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Solomon's Mines.

BY H. RIDER HAGGARD.

CHAPTER I.

I MEET SIR HENRY CURTIS.

It is a curious thing that at my age—fifty-five last birthday—I should find myself taking up a pen to try and write a history. I wonder what sort of a history it will be when I have done it, if I ever come to the end of the trip! I have done a good many things in my life, which seem to me now, owing to my having begun so young, perhaps. At an age when other boys are at school, I was earning my living as a trader in the old colony. I have been trading, hunting, fighting, or minding ever since. And yet it is only eight months ago that I made my pile. It is a big pile now I have got it. I don't know yet how big—but I don't think I would go through the last fifteen or sixteen months again for it; no, not if I knew that I should come out safe at the end, pile and all. But then I am a timid man, and don't like violence, and am pretty sick of adventure. I wonder why I am going to write this book: it is not in my line. I am not a literary man, though very devoted to the Old Testament and also to the "Ingoldsby Legends." Let me try and set down my reasons, just to see if I have any.

First reason: Because Sir Henry Curtis and Captain John Good asked me to. Second reason: Because I am laid up here at Durban with the pain and trouble of my leg. Ever since that confounded lion got hold of me I have been liable to it, and its being rather bad just now makes me limp more than ever. There must be some poison in the lion's teeth, otherwise how is it that when your wounds are healed they break out again, generally, mark you, at the same time of year that you got your mauling? It is a hard thing that when one has shot sixty-five lions as I have in the course of my life, that the sixty-sixth should chew your leg like a quid of tobacco. It breaks the routine of the thing, and putting other considerations aside, I am an orderly man and don't like that. This is by the way.

Third reason: Because I want my boy, Harry, who is over there at the hospital in London studying to become a doctor, to have something to amuse him and keep him out of mischief for a week or so. Hospital work must sometimes pall and get rather dull, for even of cutting up dead bodies, there must come satiety, and as this history would be dull, whatever else it may be, it may put a little life into things for a day or two while he is reading it.

Fourth reason and last: Because I am going to tell the strangest story that I know of. It may seem a queer thing to say that, especially considering that there is no woman in it—except Foulata. Stop, though! there is Gagaoola, if she was a woman and not a fiend. But she was a hundred at least, and therefore not marriageable, so I don't count her. At any rate, I can safely say that there is not a petticoat in the whole history. Well, I had better come to the yoke. It's a still place, and I feel as though I were bogged up to the axle. But "stiffies, stiffies," as the Boers say (I'm sure I don't know how they spell it), softly does it. A strong team will come through at last, that is if they ain't too poor. You will never do anything with poor oxen. Now to begin.

I, Allan Quatermain, of Durban, Natal, gentleman, make oath and say—that's how I began my deposition before the magistrate, about poor Khiva's and Ventgotes's sad deaths; but somehow it doesn't seem quite the right way to begin a book. And, besides, am I a gentleman? What is a gentleman? I don't quite know, and yet I have had to do with niggers—no, I'll scratch that word "niggers" out, for I don't like it. I've known natives who are, and so you'll say, Harry, my boy, before you're done with this tale, and I have known mean whites with lots of money and fresh out from home, too, who ain't.

Well, at any rate, I was born a gentleman, though I've been nothing but a poor traveling trader and a hunter all my life. Whether I have remained so I know not, you must judge of that. Heaven knows I've tried. I've killed many men in my time, but I have never slain wantonly or stained my hand in innocent blood, only in self-defense. The Almighty gave us our lives, and I suppose he meant us to defend them, at least I have always acted on that, and I hope it won't be brought up against me when my clock strikes. There, there, it is a cruel and wicked world, and for a timid man I have been mixed up in a deal of slaughter. I can't tell the rights of it, but at any rate I have never stolen, though I once cheated a Kafir out of a herd of cattle. But then he had done me a dirty turn, and it has troubled me ever since into the bargain.

Well it's eighteen months or so ago since I first met Sir Henry Curtis and Captain Good, and it was in this way. I had been up elephant hunting beyond Bamangwato, and had had bad luck. Every thing went wrong that trip, and to top up with I got the fever badly. So soon I was well enough I trekked down to the Diamond Fields, sold stock ivory as I had, and also my wagon and oxen, discharged my hunters, and took the post-car to the Cape. After spending a week in Cape Town, finding that they overcharged me at the hotel, and having seen everything there was to see, including the botanical gardens, which seemed to me likely to confer a great benefit on the country, and the House of Parliament, which I don't get well on nothing of the sort, I determined to go on back to Natal by the Durban, then lying in the docks waiting for the Edinburgh Castle due in from England. I took my berth and went aboard, and that afternoon the Natal passengers from the Edinburgh Castle tramped up, and we weighed and put out to sea.

Among the passengers who came on board there were two who excited my curiosity. One, a man about thirty, was one of the biggest-chested and longest-armed men I ever saw. He had yellow hair, a big yellow beard, clear-cut features, and large gray eyes set deep in his head. I never saw a finer-looking man, and somehow he reminded me of an ancient Dane. Not that I know much of ancient Danes, though I remember a modern Dane who did me out of ten pounds; but I remember once seeing a picture of some of those gentry, who I take it, were a kind of white Zulus. And they were drinking out of big horns, and their long hair hung down their backs, and as I looked at my friend standing there by the companion-ladder, I thought that if one only let his hair grow a bit, put on one of those chain shirts on to those great shoulders of his, and gave him a big battle-axe and a horn-mug, he might have sat as a model for that picture. And by the way it is a curious thing, and just shows how the blood will show out, I found out afterward that Sir Henry Curtis, for that was the big man's name, was of Danish blood. He also reminded me strongly of somebody else, but at the time I could not remember who was.

The other man who stood talking to Sir Henry was short, stout, and dark, and of a

course of my life, and they have always been just the best and bravest and nicest fellows I ever met, though given to the use of profane language.

I asked a page or two back, what is a gentleman? I'll answer it now: a royal naval officer is, in a general sort of a way, though of course, there may be a black sheep among them here and there. I fancy it is just the wide sea and the breath of God's winds that washes their hearts and blows them better out of their minds and makes them what men ought to be. Well, to return, I was right again; I found out that he was a naval officer, a lieutenant of thirty-one, after seven years' service, had been turned out of her majesty's employ with the barren honor of a commander's rank, because it was impossible that he should be promoted. That is what people who serve the queen have to expect; to be shot out into the cold world to find a living just when they are beginning to really understand their work, and to get to the prime of life.

Well, I suppose they do, mind it, but for my part I had rather earn my bread as a hunter. One's halpence are as scarce perhaps, but you don't get so many kicks. His name I found out by referring to the passenger's list—was Good—Captain John Good. He was broad, of medium height, dark, stout, and rather a curious man to look at. He was so very neat, and so very clean shaven, and always wore an eyeglass in his right eye. It seemed to grow there, for it had no string, and he never took it out except to wipe it. At first I thought he used to sleep in it, but I afterward found that this was a mistake. He put it in his trousers pocket when he went to bed, together with his false teeth, of which he had two beautiful sets that have often, my own being none of the best, caused me to break the tenth commandment. But I am anticipating.

Soon after we got under weigh evening closed in, and brought with it very dirty weather. A keen breeze sprung up off land, and a kind of aggravated Scotch mist soon drove everybody from the deck. And as for that Dunkeld, she is a flat-bottomed punt, and going up light as she was, she rolled very heavily. It almost seemed as though she would go right over, but she never did. It was quite impossible to walk about, so I stood near the engines where it was warm, and amused myself with watching the pendulum, which was fixed opposite to me, swinging slowly backward and forward as the vessel rolled, and marking the angle she touched at each lurch.

"That pendulum's wrong; it is not properly weighted," suddenly said a voice at my shoulder, somewhat testily. Looking round I saw the naval officer I had noticed when the passengers came aboard.

"Indeed, now what makes you think so?" I asked.

"Think so, I don't think at all. Why there—as she righted herself after a roll—"if the ship had really rolled to the degree that thing pointed to then she would never have rolled again, that's all. But it is just like these merchant skippers, they always are so confoundedly careless."

Just then the dinner-bell rung, and I was not sorry, for it is a dreadful thing to have to listen to an officer of the royal navy when he gets on to that subject. I only know one worse thing, and that is to hear a merchant skipper express his candid opinion of officers of the royal navy.

Captain Good and I went down to dinner together, and there we found Sir Henry Curtis already seated. He and Captain Good sat together, and I opposite them. The captain and I soon got into talk about shooting and what not; he asking me many questions, and I answering as well as I could. Presently he got on to elephants.

"Ah, sir," called out somebody who was sitting near me, "you've got the right man for that; Hunter Quatermain should be able to tell you about elephants if anybody can."

Sir Henry, who had been sitting quite listlessly to our talk, started visibly.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, leaning forward across the table, and speaking in a low, deep voice, a very suitable voice it seemed to me, it is by your name Allen Quatermain?"

I said it was.

The big man made no further remark, but I heard him mutter "fortunate" into his beard.

Presently dinner came to an end, and as we were leaving the saloon Sir Henry came up and asked me if I would come into his cabin and smoke a pipe. I accepted, and he led the way to the Dunkeld cabin, and a very good cabin it was. It had been two cabins, but when Sir Garnet or one of those big swells went down the coast in the Dunkeld, they had knocked away the partition and never put it up again. There was a sofa in the cabin, and a little table in front of it. Sir Henry sent the steward for a bottle of whisky, and the three of us sat down and lit our pipes.

"Mr. Quatermain," said Sir Henry Curtis, when the steward had brought the whisky, and lit the lamp, "the year before last about this time you were, I believe, at a place called Bamangwato, to the north of the Transvaal."

"I was," I answered, rather surprised that this gentleman should be so well acquainted with my movements, which were not, so far as I was aware, considered of general interest.

"You were trading there, were you not?" put in Captain Good, in his quick way.

"I was. I took up a wagon-load of goods, and made a camp outside the settlement, and stopped until I had sold them."

Sir Henry was sitting opposite to me in a Madeira chair, his arms leaning on the table. He now looked up, fixing his large gray eyes full upon my face. There was a curious anxiety in them I thought.

"Did you happen to meet a man called Neville there?"

He was sitting in a chair, and looking at me where he would sell his wagon, for six months afterward you saw the wagon in the possession of a Portuguese trader, who told you that he had bought it at Inyati from a white man whose name he had forgotten, and that the white man with a native servant had started off for the interior on a shooting trip, he believed."

"Yes."

"Then came a pang," said Sir Henry, suddenly. "I suppose you know or can guess nothing more of the reasons of my—of Mr. Neville's journey to the northward, or as to what point that journey was directed?"

"I heard something," I answered, and stopped. The subject was one I didn't care to discuss.

Sir Henry and Captain Good looked at each other, and Captain Good nodded.

"Mr. Quatermain," said the former, "I am going to tell you a story, and ask your advice, and perhaps your assistance. The agent who forwarded me your letter told me that I might impress you upon it, as you were," he said, "well known and universally respected in Natal, and especially noted for your discretion."

I bowed and drank some whisky and water to hide my confusion, for I am a modest man—and Sir Henry went on.

"Mr. Neville was my brother."

"Oh," I said, starting, for I now knew who Sir Henry had reminded me of when I first saw him. His brother was a much smaller man and had a dark beard, but now I thought of it, he possessed eyes of the same shade of gray and with the same keen look in them, and the features, too, were not unlike.

"He was," went on Sir Henry, "my only and younger brother, and till five years ago I did not suppose we were ever a month away from each other. But just about five years ago a misfortune befell us, as sometimes does happen in families. We had quarreled bitterly, and I behaved very unjustly to my brother in my anger." Here Captain Good nodded his head vigorously to himself. The ship gave a big roll just then, so that the looking-glass, which was fixed opposite us to starboard, was for a moment nearly over on its head, and as I was sitting upward, I could see him nodding like anything.

"As I dare say you know," went on Sir Henry, "if a man dies intestate, and has no property but land, real property it is called in England, it all descends to his eldest son. It so happened that just at the time when we quarreled our father died intestate. He had put off making his will until it was too late. The result was that my brother, who had not been brought up to any profession, was left without a penny. Of course it would have been my duty to provide for him, but at the time the quarrel between us was so bitter that I did not—to my shame I say it" (and he sighed deeply)—"offer to do anything. It was not that I grudged him anything, but I waited for him to make advances, and he made none. I am sorry to trouble you with all this, Mr. Quatermain, but I must make things clear, eh, Good?"

"Quite so, quite so," said the Captain. "Mr. Quatermain will, I am sure, keep this history to himself."

"Of course," said I, "for I rather pride myself on my discretion."

"Well," went on Sir Henry, "my brother had a few hundred pounds to his account at the time, and without saying anything to me he drew out this paltry sum, and, having adopted the name of Neville, started off for South Africa in the wild hope of making a fortune. This I heard afterward. Some three years passed, and I heard nothing of my brother, though I wrote several times. Doubtless the letters never reached him. But as time went on I grew more and more troubled about him. I found out, Mr. Quatermain, that blood is thicker than water."

"That's true," said I, thinking of my boy Harry.

"I found out, Mr. Quatermain, that I would have given half my fortune to know that my brother George, the only relation I have, was safe and well, and that I should see him again."

"But you never did, Curtis," jerked out Captain Good, glancing at the big man's face.

"Well, Mr. Quatermain, as time went on, I became more and more anxious to find out if my brother was alive or dead, and if alive to get him home again. I set inquiries on foot, and your letter was one of the results. So far as it went it was satisfactory, for it showed that till lately George was alive, but it did not go far enough.

So, to cut a long story short, I made up my mind to come out and look for him myself, and Captain Good was so kind as to come with me."

"Yes," said the captain; "nothing else to do, you see. Turned out by my lord's of the admiralty to starve on half pay. And now perhaps, sir, you will tell us what you know or have heard of the gentleman called Neville."

CHAPTER II.
THE LEGEND OF SOLOMON'S MINES.
"What was it that you heard about my brother's journey at Bamangwato?" said Sir Henry, as I paused to fill my pipe before answering Captain Good.

"I heard this," I answered, "and I have never mentioned it to a soul till to-day. I heard he was starting for Solomon's Mines." "Solomon's Mines?" ejaculated both my hearers at once. "Where are they?"

"I don't know," I said; "I know where they are said to be. I once saw the peaks of the mountains that border them, but there was a hundred and thirty miles of desert between me and them, and I am not aware that any white man ever got across it save one. But perhaps the best thing I can do is to tell you the legend of Solomon's Mines as I know it, you passing your word not to reveal anything I tell you without my permission. Do you agree to that? I have my reasons for asking it."

Sir Henry nodded, and Captain Good replied, "Certainly, certainly."

(Continued Tomorrow.)

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