

[*The English Review*]

THE ROMANCES OF RIDER HAGGARD

BY EDWARD C. RASHLEIGH

IN presenting us with *When the World Shook*, which as an effort of imaginative daring is alone surpassed by that incomparable romance with which his name will always be associated — I refer, of course, to *She* — Sir Rider Haggard again emphasizes a fact we have long suspected — that in spite of his wide popularity, perhaps because of it, he has not yet been completely understood or appreciated by his public. The obvious view of him as a writer of romance, a compiler of intensely exciting stories of adventure, has been so long familiar to his readers that his attractions as a philosopher have been somewhat overlooked. It will be our endeavor on the present occasion, after glancing at his work from the conventional point of view, to attempt some rediscovery of him in his less obtrusive aspect.

The romance of imaginative adventure is especially welcome to the Anglo-Saxon temperament, because it appeals to certain innate racial instincts which can neither be eradicated nor stifled. I confess I have little patience with those who affect a superior disdain for this kind of fiction; who complain of a 'deadly silence,' of 'seeing everywhere the hand that pulls the wires,' of 'purely artificial excitement' leaving them 'cold and a trifle fatigued.'

I have in mind a certain critic who lamented the production of these and other romances because, as he put it, they tended 'to the awakening in the young of the feudal ideal, which it has

cost the world such a deluge of blood and tears partly to get rid of.' The same sad scribe went on to allude to 'the pernicious influence of Sir Walter Scott'! Such opinions are not likely, even in these latter days of disenchantment, to gain wide acceptance. For though to-day no golden Spanish Main, that Aladdin's hinterland, calls us to explore its wonders, no undiscovered country, not even to north and south those 'thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice,' any longer awaits the lifting of the veil, the spirit of adventure, if limited in its aspirations and shorn of its fulfillment by the increasing ugliness of modern life, still smoulders within us and still responds to those magicians who have the cunning and the art to kindle it into flame.

And among their company Sir Rider Haggard has long wielded a wand second to none in power and enchantment. Being gifted, indeed, with an imagination which, as the late Sir Walter Besant once observed, is 'stronger, more vivid, more audacious than any other writer of his time,' he creates where his followers merely manipulate. And it is precisely for that reason that he still remains unrivaled in the department of fiction which he has made peculiarly his own.

Few writers have been more recklessly accused of plagiarism, and none has suffered more in this respect than the subject of this paper. Sir Rider Haggard, indeed, has to a certain extent plagiarized himself. Such similarities as we have discovered, how-

ever, rather court our gratitude than provoke our regret. We are not bored, for instance, with the trial by fire in *The Wizard* because we have already made acquaintance with that lord of the lightnings, Indaba-Zimbi, in *Allan's Wife*; the ghosts which gather to welcome the dying Eric on Mosfell do not inspire us with any less lively apprehension because we have before been introduced to a company of equally portentous 'Sahus' at the passing of Cleopatra; nor, again, would we willingly have missed the fray on the knees of the Old Stone Witch who sat aloft 'waiting for the world to die' because it recalls a like Homeric conflict in the closing chronicles of *Allan Quatermain*. That originality, moreover, is strictly limited, was possibly no new discovery even in the days of Solomon. It has been increasingly evident, as far as romance is concerned, since the time of Apuleius.

For sheer audacity, his latest effort is second to none of its author's performances. The ruins of Kôr had the respectable antiquity of a hundred centuries or so, but the marvelous city of Nyo, situated in a region of mysterious light thousands of feet beneath the earth's surface, surpasses even Kôr's length of days by the trifle of two hundred and forty thousand years! It is not, as might have been expected, in the region of the Azores, the peaks, if we may credit the ingenious speculations of Mr. Ignatius Donnelly, of the lost Atlantis, that Sir Rider Haggard has laid the scene of his latest fantasy. But it is on the mysterious island of Orofena in the Southern Pacific — a remnant of the still more ancient continent of Lemuria — that the three modern Englishmen, Arbuthnot, the wealthy mystic, Bastin, the dull, unimaginative, high-church parson, and Bickley, the medical skeptic, are wrecked, thanks to a particularly

vigorous cyclone, and resurrect from their quarter of a million years' sleep the old Superman, Oro, and his fascinating daughter, the Lady Yva.

Of the effect of their appearance on the different mentalities of Bastin, Bickley, and Arbuthnot, of the extraordinary experiences of these three in the subterranean region of Nyo, of the love of Arbuthnot for the Lady Yva in whom he finally discovers the personality of his dead wife reincarnated, and of how the final tragedy of the world's destruction was averted by the latter's self-sacrifice — of all this let the reader learn from the book itself. The description, in the closing chapters, of the World's Balance — a gigantic mountain of metal two thousand feet and more in height, spinning eternally like a huge humming-top, or gyroscope, in the interior of the earth, and traveling as it spins, and of Oro's attempt to divert its course, is as daring and arresting a flight of the imagination as anything Sir Rider Haggard has achieved. 'Who shall say,' as Mr. Holly has observed, 'what proportion of fact, past, present, or to come, may lie in the imagination? What is imagination? Perhaps it is a shadow of the intangible truth, perhaps it is the soul's thought!'

We may, indeed, pause to ask ourselves whether the idea of an age of culture far ahead of our own in the far-off dawn of the world is so wild a speculation after all. On the authority of Professor Keith, the period since the human stem became differentiated from that which led on to the great anthropoid apes is about two million years; and, on the same authority, man had reached the human standard in size of brain by the commencement of the Pliocene epoch, or about a million years ago. Is it, then, so certain — bearing in mind what vast geological changes have occurred — that it is only

for the fraction of the last seven thousand years or so that man has been civilized, and that during the whole of the enormous preceding period he has existed continuously in some condition akin to the Neanderthal?

In glancing back over the long list of Sir Rider Haggard's achievements, it is no easy matter to decide with whom out of all the excellent fellowship of his adventurers we shall more particularly concern ourselves. The African exploits of Mr. Allan Quatermain have alone furnished material for no less than nine romances, while two further chronicles have recently commenced as serials in the magazines. One of these — *The Ancient Allan* — deals with his preëxistence in Egypt at the time of the Persian Conquest; and the other, wherein we welcome the reappearance of one Umslopogaas, bears the arresting title of '*She*' *Meets Allan*, which in itself is sufficient to conjure up all kinds of speculations anent a further visit to the delectable region of Kôr.

But, Allan apart, our choice is a sufficiently wide one. We can gaze upon the glories of Montezuma's Tenochtitlan with Thomas Wingfield or the lost wonders of desolate Zimbabwe with Prince Aziel; dare Goldfoss with Eric Brighteyes or make that desperate and amazing journey into the Mist country with Juanna Rodd and Leonard Outram. Jerusalem besieged by Titus. Byzantium under the Empress Irene and Constantine the Sixth; Venice in the time of the Great Plague; Seville and Granada in the spacious days of Ferdinand and Isabella; the Netherlands groaning under the bloody sword of Alva; the mountainous kingdom of Al-je-bal, the sinister Lord of the Assassins; the unexplored wilds of Yucatan, of Abyssinia, or of No Man's Land at the back of Thibet beneath the shadow of the mystic Fire-Mountain of Kaloon — all these invite a

visit; while if we would explore the magic and mysteries of Ancient Egypt we can do so when Rameses ruled at Thebes or Cleopatra at Alexandria. Better still, to revert to Zululand, we can go a-hunting by night on Ghost Mountain with the Wolf-Brethren Umslopogaas and Galazi; or, best of all, we can steer for that wondrous region portaled by the Ethiopian's Head, give greeting to old Billali, and wander awhile with Ayesha amid the sad splendors of the tombs of Kôr.

Whichever expedition we decide upon we shall be quite easy in our minds on the score of getting safely through. Were Sir Rider Haggard presented, like Cadmus of old, with a handful of dragon's teeth to sow, the crop of warriors that would arise would make the shade of Frederick the Great quite envious. It would be no light matter to get together a bodyguard of such doughty units as Sir Henry Curtis, Umbopa and Twala, Umslopogaas and Galazi, Eric Brighteyes, Skallagrim and Ospakar Blacktooth, Martin the Frisian, Otter the conqueror of the Snake, the twin brothers Godwin and Wulf, and, if we are not superstitious of thirteen, golden-harnessed Odysseus.

The tale of scalps these paladins accounted for between them would suffice to decorate a whole tribe of Fenimore Cooper's Indians. Umslopogaas alone, if I remember rightly, had cut one hundred and three notches in the shaft of 'Groanmaker' before ever he tackled the Masai or stood with Kara at the head of the flying stairway. Which reminds me that Sir Rider Haggard has been frequently accused of bloodthirsty instincts and with pandering to unwholesome appetites. It has, indeed, been asserted that, like the Abyssinian natives whom Bruce of Munchausen fame was held to have maligned, he dines exclusively on raw steaks, and that his romances 'reek

with blood like a very shambles.' The accusation, however, is beside the mark, because it wholly begs the question of Sir Rider Haggard's outlook, and violates the rule which Maupassant has truly said will ever need repeating a thousand times, that, whatever the reader may like or dislike, the critic, if he be worthy of the name, has no right to concern himself about tendencies. 'He must judge the particular work solely in relation to the nature of the attempt.'

Sir Rider Haggard's attempt is to deal with heroic times and episodes in a heroic and realistic manner. In this, as I think, he has quite remarkably succeeded. *Nada the Lily*, for instance, where slaughter is on as large a scale as in anything he has given us, is most certainly as true and as powerful a presentment of savage existence as can easily be found either in fiction or out of it.

But it is by no means only as a graphic chronicler of rousing combats, or yet as a painter of scenes that are terrible or ghastly, that Sir Rider Haggard appeals to us. His work has charms of a higher value, wizardries of a more abiding potency. I think it is M. Paul Bourget who has observed that 'the novelist who desires to live shall continue to put poetry in his prose.' Sir Rider Haggard has a gift of poetry which, when most happily allied to his rare imagination and inventiveness, enables him to reach a far loftier height than most fabulists whose aim is no more than an exciting story of adventure. He has, indeed, an epic sense which would transcend the limits of our mundane vision and open out perspectives of some super-terrestrial landscape. There is about it a curious, indefinable quality — something of the twilight, more perhaps of the night; a night when summer-lightning is abroad, when the stars seem

alternately to approach and to recede from the atmosphere of earth. For it conveys, to me at least, a peculiar sense of the Infinite.

Sir Rider Haggard is brimful of it. It breaks out here and there in some arresting passage even in his more tranquil novels of everyday English life. Take, for instance, *Beatrice*, and *Colonel Quaritch, V. C.*, or, if you would have it in more abundant measure, *Stella Fregelius*. It is employed effectively, not twice or thrice, in *King Solomon's Mines* and *Allan Quatermain*. It is tense, yet restrained, in *Eric Brighteyes*, in *Montezuma's Daughter*, and in *Nada the Lily*. It pervasively illuminates *The World's Desire*. It reaches its loftiest expression in *Cleopatra*, in *She*, and in *Ayesha: The Return of She*. And though at times it is maddeningly contrasted with strange lapses into commonplace — for the reason, perhaps, that the romance of adventure is not, fundamentally, the most fitting place for its introduction — it is of supreme importance in any consideration of Sir Rider Haggard's performances because it is precisely where it is most finely and most unrestrainedly employed that we get the essence of his message and his meaning.

What, then, is this message? Superficially, it might be described as fatalism: that which must befall must befall. And in some degree Sir Rider Haggard may justly be said to have the prescience of the Norns ever upon him. Bearing in mind his Scandinavian antecedents, I can, indeed, almost imagine that in some previous incarnation he played the part of an Icelandic Skald and wandered from homestead to homestead foretelling disaster and doom. But it is by no means fatalism. It also goes far beyond the old Greek idea of Nemesis. It is rather the expression of a vivid sense of the unending

conflict between the dual principles of evil and of good, of suffering and of joy; of the imperative and inevitable punishment or reward which is their sequel; and of the mystery and the silence of the Eternal Law by which they act and whence they proceed. Like a pervasive and recurrent tune, this theme runs in a weird music through all this author's romances; and however loudly the external clamor of the narrative appears to drown it, those who have ears to listen cannot fail to catch its meaning.

This breadth of vision, the natural attribute of an imagination which is impatient of the finite and is ever attempting to read the stars, also accounts, and alone accounts, for a quality in Sir Rider Haggard's work which is not to be confounded with mere blood-letting, namely, ruthlessness. And by ruthlessness I mean the apparently merciless manner in which he consigns so large a number of his characters to ruin or death. This treatment does not so much apply to his menfolk, for their exits from the drama are usually portrayed in such heroic fashion as to connote a sense of glory rather than of tears. But with his womenkind it is different. Thus, in *Dawn* we have Mildred Carr heart-broken; in the *Witch's Head* Eva Keswick delivered to a fate worse than death; in *Colonel Quaritch, V. C.*, Belle Quest cruelly deserted; while among those whose lot is death itself we have Jess, Marie, Beatrice, Joan Haste, Stella Quatermain, and Stella Frege-lius; Sorais, Nada, and Gudruda; Otomie, Maya, and Elissa; Masouda and Ustane; Meriamum and Atene; Merapi and Yva.

But, however seemingly ruthless all this may appear, to interpret it as such is totally to misunderstand Sir Rider Haggard's point of view. The earthly sufferings and existences of his char-

acters are, to him, no more than single pages from an innumerable series of lives, a series without any beginning or ending. Birth and death are, in his eyes, merely milestones on the orbit of our infinity. In the words of that mysterious being who haunted Holly's dreams: 'That which is alive hath known death, and that which is dead yet can never die. For in the Circle of the Spirit life is naught and death is naught. Yea, all things live forever, though at times they sleep and are forgotten.' Thus, in his more logical view, Eternity is not regarded, as by most, as something with a hither wall to it, but we are immortal here and now. Still further, and as a consequence of this sense of the infinite, he regards this present incarnation as far too short for any final judgment or assessment of humanity's deeds and sufferings. As 'the glow worm that shines in the night time and is black in the morning,' as 'the white breath of the oxen in winter,' as 'the little shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself at sunset'; such, as he beautifully puts it in the mouth of Ignosi, is our little span of earthly days and troublings.

And so, over all the tragedy and pain which he depicts — none the less tragic because heroically treated — he suffuses always, sometimes symbolically, sometimes in intenser radiance, the silver gleam of a dawn which is yet to be, a dawn of redemption and of peace. The last words of Elissa to Aziel, 'Beloved, there is hope'; the cry of Meriamum to Odysseus, 'Beneath the wings of Truth shall we meet again'; the shoe of the drowned Beatrice swept back to Geoffrey from the cruel sea; the cloak of Ayesha as it fell out of the blackness of the dreadful gulf on Leo Vincey; the unspoken message in the eyes of the dying Sorais; the wraith of Stella as it paused

before Allan in the moonlight; the hand of Nada outstretched in greeting from her living tomb ere it quivered and grew still forever; the farewell message of Yva to Humphrey Arbuthnot; in all these there is the suggestion that the story is not yet ended and that all the inexplicable tragedy and loss, the cruelty and the pain, will elsewhere be balanced in the scales and their meaning rendered clear.

It is in the tragedy of *Kôr* and of *Kaloon*, in *She* and in *Ayesha: The Return of She*, that our author's art of blending mysticism with romance attains to its loftiest powers. The former is the more simple, the more clear, and, perhaps for that reason, the more successful of the two. We have *Ayesha* there presented to us, to quote Sir Rider Haggard's own words, 'as a type of intellectual materialism, satisfied with itself, and admitting the existence of no power beyond itself'; as a being, moreover, without any conception of the spiritual, whose ambitions and hopes, glorious and magnificent as they were, were all 'of the Earth, earthy.' In *Ayesha: The Return of She*, a far more ambitious effort, the allegorical side of the story is at once more lofty and — always a dangerous experiment — more obtrusive. As a romance it lacks that air of authenticity which contributed so highly to the success of its predecessor. If one is writing a pure fable of the Arabian Nights order, such as Beckford's *Vathek*, or Meredith's *Shaving of Shagpat*, inconsistencies are not of much moment. But *She* and its sequel — or, as the author prefers, its conclusion — purport to be a veracious account of an actual experience. And the fact that in places the latter romance contains statements as in direct contradiction to those in the original work, spoils the illusion of reality.

Ayesha is now depicted as a far

loftier being than in *She*, where, as has been said, her presentment is that of an immortal woman cherishing mere earthly ambitions. Here she is rather the immortal Spirit, of more mystical and transcendent powers. So, too, the great quest of Holly and Leo Vincey develops not merely as a material adventure of the body, but still more as an adventure of the soul. The avalanche, the glacier, the passions of Atene, the death-hounds, the last and arduous mountain beset with innumerable hidden dangers, all these must Leo's love and faith conquer. But not even yet is his victory complete. The love that shall be worthy of the divine must rise superior to the corruption and the horror of the grave; its endurance must outlast all finite limits. And hence the great trial in which he makes his choice for all eternity, and becomes justified in his faith by having restored to him the glory he had lost.

It is sincerely to be hoped that Sir Rider Haggard will one day give us the history of the *beginning* of his imaginative tragedy, and of the events which preceded and accompanied the flight of Amenartas and Kallikrates in those twilight days when the last of the native Pharaohs ruled in Egypt. Such a romance would surely be a fitting complement to the two he has already produced. It is, perhaps, idle to speculate as to which of his romances will hereafter be considered most worthy of permanent regard. Possibly, from a purely literary point of view, *Beatrice* is the best written, *Eric Brighteyes* the most artistic in form, *Nada the Lily* the most pervasively powerful, and, beyond question, *She*, and in a lesser degree, *Ayesha: The Return of She*, and *When the World Shook*, the most remarkable. To have said this, however, is to have left out the best of the Quatermain series, as well as *Jess*, *Cleopatra*, and

Montezuma's Daughter. That of all his works *She* will live, whatever else does, is, I think, no incautious prophecy.

It remains to-day, as it was well described when it first saw the light over thirty-two years ago, 'as rich and original a piece of romance as any our age has seen,' and in its own kind it will not easily be paralleled.

That in some of his work we are, on occasions, suddenly brought to earth by the introduction of banalities, which especially jar when contrasted with things immortal and divine, may freely be admitted. It has also been said that his characters, in general, are too unswerving in their passions and aspirations, their loves and hates, accurately to represent life as we know it.

However that may be, he has given us in his own original, rugged manner what others of less imagination, if of greater literary gifts, have often failed to give us. He has caught more than an echo of 'those great invisible truths, the whisper of whose wings we hear at times as they sweep through the gross air of the world.' That evil begets evil and good begets good; that 'behind the night the royal sun rides on, ever the rainbow shines around the rain'—this seems to me the sum and essence of his message. He has preached it with a magic, that remains perdurable when boyhood is outgrown, which appealing ever to our heart and blood shall indeed keep our youth as eternal in us as ever the Rolling Flame beyond the gulf of Kôr might keep it.

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THE NOVELS OF MR. COMPTON MACKENZIE

BY JOHN FREEMAN

WISE men have foretold the death of imaginative literature. Spiderlike, science will seize the body of this gilded fly, stab it methodically into numbness, and then, feeding upon its vitals, will exhaust and destroy the useless thing. With sedulous precision the scientist will do what the artist, alas, has failed to do more than vaguely and uncertainly: he will reinterpret life, he will rediscover man's relation to a vaster universe. Ignoring or spurning all attempts at the æsthetic apprehension of the significance of life and time, he will at length announce his own positive formula by which all phenomena and all relations must be valued.

It is the scientist who will feel and communicate, with a dry ecstasy wholly his own, the isolation of man amid the meanness or the majesty of the world. That language which we yet speak, stiff with ancestral associations, will be discarded; obscure symbols, their order intelligible perhaps to another scientist but to no one else, will be used to express the secrets of life and riddles of death Thebes never knew. The watcher of the skies will be no Keats: back to his galley-pots will every Keats be driven. In the midst of that web called science the spider will sit with vigilant eyes, holding their cunning in momentary suspense, swelling with vaster and vaster accumulations.