

The Ancient Allan

By

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CHAPTER I. AN OLD FRIEND

Now I, Allan Quatermain, come to the weirdest (with one or two exceptions perhaps) of all the experiences which it has amused me to employ my idle hours in recording here in a strange land, for after all England is strange to me. I grow elderly. I have, as I suppose, passed the period of enterprise and adventure and I should be well satisfied with the lot that Fate has given to my unworthy self.

To begin with, I am still alive and in health when by all the rules I should have been dead many times over. I suppose I ought to be thankful for that but, before expressing an opinion on the point, I should have to be quite sure whether it is better to be alive or dead. The religious plump for the latter, though I have never observed that the religious are more eager to die than the rest of us poor mortals.

For instance, if they are told that their holy hearts are wrong, they spend time and much money in rushing to a place called Nauheim in Germany, to put them right by means of water-drinking, thereby shortening their hours of heavenly bliss and depriving their heirs of a certain amount of cash. The same thing applies to Buxton in my own neighbourhood and gout, especially when it threatens the stomach or the throat. Even archbishops will do these things, to say nothing of such small fry as deans, or stout and prominent lay figures of the Church.

From common sinners like myself such conduct might be expected, but in

the case of those who are obviously poised on the topmost rungs of the Jacobean--I mean, the heavenly--ladder, it is legitimate to inquire why they show such reluctance in jumping off. As a matter of fact the only persons that, individually, I have seen quite willing to die, except now and again to save somebody else whom they were so foolish as to care for more than they did for themselves, have been not those "upon whom the light has shined" to quote an earnest paper I chanced to read this morning, but, to quote again, "the sinful heathen wandering in their native blackness," by which I understand the writer to refer to their moral state and not to their sable skins wherein for the most part they are also condemned to wander, that is if they happen to have been born south of a certain degree of latitude.

To come to facts, the staff of Faith which each must shape for himself, is often hewn from unsuitable kinds of wood, yes, even by the very best among us. Willow, for instance, is pretty and easy to cut, but try to support yourself with it on the edge of a precipice and see where you are. Then of a truth you will long for ironbark, or even homely oak. I might carry my parable further, some allusions to the proper material of which to fashion the helmet of Salvation suggest themselves to me for example, but I won't.

The truth is that we fear to die because all the religions are full of uncomfortable hints as to what may happen to us afterwards as a reward for our deviations from their laws and we half believe in something, whereas often the savage, not being troubled with religion, fears less,

because he half believes in nothing. For very few inhabitants of this earth can attain either to complete belief or to its absolute opposite. They can seldom lay their hands upon their hearts, and say they know that they will live for ever, or sleep for ever; there remains in the case of most honest men an element of doubt in either hypothesis.

That is what makes this story of mine so interesting, at any rate to me, since it does seem to suggest that whether or no I have a future, as personally I hold to be the case and not altogether without evidence, certainly I have had a past, though, so far as I know, in this world only; a fact, if it be a fact, from which can be deduced all kinds of arguments according to the taste of the reasoner.

And now for my experience, which it is only fair to add, may after all have been no more than a long and connected dream. Yet how was I to dream of lands, events and people where of I have only the vaguest knowledge, or none at all, unless indeed, as some say, being a part of this world, we have hidden away somewhere in ourselves an acquaintance with everything that has ever happened in the world. However, it does not much matter and it is useless to discuss that which we cannot prove.

Here at any rate is the story.

In a book or a record which I have written down and put away with others under the title of "The Ivory Child," I have told the tale of a certain

expedition I made in company with Lord Ragnall. Its object was to search for his wife who was stolen away while travelling in Egypt in a state of mental incapacity resulting from shock caused by the loss of her child under tragic and terrible circumstances. The thieves were the priests of a certain bastard Arab tribe who, on account of a birthmark shaped like the young moon which was visible above her breast, believed her to be the priestess or oracle of their worship. This worship evidently had its origin in Ancient Egypt since, although they did not seem to know it, the priestess was nothing less than a personification of the great goddess Isis, and the Ivory Child, their fetish, was a statue of the infant Horus, the fabled son of Isis and Osiris whom the Egyptians looked upon as the overcomer of Set or the Devil, the murderer of Osiris before his resurrection and ascent to Heaven to be the god of the dead.

I need not set down afresh all that happened to us on this remarkable adventure. Suffice it to say that in the end we recovered the lady and that her mind was restored to her. Before she left the Kendah country, however, the priesthood presented her with two ancient rolls of papyrus, also with a quantity of a certain herb, not unlike tobacco in appearance, which by the Kendah was called Taduki. Once, before we took our great homeward journey across the desert, Lady Ragnall and I had a curious conversation about this herb whereof the property is to cause the person who inhales its fumes to become clairvoyant, or to dream dreams, whichever the truth may be. It was used for this purpose in the mystical ceremonies of the Kendah religion when under its influence the priestess or oracle of the Ivory Child was wont to

announce divine revelations. During her tenure of this office Lady Ragnall was frequently subjected to the spell of the Taduki vapour, and said strange things, some of which I heard with my own ears. Also myself once I experienced its effects and saw a curious vision, whereof many of the particulars were afterwards translated into facts.

Now the conversation which I have mentioned was shortly to the effect, that she, Lady Ragnall, believed a time would come when she or I or both of us, were destined to imbibe these Taduki fumes and see wonderful pictures of some past or future existence in which we were both concerned. This knowledge, she declared, had come to her while she was officiating in an apparently mindless condition as the priestess of the Kendah god called the Ivory Child.

At the time I did not think it wise to pursue so exciting a subject with a woman whose mind had been recently unbalanced, and afterwards in the stress of new experiences, I forgot all about the matter, or at any rate only thought of it very rarely.

Once, however, it did recur to me with some force. Shortly after I came to England to spend my remaining days far from the temptations of adventure, I was beguiled into becoming a steward of a Charity dinner and, what was worse, into attending the said dinner. Although its objects were admirable, it proved one of the most dreadful functions in which I was ever called upon to share. There was a vast number of people, some of them highly distinguished, who had come to support the

Charity or to show off their Orders, I don't know which, and others like myself, not at all distinguished, just common subscribers, who had no Orders and stood about the crowded room like waiters looking for a job.

At the dinner, which was very bad, I sat at a table so remote that I could hear but little of the interminable speeches, which was perhaps fortunate for me. In these circumstances I drifted into conversation with my neighbour, a queer, wizened, black-bearded man who somehow or other had found out that I was acquainted with the wilder parts of Africa. He proved to be a wealthy scientist whose passion it was to study the properties of herbs, especially of such as grow in the interior of South America where he had been travelling for some years.

Presently he mentioned a root named Yagé, known to the Indians which, when pounded up into a paste and taken in the form of pills, had the effect of enabling the patient to see events that were passing at a distance. Indeed he alleged that a vision thus produced had caused him to return home, since in it he saw that some relative of his, I think a twin-sister, was dangerously ill. In fact, however, he might as well have stayed away, as he only arrived in London on the day after her funeral.

As I saw that he was really interested in the subject and observed that he was a very temperate man who did not seem to be romancing, I told him something of my experiences with Tadaki, to which he listened with a kind of rapt but suppressed excitement. When I affected disbelief in the

whole business, he differed from me almost rudely, asking why I rejected phenomena simply because I was too dense to understand them. I answered perhaps because such phenomena were inconvenient and upset one's ideas. To this he replied that all progress involved the upsetting of existent ideas. Moreover he implored me, if the chance should ever come my way, to pursue experiments with Taduki fumes and let him know the results.

Here our conversation came to an end for suddenly a band that was braying near by, struck up "God save the Queen," and we hastily exchanged cards and parted. I only mention it because, had it not occurred, I think it probable that I should never have been in a position to write this history.

The remarks of my acquaintance remained in my mind and influenced it so much that when the occasion came, I did as a kind of duty what, however much I was pressed, I am almost sure I should never have done for any other reason, just because I thought that I ought to take an opportunity of trying to discover what was the truth of the matter. As it chanced it was quick in coming.

Here I should explain that I attended the dinner of which I have spoken not very long after a very lengthy absence from England, whither I had come to live when King Solomon's Mines had made me rich. Therefore it happened that between the conclusion of my Kendah adventure some years before and this time I saw nothing and heard little of Lord and Lady Ragnall. Once a rumour did reach me, however, I think through Sir Henry

Curtis or Captain Good, that the former had died as a result of an accident. What the accident was my informant did not know and as I was just starting on a far journey at the time, I had no opportunity of making inquiries. My talk with the botanical scientist determined me to do so; indeed a few days later I discovered from a book of reference that Lord Ragnall was dead, leaving no heir; also that his wife survived him.

I was working myself up to write to her when one morning the postman brought me here at the Grange a letter which had "Ragnall Castle" printed on the flap of the envelope. I did not know the writing which was very clear and firm, for as it chanced, to the best of my recollection, I had never seen that of Lady Ragnall. Here is a copy of the letter it contained:

"My dear Mr. Quatermain,--Very strangely I have just seen at a meeting of the Horticultural Society, a gentleman who declares that a few days ago he sat next to you at some public dinner. Indeed I do not think there can be any doubt for he showed me your card which he had in his purse with a Yorkshire address upon it.

"A dispute had arisen as to whether a certain variety of *Crinum* lily was first found in Africa, or Southern America. This gentleman, an authority upon South American flora, made a speech saying that he had never met with it there, but that an

acquaintance of his, Mr. Quatermain, to whom he had spoken on the subject, said that he had seen something of the sort in the interior of Africa." (This was quite true for I remembered the incident.) "At the tea which followed the meeting I spoke to this gentleman whose name I never caught, and to my astonishment learnt that he must have been referring to you whom I believed to be dead, for so we were told a long time ago. This seemed certain, for in addition to the evidence of the name, he described your personal appearance and told me that you had come to live in England.

"My dear friend, I can assure you it is long since I heard anything which rejoiced me so much. Oh! as I write all the past comes back, flowing in upon me like a pent-up flood of water, but I trust that of this I shall soon have an opportunity of talking to you. So let it be for a while.

"Alas! my friend, since we parted on the shores of the Red Sea, tragedy has pursued me. As you will know, for both my husband and I wrote to you, although you did not answer the letters" (I never received them), "we reached England safely and took up our old life again, though to tell you the truth, after my African experiences things could never be quite the same to me, or for the matter of that to George either. To a great extent he changed his pursuits and certain political ambitions which he once cherished, seemed no longer to appeal to him. He became a student of past

history and especially of Egyptology, which under all the circumstances you may think strange, as I did. However it suited me well enough, since I also have tastes that way. So we worked together and I can now read hieroglyphics as well as most people. One year he said that he would like to go to Egypt again, if I were not afraid. I answered that it had not been a very lucky place for us, but that personally I was not in the least afraid and longed to return there. For as you know, I have, or think I have, ties with Egypt and indeed with all Africa. Well, we went and had a very happy time, although I was always expecting to see old Harût come round the corner.

"After this it became a custom with us who, since George practically gave up shooting and attending the House of Lords, had nothing to keep us in England, to winter in Egypt. We did this for five years in succession, living in a bungalow which we built at a place in the desert, not far from the banks of the Nile, about half way between Luxor which was the ancient Thebes, and Assouan. George took a great fancy to this spot when first he saw it, and so in truth did I, for, like Memphis, it attracted me so much that I used to laugh and say I believed that once I had something to do with it.

"Now near to our villa that we called 'Ragnall' after this house, are the remains of a temple which were almost buried in the sand. This temple George obtained permission to excavate. It proved to

be a long and costly business, but as he did not mind spending the money, that was no obstacle. For four winters we worked at it, employing several hundred men. As we went on we discovered that although not one of the largest, the temple, owing to its having been buried by the sand during, or shortly after the Roman epoch, remained much more perfect than we had expected, because the early Christians had never got at it with their chisels and hammers. Before long I hope to show you pictures and photographs of the various courts, etc., so I will not attempt to describe them now.

"It is a temple to Isis--built, or rather rebuilt over the remains of an older temple on a site that seems to have been called Amada, at any rate in the later days, and so named after a city in Nubia, apparently by one of the Amen-hetep Pharaohs who had conquered it. Its style is beautiful, being of the best period of the Egyptian Renaissance under the last native dynasties.

"At the beginning of the fifth winter, at length we approached the sanctuary, a difficult business because of the retaining walls that had to be built to keep the sand from flowing down as fast as it was removed, and the great quantities of stuff that must be carried off by the tramway. In so doing we came upon a shallow grave which appeared to have been hastily filled in and roughly covered over with paving stones like the rest of the court, as though to conceal its existence. In this grave lay the skeleton of a large man, together with the rusted blade of an iron sword and

some fragments of armour. Evidently he had never been mummified, for there were no wrappings, canopic jars, ushapti figures or funeral offerings. The state of the bones showed us why, for the right forearm was cut through and the skull smashed in; also an iron arrow-head lay among the ribs. The man had been buried hurriedly after a battle in which he had met his death. Searching in the dust beneath the bones we found a gold ring still on one of the fingers. On its bezel was engraved the cartouche of 'Peroa, beloved of Ra.' Now Peroa probably means Pharaoh and perhaps he was Khabasha who revolted against the Persians and ruled for a year or two, after which he is supposed to have been defeated and killed, though of his end and place of burial there is no record. Whether these were the remnants of Khabasha himself, or of one of his high ministers or generals who wore the King's cartouche upon his ring in token of his office, of course I cannot say.

"When George had read the cartouche he handed me the ring which I slipped upon the first finger of my left hand, where I still wear it. Then leaving the grave open for further examination, we went on with the work, for we were greatly excited. At length, this was towards evening, we had cleared enough of the sanctuary, which was small, to uncover the shrine that, if not a monolith, was made of four pieces of granite so wonderfully put together that one could not see the joints. On the curved architrave as I think it is called, was carved the symbol of a winged disc, and beneath in hieroglyphics as fresh as though they had only been cut yesterday,

an inscription to the effect that Peroa, Royal Son of the Sun, gave this shrine as an 'excellent eternal work,' together with the statues of the Holy Mother and the Holy Child to the 'emanations of the great Goddess Isis and the god Horus,' Amada, Royal Lady, being votaress or high-priestess.

"We only read the hieroglyphics very hurriedly, being anxious to see what was within the shrine that, the cedar door having rotted away, was filled with fine, drifted sand. Basketful by basketful we got it out and then, my friend, there appeared the most beautiful life-sized statue of Isis carved in alabaster that ever I have seen. She was seated on a throne-like chair and wore the vulture cap on which traces of colour remained. Her arms were held forward as though to support a child, which perhaps she was suckling as one of the breasts was bare. But if so, the child had gone. The execution of the statue was exquisite and its tender and mystic face extraordinarily beautiful, so life-like also that I think it must have been copied from a living model. Oh! my friend, when I looked upon it, which we did by the light of the candles, for the sun was sinking and shadows gathered in that excavated hole, I felt--never mind what I felt--perhaps you can guess who know my history.

"While we stared and stared, I longing to go upon my knees, I knew not why, suddenly I felt a faint trembling of the ground. At the same moment, the head overseer of the works, a man called Achmet,

rushed up to us, shouting out--'Back! Back! The wall has burst.
The sand runs!'

"He seized me by the arm and dragged me away beside of and behind the grave, George turning to follow. Next instant I saw a kind of wave of sand, on the crest of which appeared the stones of the wall, curl over and break. It struck the shrine, overturned and shattered it, which makes me think it was made of four pieces, and shattered also the alabaster statue within, for I saw its head strike George upon the back and throw him forward. He reeled and fell into the open grave which in another moment was filled and covered with the débris that seemed to grip me to my middle in its flow. After this I remembered nothing more until hours later I found myself lying in our house.

"Achmet and his Egyptians had done nothing; indeed none of them could be persuaded to approach the place till the sun rose because, as they said, the old gods of the land whom they looked upon as devils, were angry at being disturbed and would kill them as they had killed the Bey, meaning George. Then, distracted as I was, I went myself for there was no other European there, to find that the whole site of the sanctuary was buried beneath hundreds of tons of sand, that, beginning at the gap in the broken wall, had flowed from every side. Indeed it would have taken weeks to dig it out, since to sink a shaft was impracticable and so dangerous that the local officials refused to allow it to be

attempted. The end of it was that an English bishop came up from Cairo and consecrated the ground by special arrangement with the Government, which of course makes it impossible that this part of the temple should be further disturbed. After this he read the Burial Service over my dear husband.

"So there is the end of a very terrible story which I have written down because I do not wish to have to talk about it more than is necessary when we meet. For, dear Mr. Quatermain, we shall meet, as I always knew that we should--yes, even after I heard that you were dead. You will remember that I told you so years ago in Kendah Land and that it would happen after a great change in my life, though what that change might be I could not say...."

This is the end of the letter except for certain suggested dates for the visit which she took for granted I should make to Ragnall.