

## INTRODUCTION

Verily and indeed it is the unexpected that happens! Probably if there was one person upon the earth from whom the Editor of this, and of a certain previous history, did not expect to hear again, that person was Ludwig Horace Holly. This, too, for a good reason; he believed him to have taken his departure from the earth.

When Mr. Holly last wrote, many, many years ago, it was to transmit the manuscript of She, and to announce that he and his ward, Leo Vincey, the beloved of the divine Ayesha, were about to travel to Central Asia in the hope, I suppose, that there she would fulfil her promise and appear to them again.

Often I have wondered, idly enough, what happened to them there; whether they were dead, or perhaps droning their lives away as monks in some Thibetan Lamasery, or studying magic and practising asceticism under the tuition of the Eastern Masters trusting that thus they would build a bridge by which they might pass to the side of their adored Immortal.

Now at length, when I had not thought of them for months, without a single warning sign, out of the blue as it were, comes the answer to these wonderings!

To think--only to think--that I, the Editor aforesaid, from its appearance suspecting something quite familiar and without interest,

pushed aside that dingy, unregistered, brown-paper parcel directed in an unknown hand, and for two whole days let it lie forgotten. Indeed there it might be lying now, had not another person been moved to curiosity, and opening it, found within a bundle of manuscript badly burned upon the back, and with this two letters addressed to myself.

Although so great a time had passed since I saw it, and it was shaky now because of the author's age or sickness, I knew the writing at once--nobody ever made an "H" with that peculiar twirl under it except Mr. Holly. I tore open the sealed envelope, and sure enough the first thing my eye fell upon was the signature, L. H. Holly. It is long since I read anything so eagerly as I did that letter. Here it is:--

"My dear sir,--I have ascertained that you still live, and strange to say I still live also--for a little while.

"As soon as I came into touch with civilization again I found a copy of your book She, or rather of my book, and read it--first of all in a Hindostani translation. My host--he was a minister of some religious body, a man of worthy but prosaic mind--expressed surprise that a 'wild romance' should absorb me so much. I answered that those who have wide experience of the hard facts of life often find interest in romance. Had he known what were the hard facts to which I alluded, I wonder what that excellent person would have said?

"I see that you carried out your part of the business well and

faithfully. Every instruction has been obeyed, nothing has been added or taken away. Therefore, to you, to whom some twenty years ago I entrusted the beginning of the history, I wish to entrust its end also. You were the first to learn of She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed, who from century to century sat alone, clothed with unchanging loveliness in the sepulchres of Kor, waiting till her lost love was born again, and Destiny brought him back to her.

"It is right, therefore, that you should be the first to learn also of Ayesha, Hesea and Spirit of the Mountain, the priestess of that Oracle which since the time of Alexander the Great has reigned between the flaming pillars in the Sanctuary, the last holder of the sceptre of Hes or Isis upon the earth. It is right also that to you first among men I should reveal the mystic consummation of the wondrous tragedy which began at Kor, or perchance far earlier in Egypt and elsewhere.

"I am very ill; I have struggled back to this old house of mine to die, and my end is at hand. I have asked the doctor here, after all is over, to send you the Record, that is unless I change my mind and burn it first. You will also receive, if you receive anything at all, a case containing several rough sketches which may be of use to you, and a sistrum, the instrument that has been always used in the worship of the Nature goddesses of the old Egyptians, Isis and Hathor, which you will see is as beautiful as it is ancient. I give it to you for two reasons; as a token of my gratitude and regard, and as the only piece of evidence that is left to me of the literal truth of what I have written

in the accompanying manuscript, where you will find it often mentioned. Perhaps also you will value it as a souvenir of, I suppose, the strangest and loveliest being who ever was, or rather, is. It was her sceptre, the rod of her power, with which I saw her salute the Shadows in the Sanctuary, and her gift to me.

"It has virtues also; some part of Ayesha's might yet haunts the symbol to which even spirits bowed, but if you should discover them, beware how they are used.

"I have neither the strength nor the will to write more. The Record must speak for itself. Do with it what you like, and believe it or not as you like. I care nothing who know that it is true.

"Who and what was Ayesha, nay, what is Ayesha? An incarnate essence, a materialised spirit of Nature the unforeseeing, the lovely, the cruel and the immortal; ensouled alone, redeemable only by Humanity and its piteous sacrifice? Say you! I have done with speculations who depart to solve these mysteries.

"I wish you happiness and good fortune. Farewell to you and to all.

"L. Horace Holly."

I laid the letter down, and, filled with sensations that it is useless

to attempt to analyse or describe, opened the second envelope, of which I also print the contents, omitting only certain irrelevant portions, and the name of the writer as, it will be noted, he requests me to do.

This epistle, that was dated from a remote place upon the shores of Cumberland, ran as follows:--

"Dear sir,--As the doctor who attended Mr. Holly in his last illness I am obliged, in obedience to a promise that I made to him, to become an intermediary in a some what strange business, although in truth it is one of which I know very little, however much it may have interested me. Still I do so only on the strict understanding that no mention is to be made of my name in connexion with the matter, or of the locality in which I practise.

"About ten days ago I was called in to see Mr. Holly at an old house upon the Cliff that for many years remained untenanted except by the caretakers, which house was his property, and had been in his family for generations. The housekeeper who summoned me told me that her master had but just returned from abroad, somewhere in Asia, she said, and that he was very ill with his heart--dying, she believed; both of which suppositions proved to be accurate.

"I found the patient sitting up in bed (to ease his heart), and a strange-looking old man he was. He had dark eyes, small but full of fire and intelligence, a magnificent and snowy-white beard that covered a

chest of extraordinary breadth, and hair also white, which encroached upon his forehead and face so much that it met the whiskers upon his cheeks. His arms were remarkable for their length and strength, though one of them seemed to have been much torn by some animal. He told me that a dog had done this, but if so it must have been a dog of unusual power. He was a very ugly man, and yet, forgive the bull, beautiful. I cannot describe what I mean better than by saying that his face was not like the face of any ordinary mortal whom I have met in my limited experience. Were I an artist who wished to portray a wise and benevolent, but rather grotesque spirit, I should take that countenance as a model.

"Mr. Holly was somewhat vexed at my being called in, which had been done without his knowledge. Soon we became friendly enough, however, and he expressed gratitude for the relief that I was able to give him, though I could not hope to do more. At different times he talked a good deal of the various countries in which he had travelled, apparently for very many years, upon some strange quest that he never clearly denuded to me. Twice also he became light-headed, and spoke, for the most part in languages that I identified as Greek and Arabic; occasionally in English also, when he appeared to be addressing himself to a being who was the object of his veneration, I might almost say of his worship. What he said then, however, I prefer not to repeat, for I heard it in my professional capacity.

"One day he pointed to a rough box made of some foreign wood (the same

that I have now duly despatched to you by train), and, giving me your name and address, said that without fail it was to be forwarded to you after his death. Also he asked me to do up a manuscript, which, like the box, was to be sent to you.

"He saw me looking at the last sheets, which had been burned away, and said (I repeat his exact words)--

"Yes, yes, that can't be helped now, it must go as it is. You see I made up my mind to destroy it after all, and it was already on the fire when the command came--the clear, unmistakable command--and I snatched it off again.'

"What Mr. Holly meant by this 'command' I do not know, for he would speak no more of the matter.

"I pass on to the last scene. One night about eleven o'clock, knowing that my patient's end was near, I went up to see him, proposing to inject some strychnine to keep the heart going a little longer. Before I reached the house I met the caretaker coming to seek me in a great fright, and asked her if her master was dead. She answered No; but he was gone--had got out of bed and, just as he was, barefooted, left the house, and was last seen by her grandson among the very Scotch firs where we were talking. The lad, who was terrified out of his wits, for he thought that he beheld a ghost, had told her so.

"The moonlight was very brilliant that night, especially as fresh snow had fallen, which reflected its rays. I was on foot, and began to search among the firs, till presently just outside of them I found the track of naked feet in the snow. Of course I followed, calling to the housekeeper to go and wake her husband, for no one else lives near by. The spoor proved very easy to trace across the clean sheet of snow. It ran up the slope of a hill behind the house.

"Now, on the crest of this hill is an ancient monument of upright monoliths set there by some primeval people, known locally as the Devil's Ring--a sort of miniature Stonehenge in fact. I had seen it several times, and happened to have been present not long ago at a meeting of an archaeological society when its origin and purpose were discussed. I remember that one learned but somewhat eccentric gentleman read a short paper upon a rude, hooded bust and head that are cut within the chamber of a tall, flat-topped cromlech, or dolmen, which stands alone in the centre of the ring.

"He said that it was a representation of the Egyptian goddess, Isis, and that this place had once been sacred to some form of her worship, or at any rate to that of a Nature goddess with like attributes, a suggestion which the other learned gentlemen treated as absurd. They declared that Isis had never travelled into Britain, though for my part I do not see why the Phoenicians, or even the Romans, who adopted her cult, more or less, should not have brought it here. But I know nothing of such matters and will not discuss them.



"I remembered also that Mr. Holly was acquainted with this place, for he had mentioned it to me on the previous day, asking if the stones were still uninjured as they used to be when he was young. He added also, and the remark struck me, that yonder was where he would wish to die. When I answered that I feared he would never take so long a walk again, I noted that he smiled a little.

"Well, this conversation gave me a clue, and without troubling more about the footprints I went on as fast as I could to the Ring, half a mile or so away. Presently I reached it, and there--yes, there--standing by the cromlech, bareheaded, and clothed in his night-things only, stood Mr. Holly in the snow, the strangest figure, I think, that ever I beheld.

"Indeed never shall I forget that wild scene. The circle of rough, single stones pointing upwards to the star-strewn sky, intensely lonely and intensely solemn: the tall trilithon towering above them in the centre, its shadow, thrown by the bright moon behind it, lying long and black upon the dazzling sheet of snow, and, standing clear of this shadow so that I could distinguish his every motion, and even the rapt look upon his dying face, the white-draped figure of Mr. Holly. He appeared to be uttering some invocation--in Arabic, I think--for long before I reached him I could catch the tones of his full, sonorous voice, and see his waving, outstretched arms. In his right hand he held the looped sceptre which, by his express wish I send to you with the

drawings. I could see the flash of the jewels strung upon the wires, and in the great stillness, hear the tinkling of its golden bells.

"Presently, too, I seemed to become aware of another presence, and now you will understand why I desire and must ask that my identity should be suppressed. Naturally enough I do not wish to be mixed up with a superstitious tale which is, on the face of it, impossible and absurd. Yet under all the circumstances I think it right to tell you that I saw, or thought I saw, something gather in the shadow of the central dolmen, or emerge from its rude chamber--I know not which for certain--something bright and glorious which gradually took the form of a woman upon whose forehead burned a star-like fire.

"At any rate the vision or reflection, or whatever it was, startled me so much that I came to a halt under the lee of one of the monoliths, and found myself unable even to call to the distraught man whom I pursued.

"Whilst I stood thus it became clear to me that Mr. Holly also saw something. At least he turned towards the Radiance in the shadow, uttered one cry; a wild, glad cry, and stepped forward; then seemed to fall through it on to his face.

"When I reached the spot the light had vanished, and all I found was Mr. Holly, his arms still outstretched, and the sceptre gripped tightly in his hand, lying quite dead in the shadow of the trilithon."

The rest of the doctor's letter need not be quoted as it deals only with certain very improbable explanations of the origin of this figure of light, the details of the removal of Holly's body, and of how he managed to satisfy the coroner that no inquest was necessary.

The box of which he speaks arrived safely. Of the drawings in it I need say nothing, and of the sistrum or sceptre only a few words. It was fashioned of crystal to the well-known shape of the Crux-ansata, or the emblem of life of the Egyptians; the rod, the cross and the loop combined in one. From side to side of this loop ran golden wires, and on these were strung gems of three colours, glittering diamonds, sea-blue sapphires, and blood-red rubies, while to the fourth wire, that at the top, hung four little golden bells.

When I took hold of it first my arm shook slightly with excitement, and those bells began to sound; a sweet, faint music like to that of chimes heard far away at night in the silence of the sea. I thought too, but perhaps this was fancy, that a thrill passed from the hallowed and beautiful thing into my body.

On the mystery itself, as it is recorded in the manuscript, I make no comment. Of it and its inner significations every reader must form his or her own judgment. One thing alone is clear to me--on the hypothesis that Mr. Holly tells the truth as to what he and Leo Vincey saw and experienced, which I at least believe--that though sundry

interpretations of this mystery were advanced by Ayesha and others, none of them are quite satisfactory.

Indeed, like Mr. Holly, I incline to the theory that She, if I may still call her by that name although it is seldom given to her in these pages, put forward some of them, such as the vague Isis-myth, and the wondrous picture-story of the Mountain-fire, as mere veils to hide the truth which it was her purpose to reveal at last in that song she never sang.

The Editor.