

**Love Eternal**

**By**

**H. Rider Haggard**

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TO

THE REV. PHILIP T. BAINBRIDGE

Vicar of St. Thomas' Regent Street, London

You, whose privilege it is by instruction and example to strengthen the weak hands and confirm the feeble knees of many, may perhaps care to read of one whose human love led her from darkness into light and on to the gates of the Love Eternal.

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## LOVE ETERNAL

### CHAPTER I

#### HONEST JOHN

More than thirty years ago two atoms of the eternal Energy sped forth from the heart of it which we call God, and incarnated themselves in the human shapes that were destined to hold them for a while, as vases hold perfumes, or goblets wine, or as sparks of everlasting radium inhabit the bowels of the rock. Perhaps these two atoms, or essences, or monads indestructible, did but repeat an adventure, or many, many adventures. Perhaps again and again they had proceeded from that Home august and imperishable on certain mornings of the days of Time, to return thither at noon or nightfall, laden with the fruits of gained experience. So at least one of them seemed to tell the other before all was done and that other came to believe. If so, over what fields did they roam throughout the æons, they who having no end, could have no beginning? Not those of this world only, we may be sure. It is so small and there are so many others, millions upon millions of them, and such an infinite variety of knowledge is needed to shape the soul of man, even though it remain as yet imperfect and but a shadow of what it shall be.

Godfrey Knight was born the first, six months later she followed (her name was Isobel Blake), as though to search for him, or because whither he went, thither she must come, that being her doom and his.

Their circumstances, or rather those of their parents, were very different but, as it chanced, the houses in which they dwelt stood scarcely three hundred yards apart.

Between the rivers Blackwater and Crouch in Essex, is a great stretch of land, flat for the most part and rather dreary, which, however, to judge from what they have left us, our ancestors thought of much importance because of its situation, its trade and the corn it grew. So it came about that they built great houses there and reared beautiful abbeys and churches for the welfare of their souls. Amongst these, not very far from the coast, is that of Monk's Acre, still a beautiful fane though they be but few that worship there to-day. The old Abbey house adjacent is now the rectory. It has been greatly altered, and the outbuildings are shut up or used as granaries and so forth by arrangement with a neighbouring farmer. Still its grey walls contain some fine but rather unfurnished chambers, reputed by the vulgar to be haunted. It was for this reason, so says tradition, that the son of the original grantee of Monk's Acre Abbey, who bought it for a small sum from Henry VIII at the Dissolution of the Monasteries, turned the Abbey house into a rectory and went himself to dwell in another known as Hawk's Hall, situate on the bank of the little stream of that name,

Hawk's Creek it is called, which finds its way to the Blackwater.

Parsons, he said, were better fitted to deal with ghosts than laymen, especially if the said laymen had dispossessed the originals of the ghosts of their earthly heritage.

The ancient Hawk's Hall, a timber building of the sort common in Essex as some of its premises still show, has long since disappeared. About the beginning of the Victorian era a fish-merchant of the name of Brown, erected on its site a commodious, comfortable, but particularly hideous mansion of white brick, where he dwelt in affluence in the midst of the large estate that had once belonged to the monks. An attempt to corner herrings, or something of the sort, brought this worthy, or unworthy tradesman to disaster, and the Hall was leased to a Harwich smack-owner of the name of Blake, a shrewd person, whose origin was humble. He had one son named John, of whom he was determined to "make a gentleman." With this view John was sent to a good public school, and to college. But of him nothing could make a gentleman, because true gentility and his nature were far apart. He remained, notwithstanding all his advantages, a cunning, and in his way an able man of business, like his father before him. For the rest, he was big, florid and presentable, with the bluff and hearty manner which sometimes distinguishes a faux bonhomme. "Honest John" they called him in the neighbourhood, a soubriquet which was of service to him in many ways.

Suddenly Honest John's father died, leaving him well off, though not so rich as he would have liked to be. At first he thought of leaving Hawk's Hall and going to live at Harwich, where most of his business interests were. But, remembering that the occupation of it gave him a certain standing in the county, whereas in Harwich he would have been only a superior tradesman, he gave up the idea. It was replaced by another--to marry well.

Now John Blake was not an idealist, nor in any sense romantic; therefore, from marriage he expected little. He did not even ask that his wife should be good-looking, knowing that any aspirations which he had towards beauty could be satisfied otherwise. Nor did he seek money, being well aware that he could make this for himself. What he desired were birth and associations. After a little waiting he found exactly what he wanted.

A certain Lord Lynfield from the South of England, who lived in London, and was a director of many Boards, took a pheasant-shooting in the neighbourhood of Hawk's Hall, and with it a house. Here he lived more or less during the winter months, going up to town when necessary, to attend his Boards. Lord Lynfield was cursed with several extravagant sons, with whom John Blake, who was a good shot, soon became friendly. Also he made himself useful by lending one of them a considerable sum of money. When this came to Lord Lynfield's ears, as Honest John was careful that it should, he was disturbed and offered repayment, though as a matter of fact he did not know where to turn for the cash. In his

bluffest and heartiest way Blake refused to hear of such a thing.

"No, no, my Lord, let it stand. Your son will repay me one day, and if he doesn't, what will a trifle like that matter?"

"He certainly shall repay you. But all the same, Mr. Blake, you have behaved very well and I thank you much," replied his Lordship courteously.

Thus did John Blake become an intimate of that aristocratic family.

Now Lord Lynfield, who was a widower, had one unmarried daughter. She was an odd and timid little person, with strong religious views, who adored secretly a high-church curate in London. This, indeed, was the reason why she had been brought to Essex when her infatuation was discovered by one of her married sisters, who, like the rest of the family, was extremely "low." Lady Jane was small in body and shrinking and delicate in character, somewhat mouselike indeed. Even her eyes were large and timid as are those of a mouse. In her John Blake perceived the exact parti whom he desired for a wife.

It is not necessary to follow the pitiful story to its inevitable end, one, happily, more common at that time than it is to-day. Mr. Blake played the earnest, ardent lover, and on all occasions proclaimed his own unworthiness at the top of his loud voice. Also he hinted at large settlements to the married sisters, who put the matter before Jane very



plainly indeed. In the end, after a few words with her father, who pointed out that the provision which could be made for her was but small, and that he would die more happily if he knew her to be comfortably settled in life with a really trustworthy and generous man such as Mr. Blake had proved himself to be, she gave way, and in due course they were married.

In fact, the tragedy was complete, since Jane loathed her husband, whose real nature she had read from the beginning, as much as she adored the high-church curate from whom in some terrible hour she parted with broken words. Even when he died a few years later, she continued to adore him, so much that her one hope was that she might meet him again in the land where there is no marrying or giving in marriage. But all of this she kept locked in her poor little heart, and meanwhile did her duty by her husband with an untroubled brow, though those mouse-like eyes of hers grew ever more piteous.

He, for his part, did not do his duty by her. Of one side of his conduct she was careless, being totally indifferent as to whom he admired. Others she found it hard to bear. The man was by nature a bully, one who found pleasure in oppressing the helpless, and who loved, in the privacy of his home, to wreak the ill-temper which he was forced to conceal abroad. In company, and especially before any of her people, he treated her with the greatest deference, and would even make loud laudatory remarks concerning her; when they were alone there was a different tale to tell, particularly if she had in any way failed in

promoting that social advancement for which he had married her.

"What do you suppose I give you all those jewels and fine clothes for, to say nothing of the money you waste in keeping up the house?" he would ask brutally.

Jane made no answer; silence was her only shield, but her heart burned within her. It is probable, notwithstanding her somewhat exaggerated ideas of duty and wifely obedience, that she would have plucked up her courage and left him, even if she must earn her own living as a sempstress, had it not been for one circumstance. That circumstance was the arrival in the world of her daughter, Isobel. In some ways this event did not add to her happiness, if that can be added to which does not exist, for the reason that her husband never forgave her because this child, her only one, was not a boy. Nor did he lose any opportunity of telling her this to her face, as though the matter were one over which she had control. In others, however, for the first time in her battered little life, she drank deep of the cup of joy. She loved that infant, and from the first it loved her and her only, while to the father it was indifferent, and at times antagonistic.

From the cradle Isobel showed herself to be an individual of character. Even as a little girl she knew what she wanted and formed her own opinions quite independently of those of others. Moreover, in a certain way she was a good-looking child, but of a stamp totally different from that of either of her parents. Her eyes were not restless and

prominent, like her father's, or dark and plaintive, like her mother's, but large, grey and steady, with long curved lashes. In fact, they were fine, but it was her only beauty, since the brow above them was almost too pronounced for that of a woman, the mouth was a little large, and the nose somewhat irregular. Her hair, too, though long and thick, was straight and rather light-coloured. For the rest she was well-ground and vigorous, with a strong, full voice, and as she approached maturity she developed a fine figure.

When she was not much more than ten Isobel had her first trouble with her father. Something had gone wrong with one of his shipping speculations, and as usual, he vented it upon his wife. So cruelly did he speak to her on a household matter for which she was not the least to blame, that the poor woman at last rose and left the room to hide her tears. Isobel, however, remained behind, and walking up to her father, who stood with his back to the fire, asked him why he treated her mother thus.

"Mind your own business, you impertinent brat," he answered.

"Mummy is my business, and you are--a brute," she exclaimed, clenching her little fists. He lifted his hand as though to strike her, then changed his mind and went away. She had conquered. Thenceforward Mr. Blake was careful not to maltreat his wife in Isobel's presence. He complained to her, however, of the child's conduct, which, he said, was due to her bringing up and encouragement, and Lady Jane in turn,

scolded her in her gentle fashion for her "wicked words."

Isobel listened, then asked, without attempting to defend herself,

"Were not father's words to you wicked also, Mummy? It was not your fault if James forgot to bring round the dog-cart and made him miss the train to London. Ought you to be sworn at for that?"

"No, dear, but you see, he is my husband, and husbands can say what they wish to their wives."

"Then I will never have a husband; at least, not one like father,"

Isobel announced with decision.

There the matter ended. Or rather it did not end, since from that moment Isobel began to reflect much on matrimony and other civilized institutions, as to which at last she formed views that were not common among girls of her generation. In short, she took the first step towards Radicalism, and entered on the road of rebellion against the Existing and Acknowledged.

During the governess era which followed this scene Isobel travelled far and fast along that road. The lady, or rather the ladies, hired by her father, for his wife was allowed no voice in their selection, were of the other known as "determined"; disciplinarians of the first water.

For one reason or another they did not stay. Isobel, though a quick and

able child, very fond of reading moreover, proved unamenable under discipline as understood by those formidable females, and owing to her possession of a curious tenacity of purpose, ended by wearing them down. Also they did not care for the atmosphere of the house, which was depressing.

One of them once tried to strike Isobel. This was when she was nearly thirteen. Isobel replied with the schoolroom inkpot. She was an adept at stone-throwing, and other athletic arts. It caught her instructress fair upon her gentle bosom, spoiled her dress, filled her mouth and eyes with ink, and nearly knocked her down.

"I shall tell your father to flog you," gasped the lady when she recovered her breath.

"I should advise you not," said Isobel. "And what is more," she added after reflection, "if you do I shall advise him not to listen to you."

Then the governess thought better of it and gave notice instead. To be just to John Blake he never attempted to resort to violence against his daughter. This may have been because he knew by instinct that it would not be safe to do so or tend to his own comfort. Or perhaps, it was for the reason that in his way he was fond of her, looking on her with pride not quite untouched by fear. Like all bullies he was a coward at heart, and respected anyone who dared to stand up to him, even although she were but a girl, and his own daughter.

After the victim of the inkpot incident departed, threatening actions at law and proclaiming that her pupil would come to a bad end, questions arose as to Isobel's future education. Evidently the governess experiment had broken down and was not worth repeating. Although she trembled at the idea of parting with her only joy and consolation in life, Lady Jane suggested that she should be sent to school. It was fortunate for her that she did so, since as the idea came from his wife, Mr. Blake negatived it at once firmly and finally, a decision which she accepted with an outward sigh of resignation, having learned the necessity of guile, and inward delight. Indeed, for it that evening she thanked God upon her knees.

It may be also that her father did not wish that Isobel should go away. Lady Jane bored him to distraction, since kicking a cushion soon becomes poor sport. So much did she bore him indeed that for this and other reasons he passed most of his time in London or at Harwich, in both of which places he had offices where he transacted his shipping business, only spending the week-ends at Hawk's Hall. It was his custom to bring with him parties of friends, business men as a rule, to whom, for sundry purposes, he wished to appear in the character of a family man and local magnate. Isobel, who was quick and vivacious even while she was still a child, helped to make these parties pass off well, whereas without her he felt that they would have been a failure. Also she was useful during the shooting season. So it came about that she was kept at home.

It was at this juncture that an idea came to Mr. Blake. A few years before, at the very depth of the terrible agricultural depression of the period, he had purchased at a forced sale by the mortgagees, the entire Monk's Acre estate, at about £12 the acre, which was less than the cost of the buildings that stood upon the land. This, as he explained to all and sundry, he had done at great personal loss in the interest of the tenants and labourers, but as a matter of fact, even at the existing rents, the investment paid him a fair rate of interest, and was one which, as a business man he knew must increase in value when times changed. With the property went the advowson of Monk's Acre, and it chanced that a year later the living fell vacant through the resignation of the incumbent. Mr. Blake, now as always seeking popularity, consulted the bishop, consulted the church-wardens, consulted the parishioners, and in the end consulted his own interests by nominating the nephew of a wealthy baronet of his acquaintance whom he was anxious to secure as a director upon the Board of a certain company in which he had large holdings.

"I have never seen this clerical gentleman and know nothing of his views, or anything about him. But if you recommend him, my dear Sir Samuel, it is enough for me, since I always judge of a man by his friends. Perhaps you will furnish me, or rather my lawyers, with the necessary particulars, and I will see that the matter is put through. Now, to come to more important business, as to this Board of which I am chairman," &c.

The end of it was that Sir Samuel, flattered by such deference, became a member of the Board and Sir Samuel's nephew became rector of Monk's Acre.

Such appointments, like marriages, are made in Heaven--at least that seems to be the doctrine of the English Church, which is content to act thereon. In this particular instance the results were quite good. The Rev. Mr. Knight, the nephew of the opulent Sir Samuel, proved to be an excellent and hard-working clergyman. He was low-church, and narrow almost to the point of Calvinism, but intensely earnest and conscientious; one who looked upon the world as a place of sin and woe through which we must labour and pass on, a difficult path beset with rocks and thorns, leading to the unmeasured plains of Heaven. Also he was an educated man who had taken high degrees at college, and really learned in his way. While he was a curate, working very hard in a great seaport town, he had married the daughter of another clergyman of the city, who died in a sudden fashion as the result of an accident, leaving the girl an orphan. She was not pure English as her mother had been a Dane, but on both sides her descent was high, as indeed was that of Mr. Knight himself.

This union, contracted on the husband's part largely from motives that might be called charitable, since he had promised his deceased colleague on his death bed to befriend the daughter, was but moderately successful. The wife had the characteristics of her race; largeness and



liberality of view, high aspirations for humanity, considerable intelligence, and a certain tendency towards mysticism of the Swedenborgian type, qualities that her husband neither shared nor could appreciate. It was perhaps as well, therefore that she died at the birth of her only son, Godfrey, three years after her marriage.

Mr. Knight never married again. Matrimony was not a state which appealed to his somewhat shrunken nature. Although he admitted its necessity to the human race, of it in his heart he did not approve, nor would he ever have undertaken it at all had it not been for a sense of obligation. This attitude, because it made for virtue as he understood it, he set down to virtue, as we are all apt to do, a sacrifice of the things of earth and of the flesh to the things of heaven, and of the spirit. In fact, it was nothing of the sort, but only the outcome of individual physical and mental conditions. Towards female society, however hallowed and approved its form, he had no leanings. Also the child was a difficulty, so great indeed that at times almost he regretted that a wise Providence had not thought fit to take it straight to the joys of heaven with its mother, though afterwards, as the boy's intelligence unfolded, he developed interest in him. This, however, he was careful to keep in check, lest he should fall into the sin of inordinate affection, denounced by St. Paul in common with other errors.

Finally, he found an elderly widow, named Parsons, who acted as his housekeeper, and took charge of his son. Fortunately for Godfrey her

sense of parenthood was more pronounced than that of his father, and she, who had lost two children of her own, played the part of mother to him with a warm and loyal heart. From the first she loved him, and he loved her; it was an affection that continued throughout their lives.

When Godfrey was about nine his father's health broke down. He was still a curate in his seaport town, for good, as goodness is understood, and hard-working as he was, no promotion had come his way. Perhaps this was because the bishop and his other superiors, recognising his lack of sympathy and his narrowness of outlook, did not think him a suitable man to put in charge of a parish. At any rate, so it happened.

Thus arose his appeal to his wealthy and powerful relative, Sir Samuel, and his final nomination to a country benefice, for in the country the doctor said that he must live--unless he wished to die. Convinced though he was of the enormous advantages of Heaven over an earth which he knew to be extremely sinful, the Rev. Mr. Knight, like the rest of the world, shrank from the second alternative, which, as he stated in a letter of thanks to Sir Samuel, however much it might benefit him personally, would cut short his period of terrestrial usefulness to others. So he accepted the rectorship of Monk's Acre with gratitude.

In one way there was not much for which to be grateful, seeing that in those days of depreciated tithes the living was not worth more than £250 a year and his own resources, which came from his wife's small

fortune, were very limited. It should have been valuable, but the great tithes were alienated with the landed property of the Abbey by Henry VIII, and now belonged to the lay rector, Mr. Blake, who showed no signs of using them to increase the incumbent's stipend.

Still there was a good house with an excellent garden, too good indeed, with its beautiful and ancient rooms which a former rector of archæological knowledge and means had in part restored to their pristine state, while for the rest his tastes were simple and his needs few, for, of course, he neither drank wine nor smoked. Therefore, as has been said, he took the living with thankfulness and determined to make the best of it on a total income of about £350 a year.