

SKY GODDESS

By
CLIVE
TRENT



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Poised like a leopard, Lady Di entered the fight.

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NEALE, the American, called himself the Tumbleweed, because, like the tumbleweeds of his native West, he was forever rolling. And he didn't want to roll.

But that is the tragedy of all tumbleweeds, who dream of a home, a wife, and kids. The giant hand of destiny grips them and sets them down in odd corners of the earth, and there doesn't seem to be anything that one can do about it at all.

Neale, at thirty, was a pretty thoroughly disillusioned man. He had learned to take life as he found it. And life, in one of its hilarious moods, was being kind to him. He had a soft job, and a sweetheart. He was Acting-Deputy-Commissioner at the *kraal* of Allaha, the white

queen of the Amatonga, in that vast territory known as Rhodesia, extending between the Limpopo and Zambesi rivers, in South Africa.

A white queen? Yes. One of the granddaughters of the famous Englishman, John Dunn, who became a tribal chief in Zululand, and had at least a hundred children, of all shades and colorings. But John Dunn had his moments when he remembered that he was a white man and one of those moments probably accounted for Allaha. At least, there was no evidence of native blood in her smooth white skin and black, straight hair.

A white girl, brought up in a savage *kraal*, remembering nothing of her redoubtable old grandfather, and married to a coal-black chief of the Amatonga, in Rhodesia, at fifteen, because

her royal blood required a royal husband.

A coal-black savage, just learning to wear shoes and trousers, and to hunt with a rifle instead of a spear. There were no children. As to the reason for that, perhaps Allaha could have explained; perhaps it was some lingering remnant of race pride.

When the chief died, from being mauled by a lion in a hunt, Allaha became queen of the Amatonga tribe.

She lived in a three-room frame house in the middle of a village of beehive-shaped wattle-and-daub huts. She dispensed justice seated on a chair with a lot of gilding, surrounded by her almost nude head counselors. Sometimes she wore a loin cloth and a leopard-skin cloak, and at others she wore a secondhand European frock, with silk stockings, and a perky little hat over her ear. And she was white—white all through.

NEALE stirred when the dawn wind began to blow through the bush, and opened his eyes. It was always an adventure, this awaking at dawn. One retravelled one's old life in dreams, and one never knew where one would find oneself.

He dressed and went into Allaha's room and stood looking down at her. She was still asleep, an arm thrown above her head, lifting the firm cone of one breast beneath the light cover. He bent over and lifted her toward him. He felt her stir in his arms, sigh slightly, and then her lips were glued to his.

It was Neale who had taught Allaha how to kiss. Black savages don't kiss. Her husband, the native chief, had never kissed her, wouldn't have wanted to, even if she had let him.

It was queer how Neale loved Allaha. Once, the Tumbleweed had even thought of taking her to America and marrying her. But he had quickly realized that, white though she was, her home could never be anywhere but among her own savage people. She was quite happy there.

Every two weeks or so, Neale, in his official capacity, visited Allaha's kraal to hear legal cases that went beyond petty theft, assault, and to issue the latest orders of the white government at Buluwayo.

He always spent two or three days in Allaha's frame house, with its real European bed, and Allaha used to put on her second-hand frock and silk stockings for him.

She couldn't have been more than twenty-five, and had all the fiery nature of the tropic races.

Soft arms went about Neale's neck, warm breasts were pressed against him. Her breathing quickened, and presently little gasps began to come from her lips. Allaha's slim body quivered under Neale's embrace.

An immense satisfaction filled his heart, and all the past had grown obscure. He was young, he was alive under the warm sun, thrilling to the love of this woman of his own race, a white woman who would never trouble him with the problems of marriage—oil furnaces and cooking-stoves and grocers' bills. And in two weeks' time he would see Allaha again.

He kissed her very gratefully, and felt her cling to him in the ecstasy of the moment.

HE was standing on the porch of the three-room house, watching a file of graceful native girls returning from the crocodile-pool, their gourds of water balanced on their heads, when he saw a trooper of the Police riding up through the scrub.

In another moment he recognized young Phil Roscoe. The boy jumped from his saddle and saluted.

"Orders, sir," he said, handing Neale a paper.

Neale read it and pursed his lips in a whistle. "Lady Diana Sutwell and Fred Blake, flying from England to Capetown," he read. "Last seen over Victoria Falls. Supposed to have crashed, Employ all available natives to beat the bush for

them.

“We’ve got a troop of police out too, scouring the country,” said Roscoe. “This Lady Diana is a duke’s daughter. Freddy Blake is her flying companion. They’ve got to be found and brought in, if they’re alive. Must have crashed, or they’d have been in Buluwayo two days ago.”

It took Neale about three minutes to get the orders issued—through Allaha, of course. In three minutes more, three score of blacks, with spears and loincloths, had departed, to scour the bush and look for the white woman from the skies.

The *kraal* was empty now, except for the chattering women and the pot-bellied piccaninies. Neale was discussing plans with Roscoe on the little porch of Allaha’s three-room house.

“I think we’d best strike north along the Hunters’ Trail and see if we can get any news,” Neale was saying.

Then there was an immense shouting, and the blacks, who had hardly started, were coming back, in their midst a white girl and a white man who stumbled, and had an arm about the girl’s neck, and was upheld by her while he made the weaving journey among the yelling natives.

THEY were dragging in the remains of the plane, and the savages had gone crazy with superstitious awe. They were dancing about the three-room frame house of Allaha, brandishing spears, and what was in their minds no white man could possibly have determined.

Allaha herself, at Neale’s curt request, had taken up her quarters in one of the native huts.

“I’m all right,” grinned Freddy Blake, from the bed. “We ran out of petrol and had to come down. The damned old plane crashed in the thorn bushes, and I feel as if I’ve got a busted rib, that’s all. Sorry we missed the record, but we’ll try it again.”

“You’re doing fine, old thing,” said Lady

Di.

Freddy Blake, the young Englishman, was a man of the modern world, the type that every virile nation is turning out today. Not more than twenty-two, utterly fearless and reckless, facing life with a defiant grin.

And the Tumbleweed, at thirty, knew that, because of those eight years’ difference between their ages, he had just slipped this modern generation. The Tumbleweed had never ridden in a plane. He had the same desperate courage as Freddy Blake, just the same recklessness, but those eight years separated him from the modern generation. The poor Tumbleweed had certain queer, old-fashioned instincts, Victorian instincts about women, and life in general, that even Allaha couldn’t wholly destroy.

Lady Di smiled as she thanked Neale. She was wearing flying garb, trousers and a leather coat. Under the leather coat was a soft shirt, stained with perspiration and travel. And under the shirt were two little breasts that she was flaunting as if she didn’t care a damn about them.

No brassiere restrained them. They stood out, firm little mounds pressing against that shirt of hers, as if she was saying, “Yes, I am a woman. Now what the hell are you going to do about it?”

Blonde hair, and a rounded figure that the flying garb couldn’t hide. Hips alone that would drive a man crazy. She stood smiling at Neale, as if she was saying, “Well, what the hell? I’m a woman— yes. What does that mean to you?”

FREDDY BLAKE was resting in the bedroom. Roscoe had parked himself some little distance away. An ominous silence had fallen over the *kraal*, and Neale, who knew the natives, was a little uneasy. Also, Allaha hadn’t come to the house. Feeling hurt, perhaps. After all, she was a queen, and had been put out for the strangers.

“I don’t exactly understand you, Mr. Neale,”

said Lady Di, as they squatted on the porch together. "You have been telling me your life history, haven't you? You do seem to have had a tough break, but why don't you go back to your own country and marry this mythical woman whom you've made up in your own mind?"

"I'm in love with you," said the Tumbleweed.

"Plenty of men have told me that," said Lady Di. "Any man is drawn toward a presentable woman like me. We take that for granted. But what do you propose to do about it?"

"I'm not such a fool as you think," said Neale. "I guess you're rich. I know I can't ask you to marry me. I couldn't take you to England and live up to that highly specialized life of yours. I wouldn't fit in."

"What do you want, then?" asked Lady Di.

"I want you," said the Tumbleweed. "Is that frank?"

"Too frank," said Lady Di. "It just happens that I get a tremendous kick out of waiting for the man I shall some day marry. I may not be old-fashioned, but I'm not promiscuous, Mr. Neale. Sorry, and thanks for the compliment."

She went back to the reed mat in the living-room, and, without closing the door, began to pull off the leather coat and the shirt. Two small, but plump breasts tumbled out. Neale watched for an instant, then strode away into the night. He was looking for Roscoe. He found the trooper parked on the ground, his saddle under his head.

"I don't like this quiet in the *kraal*," he said, with a vague instinct of danger. "Camp on the porch, with your rifle handy. I'll squat at the back. These Amatonga have never seen a plane before, and God knows how they'll react."

And he went among the beehive huts, looking for Allaha.

They were all empty. Men, women and piccaninies had taken to the bush. It looked ugly

to Neale. He couldn't think, couldn't make his mind function properly. The sight of Lady Di's breasts, something youthful and gay and free about her made her the most desirable woman he had ever seen, maddened him in the soft African night, with the moon rising over the thorn-bushes.

He wanted Allaha, to hold her in his arms, and sink into blissful unconsciousness, and forget. Too often before, the Tumbleweed had been through that experience. Old-fashioned Victorian love, the search for that ideal woman who no more exists than the ideal man. And the cure—Allaha!

She wasn't to be found.

Neale sat down among the huts and tried to think the thing out. How was he going to get Freddy Blake and Lady Di across two hundred miles of bush to Buluwayo, without horses? If he sent Roscoe back for horses or a cart, and the natives went crazy—no, that was impossible.

Allaha would have advised him, but Allaha wasn't there. She had taken to the bush with the Amatonga. She was a woman, and she was obviously mad clear through. Neale remembered that he had ordered her out of her house without the smallest ceremony. He had treated her like a native when she was a white woman, and a queen.

An error, a bad error. God only knew what was likely to happen now.

He got his rifle from his saddle, and went back to the back of the house, moving softly through the night. Outside, he sat down. Through the tiny window he heard the sound of voices, Lady Di's and a man's. At first he thought the man was Freddy Blake. Then, with amazement, he recognized it as Roscoe's.

He heard Lady Di laughing softly.

"**W**HY, Phil, you're silly," she said. "Your old-fashioned scruples remind me of that fool, Neale. Of course Freddy and I were something more than flying-

partners when we stopped over on our flight. What do you think we were? Flight over the jungle, death staring us in the face, always the chance of cracking, of being tortured by savages if we landed. Why shouldn't I have done everything in my power to make Freddy happy?

"Besides, I—I happen to like men . . . Not men like that fool, Neale, who told me his life-story and his dreams and aspirations, but real men who live as if every day was their last, and don't care a damn. I tell you Freddy wouldn't mind, and it's not his business, anyway. Now hold me tighter and kiss me the way you did before."

Appalled, the Tumbleweed listened. Bitterness rose up within him then. He knew that he would never be quite the same fool again, the fool who revered women. He hated Lady Di now, and he wanted Allaha.

Quietly he opened the door and stepped into the room, to see Lady Di in Phil Roscoe's arms. A shaft of moonlight played about her plump, small breasts, showed Neale the whole contour of her lovely body.

"Very pretty," said Neale, "but those were not the orders that I gave you, Roscoe, if you remember. Now get your rifle and watch the front porch."

Lady Di sprang back, confronting Neale, maddeningly tempting in her apparent unconsciousness of her deshabelle ... of the brief and tenuous bandeau and step-ins....

"You beast," she said "Snooping—isn't that your American word?—snooping outside my house. Telling me you respected women, and I say you haven't begun to understand what respecting them means. If you had, you'd learn to leave them alone, with their little falsehoods and inconsistencies, and not go snooping around, trying to trap them."

"GET ready, Roscoe," said the Tumbleweed. "And take up your position on guard."

Phil Roscoe muttered a curse. After all, an order from a superior was an order.

The door opened, and Freddy Blake came weaving into the room. He took in the situation with a glance.

"My word, Di," he said, "what's this? Deceiving me when I had a busted rib?"

Lady Di shrieked her laughter. "That fool," she said, pointing to Neale, "thought he could win me by telling me his life history and his dreams. Hell, I love both you boys. You understand, Freddy."

"Sure, it's all right with me," said Freddy Blake, "only I'm sorry I've got a busted rib."

"Blake," said the Tumbleweed, "I'm rather worried about the attitude of the natives. They've taken to the bush, and they probably think you and this—are gods from the skies."

Lady Di shrieked out derision at the epithet, which wasn't pretty.

"Got a rifle or revolver?" Neale continued.

"I've got a Luger automatic and plenty of cartridges," said Freddy.

"You be ready to help defend this shack, if we have to. No telling what those witch-doctors are telling the niggers in the bush. Okay." He picked up Lady Di's clothes—the coat and shirt, the trousers and little shoes.

"Going into the second-hand clothing business?" asked Lady Di derisively.

"No," answered Neale. "I'll give these back to you before we leave. Till then, you're going to be just a human female creature, and you're going about without clothes, like a female of any animal species, the horse, or—the dog."

"I say, damn it, you can't treat a lady like that, just because she didn't like you," said Freddy Blake. "A fellow's got to be a gentleman, Neale."

A SUDDEN outburst of yells from the bush punctuated Freddy's words. In the moonlight the four could see the Amatonga swarming toward the hut,

brandishing their throwing-spears. Neale heard the shrieks, "*Bulala Umlungu*," "Kill the white sorcerers!"

Two figures were at their head. One was Allaha, and she was screaming like nothing human. The other was the head tribal witch-doctor, with cow-horns on his head, and his snuffbox thrust through the slit lobe of his ear.

In an instant Roscoe and Neale had their rifles in their hands, while Freddy Blake had darted back for his automatic. A shower of spears flew against the wall of the frame house, and stuck quivering in it. And the Amatonga had plenty more.

"Don't shoot the woman!" Neale shouted, as the two rifles and the automatic began pumping lead.

But another pistol was coming into action too. Lady Di had one, and she was standing among the three, her magnificent, lean body poised like a leopard's, her plump breasts resting on the arch of her chest, sublimely and magnificently unconscious of her femininity.

The leading files of the Amatonga collapsed under that hail of lead from automatic rifles and pistols. A score of threshing bodies littered the ground in front of the shack. The witch-doctor was down, but Allaha wasn't down. She was standing alone, screaming, and urging on her men.

There came another rush. Stabbing spears were now brought into use, the keen-pointed *assegai* of the South African native. That rush brought the Amatonga warriors up to the doorway.

The last burst of lead drove them back, into the bush, leaving the four together, gasping from the exertion of the fight. In front of the shack was a heap of moaning, writhing bodies. From time to time one would disentangle itself and crawl back into the scrub. The four recharged their weapons.

"I say," gasped Freddy Blake, "this would be rather fun if I didn't have a busted rib, but

won't you give Di back her clothes?"

"No," answered Neale.

"Hell, I don't want them," said Lady Di. "I'm not ashamed of my figure."

NEALE looked at her, standing there, and realized that she was purposely torturing him.

He supposed he'd have to let her have her clothes and just forget her. But everything was badly jumbled in the Tumbleweed's head. He'd been so happy with Allaha, until she staged this fantastic fight, and he'd been fooled about Lady Di, as he was always being fooled. He had been mad about her, and now he only wanted to heap insult and ignominy upon her.

Allaha was screaming somewhere in the bush. The Amatonga were not through yet.

No, for there came another rush, another shower of spears. Phil Roscoe gasped and doubled up as an assegai stood quivering in his chest. A gush of blood burst from his lips. He quivered and lay still. Phil Roscoe had got his. He was dead.

Shrieking with fury, the Amatonga rushed again, and again the two automatics and Neale's rifle mowed down the leading files. But the ranks behind were coming on, and, at their head, Allaha, screaming like a demented woman.

Rifles and pistols were empty. It was rifle-butt and pistol-butts against spears. A huge savage leaped at Neale, and Neale split his head open as if it had been an egg. Then it was Allaha, with a little spear in her hand, drawn back to thrust.

Neale caught the girl's arm and twisted it, tore the spear from it and left her disarmed.

"*Hamba gachle*," he said. "Go slowly."

He saw her torture-twisted face. He saw Lady Di aiming her automatic at Allaha's head, and he struck up her hand. The slug passed harmlessly above the girl.

"One of your dreams? Your ideal woman?" sneered Lady Di.

God, how magnificent she was, standing there, half naked, utterly fearless!

FREDDY BLAKE pointed his automatic at Allaha and fired. Allaha dropped. But now the Amatonga were all about them. A savage, holding a flaming brand, flung it at the roof of the shack. It struck, dropped, lay at the foot, a pithy brand of fire. Another flew, another brand. It lit upon the roof and rested there. A little curl of smoke began to spread into the night sky.

The savages had withdrawn again. Neale, Freddy, and Lady Di recharged their weapons. But the whole roof had now caught fire, and the shack was blazing steadily down to its foundations.

“Well, we’ve got to make a break for it,” said Neale.

“Where?” asked Freddy.

Neale hadn’t any answer for that. For the Amatonga were all around them, and the throwing spears were still striking into the smoking frame wall of the house. One grazed Neale’s shoulder and passed by, quivering in a clapboard.

Suddenly Freddy Blake’s face turn’d gray. He turned to Neale. “They’ve got me, the damn devils,” he said. Neale saw an *assegai* with a head almost as big as a shovel, standing out six inches behind him. It had pierced him through the body.

Freddy Blake supported himself against the smoking wall and grinned. “So—that’s the end.” he mumbled.

And went down, dying. Twenty-two. The type of young manhood that every civilized country in the world produces. Dying now and didn’t care a damn, because life and death were the same grand adventure.

But Lady Di was down upon her knees, heedless of the flying spears, and her lips were upon Freddy Blake’s. Her lover—one of her lovers. Had he meant anything at all to her, or

was that just a gesture, a salute to a life that was passing.

The Tumbleweed couldn’t know. He just stood there, with the throwing-spears flying about him, while Lady Di received the last breath of life from Freddy Blake with her lips.



Neale tore the spear from the girl's hands and left her disarmed.

HE went back into the house and got her clothes. “Here, put these on,” said the Tumbleweed roughly.

There wasn’t much time, for the whole house was becoming a fiery furnace, but Lady Di calmly put on her shoes, then the trousers, then buttoned her plump breasts into the shirt, then adjusted the leather jacket.

“And now?” she asked of Neale. The savage yells from the bush indicated that the Amatonga realized that the defenders had reached their end. But of a sudden there sounded the crackle of rifles from another quarter, the yells redoubled, and suddenly the shower of spears ceased to fly.

Through the bush came a troop of hard-

bitted Rhodesian police troopers, firing with carbines from their saddles, and driving the natives into the depths of the scrub, tramping them down, imposing on them the terror that the white man exercises on the native, everywhere in the world.

The fight was ended, and two dozen troopers swung up to the blazing hut, just as Neale and Lady Di emerged. Neale wasn't quite sane at that moment. He was bending over Allaha, crumpled on the ground. Allaha had been shot through the lungs, and was gasping out her life-blood, but she was still what she had always been, a woman. She smiled up at Neale as he kneeled beside her. "I die," she said.

The Tumbleweed said nothing. Just held the dying girl in his arms. A white girl, whom destiny had cast among savages. Neale had been wise not to have taken her back to America. Their lives hadn't been meant to run that way.

"I was angry," whispered Allaha, in the Amatonga tongue. "I was jealous because of her. Do you love her, my man?"

"No," answered Neale. "I think I hate her more than any human being in the world. I love you, Allaha."

Allaha, put her arms around Neale's neck, and died very happily, very peacefully with her cheek against his.

THE troopers were congregating about Neale. "Glad we came in time, sir," said the sergeant in command.

Neale looked at the dead girl, at the two dead men whose corpses had been dragged from the blazing shack. "Yes, in time," he answered bitterly.

"We were sent out to look for Lady Diana Sutwell. Too bad those niggers got Freddy Blake and Phil. But we saved her anyway."

"Yes," said Neale.

"Orders are to bring Lady Diana back to Buluwayo. I'd suggest you come with us, Mr. Neale, and the Commissioner will no doubt

send a troop to clear up this district later."

"I don't think this district will need clearing up," said Neale. "That plane scared the natives, And Allaha here"—he pointed to the body of the girl—"well, she was a white woman, and she resented Lady Diana butting in and occupying her house. I don't think there will be any more trouble with the natives."

"I see, sir," said the sergeant.

"Detail some men to dig a grave," said Neale. And then he looked at Allaha. It was incredible that all the beauty and the passion of her had mouldered into this insensate clay. That he would never again feel her arms twine themselves about his neck, and her lips warm and moist upon his own. He'd taught her to kiss, Neale was thinking, and Allaha had proved an apt pupil.

"I'll do that, sir. We'll fix a shelter for Lady Diana, and tomorrow we'll start for Buluwayo."

"Okay," said Neale. But he followed what had been Allaha until she was cast into the common grave. And then the heart of the Tumbleweed was broken. No, Allaha hadn't been much to him. Just a white girl whom he had fondled when he went to the *kraal*. He hadn't really loved Allaha. But a queer idea was entering into the brain of the Tumbleweed. It was that all women were one and the same person. With the death of Allaha, something had happened to the Tumbleweed that had changed his entire destiny.

He would never have those Victorian, romantic ideas of women again, and his whole outlook on life was altered. Suddenly he felt that he was a man, whose function it was to dominate women, instead of worshiping them.

So that was how he went to the shelter that the troopers had improvised for Lady Diana that night, when the troopers—except for the sentries—were snoring some little distance away.

SHE was awake. In the hot African night, she had tossed off her blankets. She was wearing the soiled shirt that came almost to her knees. And it had been rumpled up, so that the sleek columns of her thighs gleamed smooth and white.

“Hello!” Lady Di greeted the Tumbleweed.

Neale squatted down beside her, on his haunches, in the way of Europeans in South Africa.

“How do you feel about me?” he asked.

“I hate you like nothing human,” answered Lady Di, pulling the shirt down about her hips. “Those two poor boys who died!”

“Not my fault,” said the Tumbleweed.

“Perhaps not. Oh, Neale, you fought so gallantly, and I had thought you were just a weakling. I couldn’t love you when you came to me with your life history instead of just dominating me.”

“No, I guess not,” said Neale. Lady Di

began crying. “I never want to see your face again,” she said.

“You’ll never need to, after we get to Buluwayo. But you’ll have to, now —because I still feel the same way about you.”

“You dare to—to—?”

“Yes. Because hate and love are the same thing.”

LATER, Neale was holding Lady Di, and thinking about Allaha, whom he would never see any more, and wondering whether all women really were the same.

He was still wondering when the dawn bugle blew, and he detached himself from Lady Di’s arms, and made his way back to the house.

He was riding into Buluwayo with Lady Di, and after that he never wanted to see her again. He was thinking of Allaha, lost to him forever. He was a much wiser Tumbleweed, when he placed his lips in a farewell gesture upon hers.