

The People Of The Mist

By

H. Rider Haggard

DEDICATION

I DEDICATE THIS EFFORT OF

"PRIMEVAL AND TROGLODYTE IMAGINATION"

THIS RECORD OF BAREFACED AND FLAGRANT ADVENTURE

TO MY GODSONS

IN THE HOPE THAT THEREIN THEY MAY FIND

SOME STORE OF HEALTHY AMUSEMENT.

Ditchingham, 1894.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

On several previous occasions it has happened to this writer of romance to be justified of his romances by facts of startling similarity, subsequently brought to light and to his knowledge. In this tale occurs an instance of the sort, a "double-barrelled" instance indeed, that to him seems sufficiently curious to be worthy of telling. The People of the Mist of his adventure story worship a sacred crocodile to which they make sacrifice, but in the original draft of the book this crocodile was a snake--monstrum horrendum, informe, ingens. A friend of the writer, an African explorer of great experience who read that draft, suggested that the snake was altogether too unprecedented and impossible. Accordingly, also at his suggestion, a crocodile was substituted. Scarcely was this change effected, however, when Mr. R. T. Coryndon, the slayer of almost the last white rhinoceros, published in the African Review of February 17, 1894, an account of a huge and terrific serpent said to exist in the Dichwi district of Mashonaland, that in many particulars resembled the snake of the story, whose prototype, by the way, really lives and is adored as a divinity by certain natives in the remote province of Chiapas in Mexico. Still, the tale being in type, the alteration was suffered to stand. But now, if the Zoutpansberg Review may be believed, the author can take credit for his crocodile also, since that paper states that in the course of the recent campaign against Malaboch, a chief living in the north of the Transvaal, his fetish or god was captured, and that god, a crocodile fashioned in wood, to which offerings were made. Further, this journal says that among

these people (as with the ancient Egyptians), the worship of the crocodile is a recognised cult. Also it congratulates the present writer on his intimate acquaintance with the more secret manifestations of African folklore and beast worship. He must disclaim the compliment in this instance as, when engaged in inventing the 'People of the Mist,' he was totally ignorant that any of the Bantu tribes revered either snake or crocodile divinities. But the coincidence is strange, and once more shows, if further examples of the fact are needed, how impotent are the efforts of imagination to vie with hidden truths--even with the hidden truths of this small and trodden world.

September 20, 1894.

THE PEOPLE OF THE MIST

CHAPTER I

THE SINS OF THE FATHER ARE VISITED ON THE CHILDREN

The January afternoon was passing into night, the air was cold and still, so still that not a single twig of the naked beech-trees stirred; on the grass of the meadows lay a thin white rime, half frost, half snow; the firs stood out blackly against a steel-hued sky, and over the tallest of them hung a single star. Past these bordering firs there ran a road, on which, in this evening of the opening of our story, a young man stood irresolute, glancing now to the right and now to the left.

To his right were two stately gates of iron fantastically wrought, supported by stone pillars on whose summits stood griffins of black marble embracing coats of arms, and banners inscribed with the device *Per ardua ad astra*. Beyond these gates ran a broad carriage drive, lined on either side by a double row of such oaks as England alone can produce under the most favourable circumstances of soil, aided by the nurturing hand of man and three or four centuries of time.

At the head of this avenue, perhaps half a mile from the roadway, although it looked nearer because of the eminence upon which it was

placed, stood a mansion of the class that in auctioneers' advertisements is usually described as "noble." Its general appearance was Elizabethan, for in those days some forgotten Outram had practically rebuilt it; but a large part of its fabric was far more ancient than the Tudors, dating back, so said tradition, to the time of King John. As we are not auctioneers, however, it will be unnecessary to specify its many beauties; indeed, at this date, some of the tribe had recently employed their gift of language on these attractions with copious fulness and accuracy of detail, since Outram Hall, for the first time during six centuries, was, or had been, for sale.

Suffice it to say that, like the oaks of its avenue, Outram was such a house as can only be found in England; no mere mass of bricks and mortar, but a thing that seemed to have acquired a life and individuality of its own. Or, if this saying be too far-fetched and poetical, at the least this venerable home bore some stamp and trace of the lives and individualities of many generations of mankind, linked together in thought and feeling by the common bond of blood.

The young man who stood in the roadway looked long and earnestly towards the mass of buildings that frowned upon him from the crest of the hill, and as he looked an expression came into his face which fell little, if at all, short of that of agony, the agony which the young can feel at the shock of an utter and irredeemable loss. The face that wore such evidence of trouble was a handsome one enough, though just now all the charm of youth seemed to have faded from it. It was dark and strong, nor

was it difficult to guess that in after-life it might become stern. The form also was shapely and athletic, though not very tall, giving promise of more than common strength, and the bearing that of a gentleman who had not brought himself up to the belief that ancient blood can cover modern deficiencies of mind and manner. Such was the outward appearance of Leonard Outram as he was then, in his twenty-third year.

While Leonard watched and hesitated on the roadway, unable, apparently, to make up his mind to pass those iron gates, and yet desirous of doing so, carts and carriages began to appear hurrying down the avenue towards him.

"I suppose that the sale is over," he muttered to himself. "Well, like death, it is a good thing to have done with."

Then he turned to go; but hearing the crunch of wheels close at hand, stepped back into the shadow of the gateway pillar, fearing lest he should be recognised on the open road. A carriage came up, and, just as it reached the gates, something being amiss with the harness, a footman descended from the box to set it right. From where he stood Leonard could see its occupants, the wife and daughter of a neighbouring squire, and overhear their conversation. He knew them well; indeed, the younger lady had been one of his favourite partners at the county balls.

"How cheap the things went, Ida! Fancy buying that old oak sideboard for ten pounds, and with all those Outram quarterings on it too! It is as good as an historical document, and I am sure that it must be worth at least fifty. I shall sell ours and put it into the dining-room. I have coveted that sideboard for years."

The daughter sighed and answered with some asperity.

"I am so sorry for the Outrams that I should not care about the sideboard if you had got it for twopence. What an awful smash! Just think of the old place being bought by a Jew! Tom and Leonard are utterly ruined, they say, not a sixpence left. I declare I nearly cried when I saw that man selling Leonard's guns."

"Very sad indeed," answered the mother absently; "but if he is a Jew, what does it matter? He has a title, and they say that he is enormously rich. I expect there will be plenty going on at Outram soon. By the way, my dear Ida, I do wish you would cure yourself of the habit of calling young men by their Christian names--not that it matters about these two, for we shall never see any more of them."

"I am sure I hope that we shall," said Ida defiantly, "and when we do I shall call them by their Christian names as much as ever. You never objected to it before the smash, and I love both of them, so there! Why did you bring me to that horrid sale? You know I did not want to go. I shall be wretched for a week, I----" and the carriage swept on out of

hearing.

Leonard emerged from the shadow of the gateway and crossed the road swiftly. On the further side of it he paused, and looking after the retreating carriage said aloud, "God bless you for your kind heart, Ida Hatherley. Good luck go with you! And now for the other business."

A hundred yards or so down the road, was a second gate of much less imposing appearance than those which led to the Outram Hall. Leonard passed through it and presently found himself at the door of a square red brick house, built with no other pretensions than to those of comfort. This was the Rectory, now tenanted by the Reverend and Honourable James Beach, to whom the living had been presented many years before by Leonard's father, Mr. Beach's old college friend.

Leonard rang the bell, and as its distant clamour fell upon his ears a new fear struck him. What sort of reception would he meet with in this house? he wondered. Hitherto his welcome had always been so cordial that until this moment he had never doubted of it, but now circumstances were changed. He was no longer in the position of second son to Sir Thomas Outram of Outram Hall. He was a beggar, an outcast, a wanderer, the son of a fraudulent bankrupt and suicide. The careless words of the woman in the carriage had let a flood of light into his mind, and by it he saw many things which he had never seen before. Now he remembered a little motto that he had often heard, but the full force of which he did not appreciate until to-day. "Friends follow fortune," was the wording of

this motto. He remembered also another saying that had frequently been read to him in church and elsewhere, and the origin of which precluded all doubt as to its truth:--

"Unto every one that hath shall be given, but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath."

Now, as it chanced, Leonard, beggared as he was, had still something left which could be taken away from him, and that something the richest fortune which Providence can give to any man in his youth, the love of a woman whom he also loved. The Reverend and Honourable James Beach was blessed with a daughter, Jane by name, who had the reputation, not undeserved, of being the most beautiful and sweetest-natured girl that the country-side could show. Now, being dark and fair respectively and having lived in close association since childhood, Leonard and Jane, as might be expected from the working of the laws of natural economy, had gravitated towards each other with increasing speed ever since they had come to understand the possibilities of the institution of marriage. In the end thus mutual gravitation led to a shock and confusion of individualities which was not without its charm; or, to put the matter more plainly, Leonard proposed to Jane and had been accepted with many blushes and some tears and kisses.

It was a common little romance enough, but, like everything else with which youth and love are concerned, it had its elements of beauty. Such affairs gain much from being the first in the series. Who is there among

us that does not adore his first love and his first poem? And yet when we see them twenty years after!

Presently the Rectory door was opened and Leonard entered. At this moment it occurred to him that he did not quite know why he had come. To be altogether accurate, he knew why he had come well enough. It was to see Jane, and arrive at an understanding with her father. Perhaps it may be well to explain that his engagement to that young lady was of the suppressed order. Her parents had no wish to suppress it, indeed; for though Leonard was a younger son, it was well known that he was destined to inherit his mother's fortune of fifty thousand pounds more or less. Besides, Providence had decreed a delicate constitution to his elder and only brother Thomas. But Sir Thomas Outram, their father, was reputed to be an ambitious man who looked to see his sons marry well, and this marriage would scarcely have been to Leonard's advantage from the family lawyer point of view.

Therefore, when the matter came to the ears of Jane's parents, they determined to forego the outward expression of their pride and delight in the captive whom they owed to the bow and spear of their daughter's loveliness, at any rate for a while, say until Leonard had taken his degree. Often and often in the after-years did they have occasion to bless themselves for their caution. But not the less on this account was Leonard's position as the affianced lover of their daughter recognised among them; indeed, the matter was no secret from anybody, except perhaps from Sir Thomas himself. For his part, Leonard took no pains

to conceal it even from him; but the father and son met rarely, and the estrangement between them was so complete, that the younger man saw no advantage in speaking of a matter thus near to his heart until there appeared to be a practical object in so doing.

The Rev. James Beach was a stout person of bland and prepossessing appearance. Never had he looked stouter, more prepossessing, or blander than on this particular evening when Leonard was ushered into his presence. He was standing before the fire in his drawing-room holding a huge and ancient silver loving-cup in both hands, and in such a position as to give the observer the idea that he had just drained its entire contents. In reality, it may be explained, he was employed in searching for a hall-mark on the bottom of the goblet, discoursing the while to his wife and children--for Jane had a brother--upon its value and beauty. The gleam of the silver caught Leonard's eye as he entered the room, and he recognised the cup as one of the heirlooms of his own family.

Leonard's sudden and unlooked-for advent brought various emotions into active play. There were four people gathered round that comfortable fire--the rector, his wife, his son, and last, but not least, Jane herself. Mr. Beach dropped the cup sufficiently to allow himself to stare at his visitor along its length, for all the world as though he were covering him with a silver blunderbuss. His wife, an active little woman, turned round as if she moved upon wires, exclaiming, "Good gracious, who'd have thought it?" while the son, a robust young man

of about Leonard's own age and his college companion, said "Hullo! old fellow, well, I never expected to see you here to-day!"--a remark which, however natural it may have been, scarcely tended to set his friend at ease.

Jane herself, a tall and beautiful girl with bright auburn hair, who was seated on a footstool nursing her knees before the fire, and paying very little heed to her father's lecture upon ancient plate, did none of these things. On the contrary, she sprang up with the utmost animation, her lips apart and her lovely face red with blushes, or the heat of the fire, and came towards him exclaiming, "Oh, Leonard, dear Leonard!"

Mr. Beach turned the silver blunderbuss upon his daughter and fired a single, but most effective shot.

"Jane!" he said in a voice in which fatherly admonition and friendly warning were happily blended.

Jane stopped in full career was though in obedience to some lesson which momentarily she had forgotten. Then Mr. Beach, setting down the flagon, advanced upon Leonard with an ample pitying smile and outstretched hand.

"How are you, my dear boy, how are you?" he said. "We did not expect--"

"To see me here under the circumstances," put in Leonard bitterly. "Nor would you have done so, but Tom and I understood that it was only to be

a three days' sale."

"Quite right, Leonard. As first advertised the sale was for three days, but the auctioneer found that he could not get through in the time. The accumulations of such an ancient house as Outram Hall are necessarily vast," and he waved his hand with a large gesture.

"Yes," said Leonard.

"Hum!" went on Mr. Beach, after a pause which was beginning to grow awkward. "Doubtless you will find it a matter for congratulation that on the whole things sold well. It is not always the case, not by any means, for such collections as those of Outram, however interesting and valuable they may have been to the family itself, do not often fetch their worth at a country auction. Yes, they sold decidedly well, thanks chiefly to the large purchases of the new owner of the estate. This tankard, for instance, which I have bought--hem--as a slight memento of your family, cost me ten shillings an ounce."

"Indeed!" answered Leonard coldly; "I always understood that it was worth fifty."

Then came another pause, during which all who were present, except Mr. Beach and himself, rose one by one and quitted the room. Jane was the last to go, and Leonard noticed, as she passed him, that there were tears in her eyes.

"Jane," said her father in a meaning voice when her hand was already on the door, "you will be careful to be dressed in time for dinner, will you not, love? You remember that young Mr. Cohen is coming, and I should like somebody to be down to receive him."

Jane's only answer to this remark was to pass through the door and slam it behind her. Clearly the prospect of the advent of this guest was not agreeable to her.

"Well, Leonard," went on Mr. Beach when they were alone, in a tone that was meant to be sympathetic but which jarred horribly on his listener's ears, "this is a sad business, very sad. But why are you not sitting down?"

"Because no one asked me to," said Leonard as he took a chair.

"Hem!" continued Mr. Beach; "by the way I believe that Mr. Cohen is a friend of yours, is he not?"

"An acquaintance, not a friend," said Leonard.

"Indeed, I thought that you were at the same college."

"Yes, but I do not like him."

"Prejudice, my dear boy, prejudice. A minor sin indeed, but one against which you must struggle. But there, there, it is natural that you should not feel warmly about the man who will one day own Outram. Ah! as I said, this is all very sad, but it must be a great consolation to you to remember that when everything is settled there will be enough, so I am told, to pay your unhappy father's debts. And now, is there anything that I can do for you or your brother?"

Leonard reflected that whatever may have been his father's misdeeds, and they were many and black, it should scarcely have lain in the mouth of the Rev. James Beach, who owed nearly everything he had in the world to his kindness, to allude to them. But he could not defend his father's memory, it was beyond defence, and just now he must fight for his own hand.

"Yes, Mr. Beach," he said earnestly, "you can help me very much. You know the cruel position in which my brother and I are placed through no fault of our own: our old home is sold, our fortunes have gone utterly, and our honourable name is tarnished. At the present moment I have nothing left in the world except the sum of two hundred pounds which I had saved for a purpose of my own out of my allowance. I have no profession and cannot even take my degree, because I am unable to afford the expense of remaining at college."

"Black, I must say, very black," murmured Mr. Beach, rubbing his chin.

"But under these circumstances what can I do to help you? You must trust

in Providence, my boy; it never fails the deserving."

"This," answered Leonard, nervously; "you can show your confidence in me by allowing my engagement to Jane to be proclaimed." Here Mr. Beach waved his hand once more as though to repel some invisible force.

"One moment," continued Leonard. "I know that it seems a great deal to ask, but listen. Although everything looks so dark, I have reliance on myself. With the stimulus which my affection for your daughter will give me, and knowing that in order to win her I must first put myself in a position to support her as she should be supported, I am quite convinced that I shall be able to surmount all difficulties by my own efforts."

"Really, I cannot listen to such nonsense any longer," broke in Mr. Beach angrily. "Leonard, this is nothing less than an impertinence. Of course any understanding that may have existed between you and Jane is quite at an end. Engagement! I heard of no engagement. I knew that there was some boy and girl folly between you indeed, but for my part I never gave the matter another thought."

"You seem to forget, sir," said Leonard, keeping his temper with difficulty, "that not six months ago you and I had a long conversation on this very subject, and decided that nothing should be said to my father of the matter until I had taken my degree."

"I repeat that it is an impertinence," answered Mr. Beach, but with a

careful avoidance of the direct issue. "What! You, who have nothing in the world except a name which you father has--well--tarnished--to use your own word, you ask me for my dear daughter's hand? You are so selfish that you wish not only to ruin her chances in life, but also to drag her into the depths of your poverty. Leonard, I should never have thought it of you!"

Then at last Leonard broke out.

"You do not speak the truth. I did not ask you for your daughter's hand. I asked you for the promise of it when I should have shown myself worthy of her. But now there is an end of that. I will go as you bid me but before I go I will tell you the truth. You wish to use Jane's beauty to catch this Jew with. Of her happiness you think nothing, provided only you can secure his money. She is not a strong character, and it is quite possible that you will succeed in your plot, but I tell you it will not prosper. You, who owe everything to our family, now when trouble has overtaken us, turn upon me and rob me of the only good that was left to me. By putting an end to a connection of which everybody knew, you stamp me still deeper into the mire. So be it, but of this I am sure, that such conduct will meet with a due reward, and that a time will come when you will bitterly regret the way in which you have dealt with your daughter and treated me in my misfortunes. Good-bye."

And Leonard turned and left the room and the Rectory.