

## CHAPTER II. RAGNALL CASTLE

When I had finished reading this amazing document I lit my pipe and set to work to think it over. The hypothetical inquirer might ask why I thought it amazing. There was nothing odd in a dilettante Englishman of highly cultivated mind taking to Egyptology and, being, as it chanced, one of the richest men in the kingdom, spending a fraction of his wealth in excavating temples. Nor was it strange that he should have happened to die by accident when engaged in that pursuit, which I can imagine to be very fascinating in the delightful winter climate of Egypt. He was not the first person to be buried by a fall of sand. Why, only a little while ago the same fate overtook a nursery-governess and the child in her charge who were trying to dig out a martin's nest in a pit in this very parish. Their operations brought down a huge mass of the overhanging bank beneath which the sand-vein had been hollowed by workmen who deserted the pit when they saw that it had become unsafe. Next day I and my gardeners helped to recover their bodies, for their whereabouts was not discovered until the following morning, and a sad business it was.

Yet, taken in conjunction with the history of this couple, the whole Ragnall affair was very strange. When but a child Lady Ragnall, then the Hon. Miss Holmes, had been identified by the priests of a remote African tribe as the oracle of their peculiar faith, which we afterwards proved to be derived from old Egypt, in short the worship of Isis and Horus. Subsequently they tried to steal her away and through the accident of

my intervention, failed. Later on, after her marriage when shock had deprived her of her mind, these priests renewed the attempt, this time in Egypt, and succeeded. In the end we rescued her in Central Africa, where she was playing the part of the Mother-goddess Isis and even wearing her ancient robes. Next she and her husband came home with their minds turned towards a branch of study that took them back to Egypt. Here they devote themselves to unearthing a temple and find out that among all the gods of Egypt, who seem to have been extremely numerous, it was dedicated to Isis and Horus, the very divinities with whom they recently they had been so intimately concerned in traditional and degenerate forms.

Moreover that was not the finish of it. They come to the sanctuary. They discover the statue of the goddess with the child gone, as their child was gone. A disaster occurs and both destroys and buries Ragnall so effectually that nothing of him is ever seen again: he just vanishes into another man's grave and remains there.

A common sort of catastrophe enough, it is true, though people of superstitious mind might have thought that it looked as though the goddess, or whatever force was behind the goddess, was working vengeance on the man who desecrated her ancient shrine. And, by the way, though I cannot remember whether or no I mentioned it in "The Ivory Child," I recall that the old priest of the Kendah, Harût, once told me he was sure Ragnall would meet with a violent death. This seemed likely enough in that country under our circumstances there, still I asked him why. He

answered,

"Because he has laid hands on that which is holy and not meant for man,"  
and he looked at Lady Ragnall.

I remarked that all women were holy, whereon he replied that he did not  
think so and changed the subject.

Well, Ragnall, who had married the lady who once served as the last  
priestess of Isis upon earth, was killed, whereas she, the priestess,  
was almost miraculously preserved from harm. And--oh! the whole story  
was deuced odd and that is all. Poor Ragnall! He was a great English  
gentleman and one whom when first I knew him, I held to be the most  
fortunate person I ever met, endowed as he was with every advantage of  
mind, body and estate. Yet in the end this did not prove to be the case.  
Well, while he lived he was a good friend and a good fellow and none  
can hope for a better epitaph in a world where all things are soon  
forgotten.

And now, what was I to do? To tell the truth I did not altogether desire  
to reopen this chapter in past history, or to have to listen to painful  
reminiscences from the lips of a bereaved woman. Moreover, beautiful  
as she had been, for doubtless she was *passée* now, and charming as of  
course she remained--I do not think I ever knew anyone who was quite so  
charming--there was something about Lady Ragnall which alarmed me. She  
did not resemble any other woman. Of course no woman is ever quite like

another, but in her case the separateness, if I may so call it, was very marked. It was as though she had walked out of a different age, or even world, and been but superficially clothed with the attributes of our own. I felt that from the first moment I set eyes upon her and while reading her letter the sensation returned with added force.

Also for me she had a peculiar attraction and not one of the ordinary kind. It is curious to find oneself strangely intimate with a person of whom after all one does not know much, just as if one really knew a great deal that was shut off by a thin but quite impassable door. If so, I did not want to open that door for who could tell what might be on the other side of it? And intimate conversations with a lady in whose company one has shared very strange experiences, not infrequently lead to the opening of every kind of door.

Further I had made up my mind some time ago to have no more friendships with women who are so full of surprises, but to live out the rest of my life in a kind of monastery of men who have few surprises, being creatures whose thoughts are nearly always open and whose actions can always be foretold.

Lastly there was that Taduki business. Well, there at any rate I was clear and decided. No earthly power would induce me to have anything more to do with Taduki smoke. Of course I remembered that Lady Ragnall once told me kindly but firmly that I would if she wished. But that was just where she made a mistake. For the rest it seemed unkind to refuse

her invitation now when she was in trouble, especially as I had once promised that if ever I could be of help, she had only to command me. No, I must go. But if that word--Taduki--were so much as mentioned I would leave again in a hurry. Moreover it would not be, for doubtless she had forgotten all about the stuff by now, even if it were not lost.

The end of it was that as I did not wish to write a long letter entering into all that Lady Ragnall had told me, I sent her a telegram, saying that if convenient to her, I would arrive at the Castle on the following Saturday evening and adding that I must be back here on the Tuesday afternoon, as I had guests coming to stay with me on that day. This was perfectly true as the season was mid-November and I was to begin shooting my coverts on the Wednesday morning, a function that once fixed, cannot be postponed.

In due course an answer arrived--"Delighted, but hoped that you would have been able to stay longer."

Behold me then about six o'clock on the said Saturday evening being once more whirled by a splendid pair of horses through the gateway arch of Ragnall Castle. The carriage stopped beneath the portico, the great doors flew open revealing the glow of the hall fire and lights within, the footman sprang down from the box and two other footmen descended the steps to assist me and my belongings out of the carriage. These,

I remember, consisted of a handbag with my dress clothes and a yellow-backed novel.

So one of them took the handbag and the other had to content himself with the novel, which made me wish I had brought a portmanteau as well, if only for the look of the thing. The pair thus burdened, escorted me up the steps and delivered me over to the butler who scanned me with a critical eye. I scanned him also and perceived that he was a very fine specimen of his class. Indeed his stately presence so overcame me that I remarked nervously, as he helped me off with my coat, that when last I was here another had filled his office.

"Indeed, Sir," he said, "and what was his name, Sir?"

"Savage," I replied.

"And where might he be now, Sir?"

"Inside a snake!" I answered. "At least he was inside a snake but now I hope he is waiting upon his master in Heaven."

The man recoiled a little, pulling off my coat with a jerk. Then he coughed, rubbed his bald head, stared and recovering himself with an effort, said,

"Indeed, Sir! I only came to this place after the death of his late

lordship, when her ladyship changed all the household. Alfred, show this gentleman up to her ladyship's boudoir, and William, take his--baggage--to the blue room. Her ladyship wishes to see you at once, Sir, before the others come."

So I went up the big staircase to a part of the Castle that I did not remember, wondering who "the others" might be. Almost could I have sworn that the shade of Savage accompanied me up those stairs; I could feel him at my side.

Presently a door was thrown open and I was ushered into a room somewhat dimly lit and full of the scent of flowers. By the fire near a tea-table, stood a lady clad in some dark dress with the light glinting on her rich-hued hair. She turned and I saw that she still wore the necklace of red stones, and beneath it on her breast a single red flower. For this was Lady Ragnall; about that there was no doubt at all, so little doubt indeed that I was amazed. I had expected to see a stout, elderly woman whom I should only know by the colour of her eyes and her voice, and perhaps certain tricks of manner. But, this was the mischief of it, I could not perceive any change, at any rate in that light. She was just the same! Perhaps a little fuller in figure, which was an advantage; perhaps a little more considered in her movements, perhaps a little taller or at any rate more stately, and that was all.

These things I learned in a flash. Then with a murmured "Mr. Quatermain, my Lady," the footman closed the door and she saw me.

Moving quickly towards me with both her hands outstretched, she exclaimed in that honey-soft voice of hers,

"Oh! my dear friend----" stopped and added, "Why, you haven't changed a bit."

"Fossils wear well," I replied, "but that is just what I was thinking of you."

"Then it is very rude of you to call me a fossil when I am only approaching that stage. Oh! I am glad to see you. I am glad!" and she gave me both the outstretched hands.

Upon my word I felt inclined to kiss her and have wondered ever since if she would have been very angry. I am not certain that she did not divine the inclination. At any rate after a little pause she dropped my hands and laughed. Then she said,

"I must tell you at once. A most terrible catastrophe has happened----"

Instantly it occurred to me that she had forgotten having informed me by letter of all the details of her husband's death. Such things chance to people who have once lost their memory. So I tried to look as sympathetic as I felt, sighed and waited.



"It's not so bad as all that," she said with a little shake of her head, reading my thought as she always had the power to do from the first moment we met. "We can talk about that afterwards. It's only that I hoped we were going to have a quiet two days, and now the Atterby-Smiths are coming, yes, in half an hour. Five of them!"

"The Atterby-Smiths!" I exclaimed, for somehow I too felt disappointed.

"Who are the Atterby-Smiths?"

"Cousins of George's, his nearest relatives. They think he ought to have left them everything. But he didn't, because he could never bear the sight of them. You see his property was unentailed and he left it all to me. Now the entire family is advancing to suggest that I should leave it to them, as perhaps I might have done if they had not chosen to come just now."

"Why didn't you put them off?" I asked.

"Because I couldn't," she answered with a little stamp of her foot, "otherwise do you suppose they would have been here? They were far too clever. They telegraphed after lunch giving the train by which they were to arrive, but no address save Charing Cross. I thought of moving up to the Berkeley Square house, but it was impossible in the time, also I didn't know how to catch you. Oh! it's most vexatious."

"Perhaps they are very nice," I suggested feebly.

"Nice! Wait till you have seen them. Besides if they had been angels I did not want them just now. But how selfish I am! Come and have some tea. And you can stop longer, that is if you live through the Atterby-Smiths who are worse than both the Kendah tribes put together. Indeed I wish old Harût were coming instead. I should like to see Harût again, wouldn't you?" and suddenly the mystical look I knew so well, gathered on her face.

"Yes, perhaps I should," I replied doubtfully. "But I must leave by the first train on Tuesday morning; it goes at eight o'clock. I looked it up."

"Then the Atterby-Smiths leave on Monday if I have to turn them out of the house. So we shall get one evening clear at any rate. Stop a minute," and she rang the bell.

The footman appeared as suddenly as though he had been listening at the door.

"Alfred," she said, "tell Moxley" (he, I discovered, was the butler) "that when Mr. and Mrs. Atterby-Smith, the two Misses Atterby-Smith and the young Mr. Atterby-Smith arrive, they are to be shown to their rooms. Tell the cook also to put off dinner till half-past eight, and if Mr. and Mrs. Scroope arrive earlier, tell Moxley to tell them that I am sorry to be a little late, but that I was delayed by some parish

business. Now do you understand?"

"Yes, my Lady," said Alfred and vanished.

"He doesn't understand in the least," remarked Lady Ragnall, "but so long as he doesn't show the Atterby-Smiths up here, in which case he can go away with them on Monday, I don't care. It will all work out somehow. Now sit down by the fire and let's talk. We've got nearly an hour and twenty minutes and you can smoke if you like. I learnt to in Egypt," and she took a cigarette from the mantelpiece and lit it.

That hour and twenty minutes went like a flash, for we had so much to say to each other that we never even got to the things we wanted to say. For instance, I began to tell her about King Solomon's Mines, which was a long story; and she to tell me what happened after we parted on the shores of the Red Sea. At least the first hour and a quarter went, when suddenly the door opened and Alfred in a somewhat frightened voice announced--"Mr. and Mrs. Atterby-Smith, the Misses Atterby-Smith and Mr. Atterby-Smith junior."

Then he caught sight of his mistress's eye and fled.

I looked and felt inclined to do likewise if only there had been another door. But there wasn't and that which existed was quite full. In the forefront came A.-S. senior, like a bull leading the herd. Indeed his appearance was bull-like as my eye, travelling from the expanse of white

shirt-front (they were all dressed for dinner) to his red and massive countenance surmounted by two horn-like tufts of carrot hair, informed me at a glance. Followed Mrs. A.-S., the British matron incarnate. Literally there seemed to be acres of her; black silk below and white skin above on which set in filigree floated big green stones, like islands in an ocean. Her countenance too, though stupid was very stern and frightened me. Followed the progeny of this formidable pair. They were tall and thin, also red haired. The girls, whose age I could not guess in the least, were exactly like each other, which was not strange as afterwards I discovered that they were twins. They had pale blue eyes and somehow reminded me of fish. Both of them were dressed in green and wore topaz necklaces. The young man who seemed to be about one or two and twenty, had also pale blue eyes, in one of which he wore an eye-glass, but his hair was sandy as though it had been bleached, parted in the middle and oiled down flat.

For a moment there was a silence which I felt to be dreadful. Then in a big, pompous voice A.-S. père said,

"How do you do, my dear Luna? As I ascertained from the footman that you had not yet gone to dress, I insisted upon his leading us here for a little private conversation after we have been parted for so many years. We wished to offer you our condolences in person on your and our still recent loss."

"Thank you," said Lady Ragnall, "but I think we have corresponded on the

subject which is painful to me."

"I fear that we are interrupting a smoking party, Thomas," said Mrs. A.-S. in a cold voice, sniffing at the air for all the world like a suspicious animal, whereon the five of them stared at Lady Ragnall's cigarette which she held between her fingers.

"Yes," said Lady Ragnall. "Won't you have one? Mr. Quatermain, hand Mrs. Smith the box, please."

I obeyed automatically, proffering it to the lady who nearly withered me with a glance, and then to each to each in turn. To my relief the young man took one.

"Archibald," said his mother, "you are surely not going to make your sisters' dresses smell of tobacco just before dinner."

Archibald sniggered and replied,

"A little more smoke will not make any difference in this room, Ma."

"That is true, darling," said Mrs. A.-S. and was straightway seized with a fit of asthma.

After this I am sure I don't know what happened, for muttering something about its being time to dress, I rushed from the room and wandered about

until I could find someone to conduct me to my own where I lingered until I heard the dinner-bell ring. But even this retreat was not without disaster, for in my hurry I trod upon one of the young lady's dresses; I don't know whether it was Dolly's or Polly's (they were named Dolly and Polly) and heard a dreadful crack about her middle as though she were breaking in two. Thereon Archibald giggled again and Dolly and Polly remarked with one voice--they always spoke together,

"Oh! clumsy!"

To complete my misfortunes I missed my way going downstairs and strayed to and fro like a lost lamb until I found myself confronted by a green baize door which reminded me of something. I stood staring at it till suddenly a vision arose before me of myself following a bell wire through that very door in the darkness of the night when in search for the late Mr. Savage upon a certain urgent occasion. Yes, there could be no doubt about it, for look! there was the wire, and strange it seemed to me that I should live to behold it again. Curiosity led me to push the door open just to ascertain if my memory served me aright about the exact locality of the room. Next moment I regretted it for I fell straight into the arms of either Polly or Dolly.

"Oh!" said she, "I've just been sewn up."

I reflected that this was my case also in another sense, but asked feebly if she knew the way downstairs.

She didn't; neither of us did, till at length we met Mrs. Smith coming to look for her.

If I had been a burglar she could not have regarded me with graver suspicions. But at any rate she knew the way downstairs. And there to my joy I found my old friend Scroope and his wife, both of them grown stout and elderly, but as jolly as ever, after which the Smith family ceased to trouble me.

Also there was the rector of the parish, Dr. Jeffreys and an absurdly young wife whom he had recently married, a fluffy-headed little thing with round eyes and a cheerful, perky manner. The two of them together looked exactly like a turkey-cock and a chicken. I remembered him well enough and to my astonishment he remembered me, perhaps because Lady Ragnall, when she had hastily invited him to meet the Smith family, mentioned that I was coming. Lastly there was the curate, a dark, young man who seemed to be always brooding over the secrets of time and eternity, though perhaps he was only thinking about his dinner or the next day's services.

Well, there we stood in that well-remembered drawing-room in which first I had made the acquaintance of Harût and Marût; also of the beautiful Miss Holmes as Lady Ragnall was then called. The Scroopes, the Jeffreys and I gathered in one group and the Atterby-Smiths in another like a force about to attack, while between the two, brooding and

indeterminate, stood the curate, a neutral observer.

Presently Lady Ragnall arrived, apologizing for being late. For some reason best known to herself she had chosen to dress as though for a great party. I believe it was out of mischief and in order to show Mrs. Atterby-Smith some of the diamonds she was firmly determined that family should never inherit. At any rate there she stood glittering and lovely, and smiled upon us.

Then came dinner and once more I marched to the great hall in her company; Dr. Jeffreys got Mrs. Smith; Papa Smith got Mrs. Jeffreys who looked like a Grecian maiden walking into dinner with the Minotaur; Scroope got one of the Miss Smiths, she who wore a pink bow, the gloomy curate got the other with a blue bow, and Archibald got Mrs. Scroope who departed making faces at us over his shoulder.

"You look very grand and nice," I said to Lady Ragnall as we followed the others at a discreet distance.

"I am glad," she answered, "as to the nice, I mean. As for the grand, that dreadful woman is always writing to me about the Ragnall diamonds, so I thought that she should see some of them for the first and last time. Do you know I haven't worn these things since George and I went to Court together, and I daresay shall never wear them again, for there is only one ornament I care for and I have got that on under my dress."



I stared at her and with a laugh said that she was very mischievous.

"I suppose so," she replied, "but I detest those people who are pompous and rude and have spoiled my party. Do you know I had half a mind to come down in the dress that I wore as Isis in Kendah Land. I have got it upstairs and you shall see me in it before you go, for old time's sake. Only it occurred to me that they might think me mad, so I didn't. Dr. Jeffreys, will you say grace, please?"

Well, it was a most agreeable dinner so far as I was concerned, for I sat between my hostess and Mrs. Scroope and the rest were too far off for conversation. Moreover as Archibald developed an unexpected quantity of small talk, and Scroope on the other side amused himself by filling pink-bow Miss Smith's innocent mind with preposterous stories about Africa, as had happened to me once before at this table, Lady Ragnall and I were practically left undisturbed.

"Isn't it strange that we should find ourselves sitting here again after all these years, except that you are in my poor mother's place? Oh! when that scientific gentleman convinced me the other day that you whom I had heard were dead, were not only alive and well but actually in England, really I could have embraced him."

I thought of an answer but did not make it, though as usual she read my mind for I saw her smile.

"The truth is," she went on, "I am an only child and really have no friends, though of course being--well, you know," and she glanced at the jewels on her breast, "I have plenty of acquaintances."

"And suitors," I suggested.

"Yes," she replied blushing, "as many as Penelope, not one of whom cares twopence about me any more than I care for them. The truth is, Mr. Quatermain, that nobody and nothing interest me, except a spot in the churchyard yonder and another amid ruins in Egypt."

"You have had sad bereavements," I said looking the other way.

"Very sad and they have left life empty. Still I should not complain for I have had my share of good. Also it isn't true to say that nothing interests me. Egypt interests me, though after what has happened I do not feel as though I could return there. All Africa interests me and," she added dropping her voice, "I can say it because I know you will not misunderstand, you interest me, as you have always done since the first moment I saw you."

"I!" I exclaimed, staring at my own reflection in a silver plate which made me look--well, more unattractive than usual. "It's very kind of you to say so, but I can't understand why I should. You have seen very little of me, Lady Ragnall, except in that long journey across the desert when we did not talk much, since you were otherwise engaged."

"I know. That's the odd part of it, for I feel as though I had seen you for years and years and knew everything about you that one human being can know of another. Of course, too, I do know a good lot of your life through George and Harût."

"Harût was a great liar," I said uneasily.

"Was he? I always thought him painfully truthful, though how he got at the truth I do not know. Anyhow," she added with meaning, "don't suppose I think the worse of you because others have thought so well. Women who seem to be all different, generally, I notice, have this in common. If one or two of them like a man, the rest like him also because something in him appeals to the universal feminine instinct, and the same applies to their dislike. Now men, I think, are different in that respect."

"Perhaps because they are more catholic and charitable," I suggested, "or perhaps because they like those who like them."

She laughed in her charming way, and said,

"However these remarks do not apply to you and me, for as I think I told you once before in that cedar wood in Kendah Land where you feared lest I should catch a chill, or become--odd again, it is another you with whom something in me seems to be so intimate."

"That's fortunate for your sake," I muttered, still staring at and pointing to the silver plate.

Again she laughed. "Do you remember the Taduki herb?" she asked. "I have plenty of it safe upstairs, and not long ago I took a whiff of it, only a whiff because you know it had to be saved."

"And what did you see?"

"Never mind. The question is what shall we both see?"

"Nothing," I said firmly. "No earthly power will make me breathe that unholy drug again."

"Except me," she murmured with sweet decision. "No, don't think about leaving the house. You can't, there are no Sunday trains. Besides you won't if I ask you not."

"In vain is the net spread in the sight of any bird," I replied, firm as a mountain.

"Is it? Then why are so many caught?"

At that moment the Bull of Bashan--I mean Smith, began to bellow something at his hostess from the other end of the table and our conversation came to an end.

"I say, old chap," whispered Scroope in my ear when we stood up to see the ladies out. "I suppose you are thinking of marrying again. Well, you might do worse," and he glanced at the glittering form of Lady Ragnall vanishing through the doorway behind her guests.

"Shut up, you idiot!" I replied indignantly.

"Why?" he asked with innocence. "Marriage is an honourable estate, especially when there is lots of the latter. I remember saying something of the sort to you years ago and at this table, when as it happened you also took in her ladyship. Only there was George in the wind then; now it has carried him away."

Without deigning any reply I seized my glass and went to sit down between the canon and the Bull of Bashan.