once monarch, it was a brutal and agonising descent into the pain of a body breaking down. Only in recent weeks had the condition of his leg improved such that he could once again embark upon his favourite leisure activity, the humble walk. Receiving and composing letters was still his primary pleasure. However he needed letters to be read aloud to him by an assistant and had to dictate his responses due to his poor eyesight. This was a blow of indignity to his proud persona. He had accepted that he would never read another letter with his weak eyes again; until he had received Holly’s final letter. Though it had taken time and resulted in a painful headache, he had read it to himself. Due to Holly’s final sentiments, Pedro had been left feeling despondent and melancholy but not without hope. There still lay the possibility that a world beyond the perception and imagination of mortal man existed. In such a world as the one they lived in, the Emperor knew that his life was not limited to himself or his perspective. He simply possessed a deep desire to know if there was more and knew Holly could answer his questions based on his earlier work.

On a night, not long before his sixty-sixth birthday, the Emperor found himself immersed in the letters once again. With a slow steady pace he read every letter sent to him by Holly, taking in meaning and message, a lifetime of academic immersion in texts allowing him the skills to analyse hidden choices and omissions possibly made by Holly. Suspicions that there was more to be discovered in the letters meant the Emperor could not concentrate on anything else. He was convinced that he had failed to notice further information. Although plagued by this doubt and holding on to a series of questions he wanted to ask the writer and adventurer, for instance what the dreams had meant, and where he was going next, the Emperor did not believe he could compose a letter succinct enough to express his thoughts in time to send it before Holly left. Whatever hidden meaning he discovered would have to suffice in the way of answer. As it was the correspondence had been fruitful and accomplished everything the Emperor had desired from it and that was how he would settle the matter in his mind. He had wanted to know if there was more to the world then what a person might perceive with this mind and their senses. There was enough evidence from Holly to prove that there was. He did not need details just the permission to imagine.
Deciding that it was finally time for sleep he gathered the letters together, carefully placing them into a drawer, empty save for a small package and its accompanying note. In the warmth and comfort that only a soft bed can provide, the Emperor found his weary body relaxing and his wandering mind coming to an uneasy peace. However, sleep eluded him and he knew that soon he would return to his journal. For the moment he lay, eyes closed, motionless and deep in thought. Images of an ancient continent danced in his mind, memories of what he had seen, speculation on what might be. No matter what he imagined, the truth would no doubt be stranger and more beautiful, and probably hidden forever more from man.

Midnight came and went as the long case clock, hands moving slowly, peacefully, steadily, counted the ebbing flow of time.