

H. RIDER HAGGARD



QUEEN SHEBA'S
RING

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CHAPTER I

The Coming of the Ring

It is very unlikely that any of my readers has read the monograph, I believe that is the right word, of my dear friend, Professor Higgs—Ptolemy Higgs to give him his full name. His scholarly paper, penned one year ago, described his adventures in the ancient land of Mur in North Central Africa, as well as the mysterious underground city in the mountains which surrounded it. It also recorded valuable information regarding the strange tribe of Abyssinian Jews, or rather their mixed descendants, by whom it is, or was, inhabited.

Professor Higgs's rivals, of whom either the extent of his achievements or his somewhat confrontational methods of dealing with controversy seem to have made him a great many, have lately risen up and publicly accused him of being an individual who stretches the truth. Indeed, only this morning one of his critics, in a letter to the press, alluded to some of the disparaging remarks that had been made by a renowned explorer concerning Higg's memoirs. This gentleman, who, I am told, lectured to the British Association several years ago, was so skeptical of Professor Higg's claims that he questioned whether he rode across the desert to Mur, not upon a camel, as he alleged, but upon a land tortoise of extraordinary size.

The innuendo contained in this epistle has made the Professor, who, as I have already hinted is not by nature meek, extremely angry. Indeed, notwithstanding all that I could do, he left his London house under an hour ago with a whip of hippopotamus hide, purposing to avenge himself upon the

person of his defamer. In order to prevent a public scandal, however, I have taken the liberty of telephoning that gentleman, who, bold and vicious as he may be in print, is really rather small and timid, to encourage him to hide himself at once. Judging from the abrupt fashion in which our conversation came to an end, I can only assume that my hint was taken. At any rate, I hope for the best, and, as an extra precaution, have communicated my concerns with the lawyers of my justly indignant friend.

The reader will now probably understand that I am writing this book, not to bring myself or others before the public, or to make money, of which I have no present need, or for any purpose whatsoever, except to set down the bare and actual truth. In fact, so many rumors are flying concerning where we have been and what befell us during our recent travels to the African interior that this has become quite necessary. As soon as I laid down that cruel column of uncomplimentary gibes and considered the other insinuations to which I have alluded—yes, this very morning, before breakfast, I knew I must begin to write. In fact, this conviction took hold of me so strongly that I sent a cable to Oliver, Captain Oliver Orme, the hero of my history, if it has any particular hero, who is at present engaged upon what must be an extremely agreeable journey round the world—asking his consent. Several hours later, his answer arrived from Tokyo. Here it is:

“Do what you think necessary, but please consider altering all names as I propose returning via America, and fear interviewers. Japan jolly place.”

Then followed some private matters, which are not worthy of our consideration. Oliver, you might as well know, is prone to extravagance where cablegrams are concerned.

I suppose that before entering on this narration, for the reader's benefit, I had better give some short description of myself.

My name is Richard Adams. I am the son of a Cumberland yeoman, who married a woman from Welsh background. For this reason, I have Celtic blood in my veins, which perhaps

accounts for my love of roving and other things. I am now an old man, near the end of my course, I suppose; at any rate, I was sixty-one on my last birthday. This is my appearance as I see it in the glass before me: tall and spare. I don't weigh more than a hundred and forty pounds—the desert has any superfluous flesh that I ever owned. My eyes are brown, my face is long, and I wear a pointed white beard, which matches the white hair above.

Truth compels me to add that my general appearance, as seen in that mirrored glass that does not lie, reminds me of a rather aged goat. Indeed, to be frank, by the natives among whom I have sojourned, and especially among the Khalifa's people when I was a prisoner there, I have often been called the White Goat.

Of my very commonplace outward self let this suffice, except to add that I have always enjoyed exceptionally good eyesight, which has helped to get me out of more than a few tight scrapes over the years. As for my background, I am a doctor of the old school. Think of it! When I was a student at Bart's Medical School, even a simple antiseptic treatment was quite a new thing. I can still remember the crude method for administering it was with the help of a kind of engine on wheels, out of which disinfectants were dispensed with a pump, much as the advanced gardener sprays a greenhouse today.

I was an above average student, and my early training as a doctor proceeded quite well. But in every man's life there happen things which, whatever excuses may be found for them, would not look particularly well in cold print (nobody's record, when examined by the penetrating light of God's law, could really stand without a thick coat of varnish). For various reasons, some good and some bad, I could never stay in one place very long in my youth. Something in my soul made me long to be a wanderer. In short, having no strict ties at home, and desiring to see the world, I wandered far and wide for many years, earning my living from place to place. Seldom in my experience as an itinerate doctor, however, did I have a difficult time making a living, for there are, after all, no shortage

of sick people in the world.

My fortieth birthday found me practicing at Cairo, which I mention only because it was here that I first met Ptolemy Higgs, who, even then in his youth, was noted for his extraordinary antiquarian and linguistic abilities. I remember that in those days the joke about him was that he could argue in fifteen languages like a native, and in thirty-two with common proficiency. He was also known as one who could read hieroglyphics as easily as a bishop reads his Missal.

Well, I doctored him through a bad attack of typhoid, but as he had spent every farthing he owned on scarabs or something of the sort, I determined not to charge him. This little kindness I am bound to say he never forgot, for whatever his failings may be (personally I would not trust him alone with any object that was more than a thousand years old), Ptolemy is a good and faithful friend.

In Cairo, I met and eventually married a Copt women. She was a lady of high descent, the tradition in her family being that they were sprung from one of the Ptolemaic Pharaohs, which is possible and even probable enough. Also, she was raised as a Christian in the Coptic Church, and well educated in her way. But, of course, she remained an Oriental in her customs and mindset. As I have tried to explain to others, for a European to marry an Oriental is a very challenging thing, especially if he continues to live in the East, where it cuts him off from social recognition and intimacy with his own race. Still, although this step of mine forced me to leave Cairo and go to Assouan, then a little-known place, to practice chiefly among the natives, God knows we were happy enough together till the plague took her, and with it my joy in life.

I trust you will forgive me for not dwelling upon the details of that business, since there are some things too dreadful and too sacred for me to share in a narrative of this kind. She left me one child, a son, who I treasured. To fill up my cup of sorrow, however, when my son was twelve years of age, he was kidnapped by slave traders from the Mahdi tribe.

Now that you have this knowledge of my background, you

will perhaps be in a better position to understand the true story that I am now about to tell of the adventures that I experienced in the remote regions of the African interior. There is nobody else to write it; Oliver will not; Higgs cannot (outside of anything learned and antiquarian, he is hopeless), so I must. At any rate, if you find that the record of our adventures is not interesting, the fault will be mine, not that of the story, which is fascinating enough in its own right.

We are now in the middle of June, and it was a year ago last December that, on the evening of the day of my arrival in London after an absence of half a lifetime, I found myself knocking at the door of Professor Higgs's residence on Guildford Street. It was opened by his housekeeper, Mrs. Reid. She was a thin and saturnine old woman who reminded me of a reanimated mummy. After a brief introduction, she told me that the Professor was in, but had a gentleman to dinner, and suggested sourly that I should call again the next morning. With difficulty, I eventually persuaded her to inform her master that an old Egyptian friend had brought him something that he certainly would like to see.

Five minutes later I groped my way into Higgs's sitting-room, which Mrs. Reid escorted me to from a lower floor. It was a large room, running the whole width of the house, divided into two by an arch, where once, in the Georgian days, there had been folding doors. The place was in shadow, except for the firelight, which shone upon a table laid ready for dinner. An extraordinary collection of antiquities, including a couple of mummies with gold faces arranged in their coffins against the wall, could also be seen. At the far end of the room, however, an electric lamp was dimly glowing near a tiny window that sat next to another table that was covered with books; and by it I saw my host, whom I had not seen for twenty years. Higgs and his dinner guest sat contentedly in their stuffed chairs as I made my approach.

First, I will describe Higgs, who, I may state, is admitted, even by his enemies, to be one of the most learned antiquarians and greatest masters of dead languages in Europe. Although

few would guess it from his appearance, he was already almost forty-five years old. In build, he was short and stout, with a face that was round and often flushed. His hair and beard were fiery red, and his eyes, when they could be seen (for generally he wore a pair of large dark spectacles) were small and of an indefinite hue, but sharp as needles. The manner of his dress was commonly so untidy, peculiar, and worn that it is said the police invariably requested him to move on, fearing that he would be prone to loiter in the streets at night. Such was, and to a great extent still is, the best description I can give of my dearest friend, Professor Ptolemy Higgs. I only hope that he won't be offended when he sees my assessment of him set down in black and white.

The man who was seated next to Professor Higgs, with his chin resting on his hand, listening to some erudite discourse with a rather distracted air, was extraordinarily different, especially by contrast. He was a tall well-made young man, rather thin, but broad-shouldered. I reckoned him to be close to twenty-five years of age. His face was clean-cut—so much so, indeed, that his dark eyes alone relieved it from a suspicion of hardness. His hair was short and straight, with a brown tint that matched his eyes. As I was introduced to this gentleman, he impressed me as a man of thought and ability, and, when he smiled, singularly pleasant. Such was, and is, Captain Oliver Orme, who, by the way, I should explain, had only been a captain of some volunteer engineers. As I was to learn at a later date, however, he was in fact a very able soldier, as was proved in the South African War, from where he had then but lately returned.

I ought to also say that he gave me the impression of a man not in love with himself or the world, or rather of one with whom the world was not in love; indeed, his young face seemed distinctly sad. Perhaps it was this that attracted me to him so much from the first moment that my eyes fell on him, for I was one with whom kind providence had also been out of touch for some time. At any rate, I found it easy to like men who had seen their share of sorrow, for such men seemed

somehow to be the better for having faced tribulation.

While I stood contemplating this pair, Higgs looking up from the papyrus that he was reading (I gathered later that he had spent the afternoon in unrolling a mummy, and was studying its features), and caught sight of me standing in the shadow.

"Who do you claim to be?" exclaimed the Professor in a shrill and strident voice, for it acquires that quality when he is angry or alarmed. "And what, I might add, are you doing in my drawing room?"

"Steady," said his companion; "your housekeeper told you that some friend of yours had come to call."

"Oh, yes, so she did, only I can't remember any friend with a face and beard like a goat. Advance, my mysterious and long-lost friend, so I can see you in a better light."

So I stepped into the shining circle of the electric light and halted again.

"Well I'll be," muttered Higgs. "The face is somewhat familiar, the face of—of—I have it—of old Adams. Yet he's been dead these ten years. The Khalifa got him, they said. By heavens, if you don't appear to be an antique version of the long-lost Adams. Please be so good as to tell me your name, for we waste time over a useless mystery."

"There is no need telling you a third time, Higgs, since it is in your mouth already."

"Well, I should have known you anywhere," said the astonished host, "but then ...your hair was not nearly so white when we last met."

"I must admit, the years have taken their toll. But don't be fooled, for there is still a great deal of youthful vigor left in me; one of the many benefits of a sanguine disposition."

"Well, Adams, I am really delighted to see you, especially as you never answered the questions I sent you in my last letter as to where you got those First Dynasty scarabs, of which the genuineness, I may tell you, has been disputed by certain envious scholars. Adams, my dear old fellow, welcome a thousand times."

This novel, by Sir H. Rider Haggard, is a broad sweeping tale of love and adventure, set in the remote African interior during the late 1800's. Four Englishmen, from very different backgrounds, determine to risk their lives to rescue an embattled African princess who claims to be a descendant of the Queen of Sheba. These adventurers get more than they bargained for along the way as they confront man-eating lions, immense stores of treasure, as well as a great deal of danger, treachery, and hardships. In the process of completing their epic mission, these men discover their need for courage, fortitude, and kind providence as they strive to survive the greatest adventure of their lives.



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