

H. Rider Haggard

Ayesha: The Return of She

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Ayesha

Генри Райдер Хаггард

Ayesha: The Return of She

«РИПОЛ Классик»

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Ayesha, the Return of She is a gothic-fantasy novel by the popular Victorian author Henry Rider Haggard, published in 1905, as a sequel to his far more popular and well known novel, She. Horace Holly and his ward Leo Vincey once again embark on a quest to find the mysterious woman known as Ayesha. Knowing that She is no longer in Africa, they go east, eventually reaching a lamasery in the mountains of Tibet.

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H. Rider Haggard

Ayesha. The Return of She

Dedication

My Dear Lang,

The appointed years – alas! how many of them – are gone by, leaving Ayesha lovely and loving and ourselves alive. As it was promised in the Caves of Kôr She has returned again.

To you therefore who accepted the first, I offer this further history of one of the various incarnations of that Immortal.

My hope is that after you have read her record, notwithstanding her subtleties and sins and the shortcomings of her chronicler (no easy office!) you may continue to wear your chain of “loyalty to our lady Ayesha.” Such, I confess, is still the fate of your old friend

H. Rider Haggard.

Ditchingham, 1905.

Author's Note

Not with a view of conciliating those readers who on principle object to sequels, but as a matter of fact, the Author wishes to say that he does not so regard this book.

Rather does he venture to ask that it should be considered as the conclusion of an imaginative tragedy (if he may so call it) whereof one half has been already published.

This conclusion it was always his desire to write should he be destined to live through those many years which, in obedience to his original design, must be allowed to lapse between the events of the first and second parts of the romance.

In response to many enquiries he may add that the name Ayesha, which since the days of the prophet Mahomet, who had a wife so called, and perhaps before them, has been common in the East, should be pronounced *Assha*.

Introduction

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

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

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

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

To think – only to think – that I, the Editor aforesaid, from its appearance suspecting something quite familiar and without interest, pushed aside that dingy, unregistered, brown-paper parcel directed in an unknown hand, and for two whole days let it lie forgotten. Indeed there it might be lying now, had not another person been moved to curiosity, and opening it, found within a bundle of manuscript badly burned upon the back, and with this two letters addressed to myself.

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

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

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

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

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

I am very ill; I have struggled back to this old house of mine to die, and my end is at hand. I have asked the doctor here, after all is over, to send you the Record, that is unless I change my mind and burn it first. You will also receive, if you receive anything at all, a case containing several rough sketches which may be of use to you, and a sistrum, the instrument that has been always used in the worship of the Nature goddesses of the old Egyptians, Isis and Hathor, which you will see is as beautiful as it is ancient. I give it to you for two reasons; as a token of my gratitude and regard, and as the only piece of evidence that is left to me of the literal truth of what I have written in the accompanying manuscript, where you will find it often mentioned. Perhaps also you will value it as a souvenir of, I suppose, the strangest and loveliest being who ever was, or rather, is. It was her sceptre, the rod of her power, with which I saw her salute the Shadows in the Sanctuary, and her gift to me.

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

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

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

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

"L. Horace Holly.

I laid the letter down, and, filled with sensations that it is useless to attempt to analyse or describe, opened the second envelope, of which I also print the contents, omitting only certain irrelevant portions, and the name of the writer as, it will be noted, he requests me to do.

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

—”

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

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

I found the patient sitting up in bed (to ease his heart), and a strange-looking old man he was. He had dark eyes, small but full of fire and intelligence, a magnificent and snowy-white beard that covered a chest of extraordinary breadth, and hair also white, which encroached upon his forehead and face so much that it met the whiskers upon his cheeks. His arms were remarkable for their length and strength, though one of them seemed to have been much torn by some animal. He told me that a dog had done this, but if so it must have been a dog of unusual power. He was a very ugly man, and yet, forgive the bull, beautiful. I cannot describe what I mean better than by

saying that his face was not like the face of any ordinary mortal whom I have met in my limited experience. Were I an artist who wished to portray a wise and benevolent, but rather grotesque spirit, I should take that countenance as a model.

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

One day he pointed to a rough box made of some foreign wood (the same that I have now duly despatched to you by train), and, giving me your name and address, said that without fail it was to be forwarded to you after his death. Also he asked me to do up a manuscript, which, like the box, was to be sent to you.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He said that it was a representation of the Egyptian goddess, Isis, and that this place had once been sacred to some form of her worship, or at any rate to that of a Nature goddess with like attributes, a suggestion which the other learned gentlemen treated as absurd. They declared that Isis had never travelled into Britain, though for

my part I do not see why the Phoenicians, or even the Romans, who adopted her cult, more or less, should not have brought it here. But I know nothing of such matters and will not discuss them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The box of which he speaks arrived safely. Of the drawings in it I need say nothing, and of the *sistrum* or sceptre only a few words. It was fashioned of crystal to the well-known shape of the *Crux-ansata*, or the emblem of life of the Egyptians; the rod, the cross and the loop combined in one. From side to side of this loop ran golden wires, and on these were strung gems of three colours,

glittering diamonds, sea-blue sapphires, and blood-red rubies, while to the fourth wire, that at the top, hung four little golden bells.

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

On the mystery itself, as it is recorded in the manuscript, I make no comment. Of it and its inner significations every reader must form his or her own judgment. One thing alone is clear to me – on the hypothesis that Mr. Holly tells the truth as to what he and Leo Vincey saw and experienced, which I at least believe – that though sundry interpretations of this mystery were advanced by Ayesha and others, none of them are quite satisfactory.

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

The Editor.

Chapter 1

The Double Sign

Hard on twenty years have gone by since that night of Leo's vision – the most awful years, perhaps, which were ever endured by men – twenty years of search and hardship ending in soul-shaking wonder and amazement.

My death is very near to me, and of this I am glad, for I desire to pursue the quest in other realms, as it has been promised to me that I shall do. I desire to learn the beginning and the end of the spiritual drama of which it has been my strange lot to read some pages upon earth.

I, Ludwig Horace Holly, have been very ill; they carried me, more dead than alive, down those mountains whose lowest slopes I can see from my window, for I write this on the northern frontiers of India. Indeed any other man had long since perished, but Destiny kept my breath in me, perhaps that a record might remain. I, must bide here a month or two till I am strong enough to travel homewards, for I have a fancy to die in the place where I was born. So while I have strength I will put the story down, or at least those parts of it that are most essential, for much can, or at any rate must, be omitted. I shrink from attempting too long a book, though my notes and memory would furnish me with sufficient material for volumes.

I will begin with the Vision.

After Leo Vincey and I came back from Africa in 1885, desiring solitude, which indeed we needed sorely to recover from the fearful shock we had experienced, and to give us time and opportunity to think, we went to an old house upon the shores of Cumberland that has belonged to my family for many generations. This house, unless somebody has taken it believing me to be dead, is still my property and thither I travel to die.

Those whose eyes read the words I write, if any should ever read them, may ask – What shock?

Well, I am Horace Holly, and my companion, my beloved friend, my son in the spirit whom I reared from infancy was – nay, is – Leo Vincey.

We are those men who, following an ancient clue, travelled to the Caves of Kôr in Central Africa, and there discovered her whom we sought, the immortal *She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed*. In Leo she found her love, that reborn Kallikrates, the Grecian priest of Isis whom some two thousand years before she had slain in her jealous rage, thus executing on him the judgment of the angry goddess. In her also I found the divinity whom I was doomed to worship from afar, not with the flesh, for that is all lost and gone from me, but, what is sorer still, because its burden is undying, with the will and soul which animate a man throughout the countless eons of his being. The flesh dies, or at least it changes, and its passions pass, but that other passion of the spirit – that longing for oneness – is undying as itself.

What crime have I committed that this sore punishment should be laid upon me? Yet, in truth, is it a punishment? May it not prove to be but that black and terrible Gate which leads to the joyous palace of Rewards? She swore that I should ever be her friend and his and dwell with them eternally, and I believe her.

For how many winters did we wander among the icy hills and deserts! Still, at length, the Messenger came and led us to the Mountain, and on the Mountain we found the Shrine, and in the Shrine the Spirit. May not these things be an allegory prepared for our instruction? I will take comfort. I will hope that it is so. Nay, I am sure that it is so.

It will be remembered that in Kôr we found the immortal woman. There before the flashing rays and vapours of the Pillar of Life she declared her mystic love, and then in our very sight was swept to a doom so horrible that even now, after all which has been and gone, I shiver at its recollection.

Yet what were Ayesha's last words? *"Forget me not... have pity on my shame. I die not. I shall come again and shall once more be beautiful. I swear it – it is true."*

Well, I cannot set out that history afresh. Moreover it is written; the man whom I trusted in the matter did not fail me, and the book he made of it seems to be known throughout the world, for I have found it here in English, yes, and read it first translated into Hindostani. To it then I refer the curious.

In that house upon the desolate sea-shore of Cumberland, we dwelt a year, mourning the lost, seeking an avenue by which it might be found again and discovering none. Here our strength came back to us, and Leo's hair, that had been whitened in the horror of the Caves, grew again from grey to golden. His beauty returned to him also, so that his face was as it had been, only purified and saddened.

Well I remember that night – and the hour of illumination. We were heart-broken, we were in despair. We sought signs and could find none. The dead remained dead to us and no answer came to all our crying.

It was a sullen August evening, and after we had dined we walked upon the shore, listening to the slow surge of the waves and watching the lightning flicker from the bosom of a distant cloud. In silence we walked, till at last Leo groaned – it was more of a sob than a groan – and clasped my arm.

"I can bear it no longer, Horace," he said – for so he called me now – "I am in torment. The desire to see Ayesha once more saps my brain. Without hope I shall go quite mad. And I am strong, I may live another fifty years."

"What then can you do?" I asked.

"I can take a short road to knowledge – or to peace," he answered solemnly, "I can die, and die I will – yes, tonight."

I turned upon him angrily, for his words filled me with fear.

"Leo, you are a coward!" I said. "Cannot you bear your part of pain as – others do?"

"You mean as you do, Horace," he answered with a dreary laugh, "for on you also the curse lies – with less cause. Well, you are stronger than I am, and more tough; perhaps because you have lived longer. No, I cannot bear it. I will die."

"It is a crime," I said, "the greatest insult you can offer to the Power that made you, to cast back its gift of life as a thing outworn, contemptible and despised. A crime, I say, which will bring with it worse punishment than any you can dream; perhaps even the punishment of everlasting separation."

"Does a man stretched in some torture-den commit a crime if he snatches a knife and kills himself, Horace? Perhaps; but surely that sin should find forgiveness – if torn flesh and quivering nerves may plead for mercy. I am such a man, and I will use that knife and take my chance. She is dead, and in death at least I shall be nearer her."

"Why so, Leo? For aught you know Ayesha may be living."

"No; for then she would have given me some sign. My mind is made up, so talk no more, or, if talk we must, let it be of other things."

Then I pleaded with him, though with little hope, for I saw that what I had feared for long was come to pass. Leo was mad: shock and sorrow had destroyed his reason. Were it not so, he, in his own way a very religious man, one who held, as I knew, strict opinions on such matters, would never have purposed to commit the wickedness of suicide.

"Leo," I said, "are you so heartless that you would leave me here alone? Do you pay me thus for all my love and care, and wish to drive me to my death? Do so if you will, and my blood be on your head."

"Your blood! Why your blood, Horace?"

"Because that road is broad and two can travel it. We have lived long years together and together endured much; I am sure that we shall not be long parted."

Then the tables were turned and he grew afraid for me. But I only answered, "If you die I tell you that I shall die also. It will certainly kill me."

So Leo gave way. "Well," he exclaimed suddenly, "I promise you it shall not be to-night. Let us give life another chance."

"Good," I answered; but I went to my bed full of fear. For I was certain that this desire of death, having once taken hold of him, would grow and grow, until at length it became too strong, and then – then I should wither and die who could not live on alone. In my despair I threw out my soul towards that of her who was departed.

"Ayesha!" I cried, "if you have any power, if in any way it is permitted, show that you still live, and save your lover from this sin and me from a broken heart. Have pity on his sorrow and breathe hope into his spirit, for without hope Leo cannot live, and without him I shall not live."

Then, worn out, I slept.

I was aroused by the voice of Leo speaking to me in low, excited tones through the darkness.

"Horace," he said, "Horace, my friend, my father, listen!"

In an instant I was wide awake, every nerve and fibre of me, for the tones of his voice told me that something had happened which bore upon our destinies.

"Let me light a candle first," I said.

"Never mind the candle, Horace; I would rather speak in the dark. I went to sleep, and I dreamed the most vivid dream that ever came to me. I seemed to stand under the vault of heaven, it was black, black, not a star shone in it, and a great loneliness possessed me. Then suddenly high up in the vault, miles and miles away, I saw a little light and thought that a planet had appeared to keep me company. The light began to descend slowly, like a floating flake of fire. Down it sank, and down and down, till it was but just above me, and I perceived that it was shaped like a tongue or fan of flame. At the height of my head from the ground it stopped and stood steady, and by its ghostly radiance I saw that beneath was the shape of a woman and that the flame burned upon her forehead. The radiance gathered strength and now I saw the woman.

"Horace, it was Ayesha herself, her eyes, her lovely face, her cloudy hair, and she looked at me sadly, reproachfully, I thought, as one might who says, 'Why did you doubt?'

"I tried to speak to her but my lips were dumb. I tried to advance and to embrace her, my arms would not move. There was a barrier between us. She lifted her hand and beckoned as though bidding me to follow her.

"Then she glided away, and, Horace, my spirit seemed to loose itself from the body and to be given the power to follow. We passed swiftly eastward, over lands and seas, and – I knew the road. At one point she paused and I looked downwards. Beneath, shining in the moonlight, appeared the ruined palaces of Kôr, and there not far away was the gulf we trod together.

"Onward above the marshes, and now we stood upon the Ethiopian's Head, and gathered round, watching us earnestly, were the faces of the Arabs, our companions who drowned in the sea beneath. Job was among them also, and he smiled at me sadly and shook his head, as though he wished to accompany us and could not.

"Across the sea again, across the sandy deserts, across more sea, and the shores of India lay beneath us. Then northward, ever northward, above the plains, till we reached a place of mountains capped with eternal snow. We passed them and stayed for an instant above a building set upon the brow of a plateau. It was a monastery, for old monks droned prayers upon its terrace. I shall know it again, for it is built in the shape of a half-moon and in front of it sits the gigantic, ruined statue of a god who gazes everlastingly across the desert. I knew, how I cannot say, that now we were far past the furthest borders of Tibet and that in front of us lay untrodden lands. More mountains stretched beyond that desert, a sea of snowy peaks, hundreds and hundreds of them.

"Near to the monastery, jutting out into the plain like some rocky headland, rose a solitary hill, higher than all behind. We stood upon its snowy crest and waited, till presently, above the mountains and the desert at our feet shot a sudden beam of light that beat upon us like some signal flashed across the sea. On we went, floating down the beam – on over the desert and the mountains, across a great

flat land beyond, in which were many villages and a city on a mound, till we lit upon a towering peak. Then I saw that this peak was loop-shaped like the symbol of Life of the Egyptians – the *crux-ansata* – and supported by a lava stem hundreds of feet in height. Also I saw that the fire which shone through it rose from the crater of a volcano beyond. Upon the very crest of this loop we rested a while, till the Shadow of Ayesha pointed downward with its hand, smiled and vanished. Then I awoke.

“Horace, I tell you that the sign has come to us.”

His voice died away in the darkness, but I sat still, brooding over what I had heard. Leo groped his way to me and, seizing my arm, shook it.

“Are you asleep?” he asked angrily. “Speak, man, speak!”

“No,” I answered, “never was I more awake. Give me time.”

Then I rose, and going to the open window, drew up the blind and stood there staring at the sky, which grew pearl-hued with the first faint tinge of dawn. Leo came also and leant upon the window-sill, and I could feel that his body was trembling as though with cold. Clearly he was much moved.

“You talk of a sign,” I said to him, “but in your sign I see nothing but a wild dream.”

“It was no dream,” he broke in fiercely; “it was a vision.”

“A vision then if you will, but there are visions true and false, and how can we know that this is true? Listen, Leo. What is there in all that wonderful tale which could not have been fashioned in your own brain, distraught as it is almost to madness with your sorrow and your longings? You dreamed that you were alone in the vast universe. Well, is not every living creature thus alone? You dreamed that the shadowy shape of Ayesha came to you. Has it ever left your side? You dreamed that she led you over sea and land, past places haunted by your memory, above the mysterious mountains of the Unknown to an undiscovered peak. Does she not thus lead you through life to that peak which lies beyond the Gates of Death? You dreamed – ”

“Oh! no more of it,” he exclaimed. “What I saw, I saw, and that I shall follow. Think as you will, Horace, and do what you will. To-morrow I start for India, with you if you choose to come; if not, without you.”

“You speak roughly, Leo,” I said. “You forget that *I* have had no sign, and that the nightmare of a man so near to insanity that but a few hours ago he was determined upon suicide, will be a poor staff to lean on when we are perishing in the snows of Central Asia. A mixed vision, this of yours, Leo, with its mountain peak shaped like a *crux-ansata* and the rest. Do you suggest that Ayesha is re-incarnated in Central Asia – as a female Grand Lama or something of that sort?”

“I never thought of it, but why not?” asked Leo quietly. “Do you remember a certain scene in the Caves of Kôr yonder, when the living looked upon the dead, and dead and living were the same? And do you remember what Ayesha swore, that she would come again – yes, to this world; and how could that be except by re-birth, or, what is the same thing, by the transmigration of the spirit?”

I did not answer this argument. I was struggling with myself.

“No sign has come to me,” I said, “and yet I have had a part in the play, humble enough, I admit, and I believe that I have still a part.”

“No,” he said, “no sign has come to you. I wish that it had. Oh! how I wish you could be convinced as I am, Horace!”

Then we were silent for a long while, silent, with our eyes fixed upon the sky.

It was a stormy dawn. Clouds in fantastic masses hung upon the ocean. One of them was like a great mountain, and we watched it idly. It changed its shape, the crest of it grew hollow like a crater. From this crater sprang a projecting cloud, a rough pillar with a knob or lump resting on its top. Suddenly the rays of the risen sun struck upon this mountain and the column and they turned white like snow. Then as though melted by those fiery arrows, the centre of the excrescence above the pillar thinned out and vanished, leaving an enormous loop of inky cloud.

“Look,” said Leo in a low, frightened voice, “that is the shape of the mountain which I saw in my vision. There upon it is the black loop, and there through it shines the fire. *It would seem that the sign is for both of us, Horace.*”

I looked and looked again till presently the vast loop vanished into the blue of heaven. Then I turned and said – “I will come with you to Central Asia, Leo.”

Chapter 2

The Lamasery

Sixteen years had passed since that night vigil in the old Cumberland house, and, behold! we two, Leo and I, were still travelling, still searching for that mountain peak shaped like the Symbol of Life which never, never could be found.

Our adventures would fill volumes, but of what use is it to record them. Many of a similar nature are already written of in books; those that we endured were more prolonged, that is all. Five years we spent in Tibet, for the most part as guests of various monasteries, where we studied the law and traditions of the Lamas. Here we were once sentenced to death in punishment for having visited a forbidden city, but escaped through the kindness of a Chinese official.

Leaving Tibet, we wandered east and west and north, thousands and thousands of miles, sojourning amongst many tribes in Chinese territory and elsewhere, learning many tongues, enduring much hardship. Thus we would hear a legend of a place, say nine hundred miles away, and spend two years in reaching it, to find when we came there, nothing.

And so the time went on. Yet never once did we think of giving up the quest and returning, since, before we started, we had sworn an oath that we would achieve or die. Indeed we ought to have died a score of times, yet always were preserved, most mysteriously preserved.

Now we were in country where, so far as I could learn, no European had ever set a foot. In a part of the vast land called Turkestan there is a great lake named Balhkas, of which we visited the shores. Two hundred miles or so to the westward is a range of mighty mountains marked on the maps as Arkarty-Tau, on which we spent a year, and five hundred or so to the eastward are other mountains called Cherga, whither we journeyed at last, having explored the triple ranges of the Tau.

Here it was that at last our true adventures began. On one of the spurs of these awful Cherga mountains – it is unmarked on any map – we well-nigh perished of starvation. The winter was coming on and we could find no game. The last traveller we had met, hundreds of miles south, told us that on that range was a monastery inhabited by Lamas of surpassing holiness. He said that they dwelt in this wild land, over which no power claimed dominion and where no tribes lived, to acquire “merit,” with no other company than that of their own pious contemplations. We did not believe in its existence, still we were searching for that monastery, driven onward by the blind fatalism which was our only guide through all these endless wanderings. As we were starving and could find no “argals,” that is fuel with which to make a fire, we walked all night by the light of the moon, driving between us a single yak – for now we had no attendant, the last having died a year before.

He was a noble beast, that yak, and had the best constitution of any animal I ever knew, though now, like his masters, he was near his end. Not that he was over-laden, for a few rifle cartridges, about a hundred and fifty, the remnant of a store which we had fortunately been able to buy from a caravan two years before, some money in gold and silver, a little tea and a bundle of skin rugs and sheepskin garments were his burden. On, on we trudged across a plateau of snow, having the great mountains on our right, till at length the yak gave a sigh and stopped. So we stopped also, because we must, and wrapping ourselves in the skin rugs, sat down in the snow to wait for daylight.

“We shall have to kill him and eat his flesh raw,” I said, patting the poor yak that lay patiently at our side.

“Perhaps we may find game in the morning,” answered Leo, still hopeful.

“And perhaps we may not, in which case we must die.”

“Very good,” he replied, “then let us die. It is the last resource of failure. We shall have done our best.”

“Certainly, Leo, we shall have done our best, if sixteen years of tramping over mountains and through eternal snows in pursuit of a dream of the night can be called best.”

“You know what I believe,” he answered stubbornly, and there was silence between us, for here arguments did not avail. Also even then I could not think that all our toils and sufferings would be in vain.

The dawn came, and by its light we looked at one another anxiously, each of us desiring to see what strength was left to his companion. Wild creatures we should have seemed to the eyes of any civilized person. Leo was now over forty years of age, and certainly his maturity had fulfilled the promise of his youth, for a more magnificent man I never knew. Very tall, although he seemed spare to the eye, his girth matched his height, and those many years of desert life had turned his muscles to steel. His hair had grown long, like my own, for it was a protection from sun and cold, and hung upon his neck, a curling, golden mane, as his great beard hung upon his breast, spreading outwards almost to the massive shoulders. The face, too – what could be seen of it – was beautiful though burnt brown with weather; refined and full of thought, sombre almost, and in it, clear as crystal, steady as stars, shone his large grey eyes.

And I – I was what I have always been – ugly and hirsute, iron-grey now also, but in spite of my sixty odd years, still wonderfully strong, for my strength seemed to increase with time, and my health was perfect. In fact, during all this period of rough travels, although now and again we had met with accidents which laid us up for awhile, neither of us had known a day of sickness. Hardship seemed to have turned our constitutions to iron and made them impervious to every human ailment. Or was this because we alone amongst living men had once inhaled the breath of the Essence of Life?

Our fears relieved – for notwithstanding our foodless night, as yet neither of us showed any signs of exhaustion – we turned to contemplate the landscape. At our feet beyond a little belt of fertile soil, began a great desert of the sort with which we were familiar – sandy, salt-encrusted, treeless, waterless, and here and there streaked with the first snows of winter. Beyond it, eighty or a hundred miles away – in that lucent atmosphere it was impossible to say how far exactly – rose more mountains, a veritable sea of them, of which the white peaks soared upwards by scores.

As the golden rays of the rising sun touched their snows to splendour, I saw Leo’s eyes become troubled. Swiftly he turned and looked along the edge of the desert.

“See there!” he said, pointing to something dim and enormous. Presently the light reached it also. It was a mighty mountain not more than ten miles away, that stood out by itself among the sands. Then he turned once more, and with his back to the desert stared at the slope of the hills, along the base of which we had been travelling. As yet they were in gloom, for the sun was behind them, but presently light began to flow over their crests like a flood. Down it crept, lower, and yet lower, till it reached a little plateau not three hundred yards above us. There, on the edge of the plateau, looking out solemnly across the waste, sat a great ruined idol, a colossal Buddha, while to the rear of the idol, built of yellow stone, appeared the low crescent-shaped mass of a monastery.

“At last!” cried Leo, “oh, Heaven! at last!” and, flinging himself down, he buried his face in the snow as though to hide it there, lest I should read something written on it which he did not desire that even I should see.

I let him lie a space, understanding what was passing in his heart, and indeed in mine also. Then going to the yak that, poor brute, had no share in these joyous emotions but only lowed and looked round with hungry eyes, I piled the sheepskin rugs on to its back. This done, I laid my hand on Leo’s shoulder, saying, in the most matter-of-fact voice I could command —

“Come. If that place is not deserted, we may find food and shelter there, and it is beginning to storm again.”

He rose without a word, brushed the snow from his beard and garments and came to help me to lift the yak to its feet, for the worn-out beast was too stiff and weak to rise of itself. Glancing at him covertly, I saw on Leo’s face a very strange and happy look; a great peace appeared to possess him.

We plunged upwards through the snow slope, dragging the yak with us, to the terrace whereon the monastery was built. Nobody seemed to be about there, nor could I discern any footprints. Was the place but a ruin? We had found many such; indeed this ancient land is full of buildings that had once served as the homes of men, learned and pious enough after their own fashion, who lived and died hundreds, or even thousands, of years ago, long before our Western civilization came into being.

My heart, also my stomach, which was starving, sank at the thought, but while I gazed doubtfully, a little coil of blue smoke sprang from a chimney, and never, I think, did I see a more joyful sight. In the centre of the edifice was a large building, evidently the temple, but nearer to us I saw a small door, almost above which the smoke appeared. To this door I went and knocked, calling aloud —

“Open! open, holy Lamas. Strangers seek your charity.” After awhile there was a sound of shuffling feet and the door creaked upon its hinges, revealing an old, old man, clad in tattered, yellow garments.

“Who is it? Who is it?” he exclaimed, blinking at me through a pair of horn spectacles. “Who comes to disturb our solitude, the solitude of the holy Lamas of the Mountains?”

“Travellers, Sacred One, who have had enough of solitude,” I answered in his own dialect, with which I was well acquainted. “Travellers who are starving and who ask your charity, which,” I added, “by the Rule you cannot refuse.”

He stared at us through his horn spectacles, and, able to make nothing of our faces, let his glance fall to our garments which were as ragged as his own, and of much the same pattern. Indeed, they were those of Tibetan monks, including a kind of quilted petticoat and an outer vestment not unlike an Eastern burnous. We had adopted them because we had no others. Also they protected us from the rigours of the climate and from remark, had there been any to remark upon them.

“Are you Lamas?” he asked doubtfully, “and if so, of what monastery?”

“Lamas sure enough,” I answered, “who belong to a monastery called the World, where, alas! one grows hungry.”

The reply seemed to please him, for he chuckled a little, then shook his head, saying —

“It is against our custom to admit strangers unless they be of our own faith, which I am sure you are not.”

“And much more is it against your Rule, holy Khubilghan,” for so these abbots are entitled, “to suffer strangers to starve”; and I quoted a well-known passage from the sayings of Buddha which fitted the point precisely.

“I perceive that you are instructed in the Books,” he exclaimed with wonder on his yellow, wrinkled face, “and to such we cannot refuse shelter. Come in, brethren of the monastery called the World. But stay, there is the yak, who also has claims upon our charity,” and, turning, he struck upon a gong or bell which hung within the door.

At the sound another man appeared, more wrinkled and to all appearance older than the first, who stared at us open-mouthed.

“Brother,” said the abbot, “shut that great mouth of yours lest an evil spirit should fly down it; take this poor yak and give it fodder with the other cattle.”

So we unstrapped our belongings from the back of the beast, and the old fellow whose grandiloquent title was “Master of the Herds,” led it away.

When it had gone, not too willingly — for our faithful friend disliked parting from us and distrusted this new guide — the abbot, who was named Kou-en, led us into the living room or rather the kitchen of the monastery, for it served both purposes. Here we found the rest of the monks, about twelve in all, gathered round the fire of which we had seen the smoke, and engaged, one of them in preparing the morning meal, and the rest in warming themselves.

They were all old men; the youngest could not have been less than sixty-five. To these we were solemnly introduced as “Brethren of the Monastery called the World, where folk grow hungry,” for the abbot Kou-en could not make up his mind to part from this little joke.

They stared at us, they rubbed their thin hands, they bowed and wished us well and evidently were delighted at our arrival. This was not strange, however, seeing that ours were the first new faces which they had seen for four long years.

Nor did they stop at words, for while they made water hot for us to wash in, two of them went to prepare a room – and others drew off our rough hide boots and thick outer garments and brought us slippers for our feet. Then they led us to the guest chamber, which they informed us was a “propitious place,” for once it had been slept in by a noted saint. Here a fire was lit, and, wonder of wonders! clean garments, including linen, all of them ancient and faded, but of good quality, were brought for us to put on.

So we washed – yes, actually washed all over – and having arrayed ourselves in the robes, which were somewhat small for Leo, struck the bell that hung in the room and were conducted by a monk who answered it, back to the kitchen, where the meal was now served. It consisted of a kind of porridge, to which was added new milk brought in by the “Master of the Herds,” dried fish from a lake, and buttered tea, the last two luxuries produced in our special honour. Never had food tasted more delicious to us, and, I may add, never did we eat more. Indeed, at last I was obliged to request Leo to stop, for I saw the monks staring at him and heard the old abbot chuckling to himself.

“Oho! The Monastery of the World, where folk grow *hungry*,” to which another monk, who was called the “Master of the Provisions,” replied uneasily, that if we went on like this, their store of food would scarcely last the winter. So we finished at length, feeling, as some book of maxims which I can remember in my youth said all polite people should do – that we could eat more, and much impressed our hosts by chanting a long Buddhist grace.

“Their feet are in the Path! Their feet are in the Path!” they said, astonished.

“Yes,” replied Leo, “they have been in it for sixteen years of our present incarnation. But we are only beginners, for you, holy Ones, know how star-high, how ocean-wide and how desert-long is that path. Indeed it is to be instructed as to the right way of walking therein that we have been miraculously directed by a dream to seek you out, as the most pious, the most saintly and the most learned of all the Lamas in these parts.”

“Yes, certainly we are that,” answered the abbot Kou-en, “seeing that there is no other monastery within five months’ journey,” and again he chuckled, “though, alas!” he added with a pathetic little sigh, “our numbers grow few.”

After this we asked leave to retire to our chamber in order to rest, and there, upon very good imitations of beds, we slept solidly for four and twenty hours, rising at last perfectly refreshed and well.

Such was our introduction to the Monastery of the Mountains – for it had no other name – where we were destined to spend the next six months of our lives. Within a few days – for they were not long in giving us their complete confidence – those good-hearted and simple old monks told us all their history.

It seemed that of old time there was a Lamasery here, in which dwelt several hundred brethren. This, indeed, was obviously true, for the place was enormous, although for the most part ruined, and, as the weather-worn statue of Buddha showed, very ancient. The story ran, according to the old abbot, that two centuries or so before, the monks had been killed out by some fierce tribe who lived beyond the desert and across the distant mountains, which tribe were heretics and worshippers of fire. Only a few of them escaped to bring the sad news to other communities, and for five generations no attempt was made to reoccupy the place.

At length it was revealed to him, our friend Kou-en, when a young man, that he was a re-incarnation of one of the old monks of this monastery, who also was named Kou-en, and that it was his duty during his present life to return thither, as by so doing he would win much merit and receive

many wonderful revelations. So he gathered a band of zealots and, with the blessing and consent of his superiors, they started out, and after many hardships and losses found and took possession of the place, repairing it sufficiently for their needs.

This happened about fifty years before, and here they had dwelt ever since, only communicating occasionally with the outside world. At first their numbers were recruited from time to time by new brethren, but at length these ceased to come, with the result that the community was dying out.

“And what then?” I asked.

“And then,” the abbot answered, “nothing. *We* have acquired much merit; we have been blest with many revelations, and, after the repose we have earned in Devachan, our lots in future existences will be easier. What more can we ask or desire, removed as we are from all the temptations of the world?”

For the rest, in the intervals of their endless prayers, and still more endless contemplations, they were husbandmen, cultivating the soil, which was fertile at the foot of the mountain, and tending their herd of yaks. Thus they wore away their blameless lives until at last they died of old age, and, as they believed – and who shall say that they were wrong – the eternal round repeated itself elsewhere.

Immediately after, indeed on the very day of our arrival at the monastery the winter began in earnest with bitter cold and snowstorms so heavy and frequent that all the desert was covered deep. Very soon it became obvious to us that here we must stay until the spring, since to attempt to move in any direction would be to perish. With some misgivings we explained this to the abbot Kou-en, offering to remove to one of the empty rooms in the ruined part of the building, supporting ourselves with fish that we could catch by cutting a hole in the ice of the lake above the monastery, and if we were able to find any, on game, which we might trap or shoot in the scrub-like forest of stunted pines and junipers that grew around its border. But he would listen to no such thing. We had been sent to be their guests, he said, and their guests we should remain for so long as might be convenient to us. Would we lay upon them the burden of the sin of inhospitality? Besides, he remarked with his chuckle —

“We who dwell alone like to hear about that other great monastery called the World, where the monks are not so favoured as we who are set in this blessed situation, and where folk even go hungry in body, and,” he added, “in soul.”

Indeed, as we soon found out, the dear old man’s object was to keep our feet in the Path until we reached the goal of Truth, or, in other words, became excellent Lamas like himself and his flock.

So we walked in the Path, as we had done in many another Lamasery, and assisted at the long prayers in the ruined temple and studied the *Kandjur*, or “Translation of the Words” of Buddha, which is their bible and a very long one, and generally showed that our “minds were open.” Also we expounded to them the doctrines of our own faith, and greatly delighted were they to find so many points of similarity between it and theirs. Indeed, I am not certain but that if we could have stopped there long enough, say ten years, we might have persuaded some of them to accept a new revelation of which we were the prophets. Further, in spare hours we told them many tales of “the Monastery called the World,” and it was really delightful, and in a sense piteous, to see the joy with which they listened to these stories of wondrous countries and new races of men; they who knew only of Russia and China and some semi-savage tribes, inhabitants of the mountains and the deserts.

“It is right for us to learn all this,” they declared, “for, who knows, perhaps in future incarnations we may become inhabitants of these places.”

But though the time passed thus in comfort and indeed, compared to many of our experiences, in luxury, oh! our hearts were hungry, for in them burned the consuming fire of our quest. We felt that we were on the threshold – yes, we knew it, we knew it, and yet our wretched physical limitations made it impossible for us to advance by a single step. On the desert beneath fell the snow, moreover great winds arose suddenly that drove those snows like dust, piling them in heaps as high as trees, beneath which any unfortunate traveller would be buried. Here we must wait, there was nothing else to be done.

One alleviation we found, and only one. In a ruined room of the monastery was a library of many volumes, placed there, doubtless, by the monks who were massacred in times bygone. These had been more or less cared for and rearranged by their successors, who gave us liberty to examine them as often as we pleased. Truly it was a strange collection, and I should imagine of priceless value, for among them were to be found Buddhistic, Sivaistic and Shamanistic writings that we had never before seen or heard of, together with the lives of a multitude of Bodhisatvas, or distinguished saints, written in various tongues, some of which we did not understand.

What proved more interesting to us, however, was a diary in many tomes that for generations had been kept by the Khubilghans or abbots of the old Lamasery, in which every event of importance was recorded in great detail. Turning over the pages of one of the last volumes of this diary, written apparently about two hundred and fifty years earlier, and shortly before the destruction of the monastery, we came upon an entry of which the following – for I can only quote from memory – is the substance —

“In the summer of this year, after a very great sandstorm, a brother (the name was given, but I forget it) found in the desert a man of the people who dwell beyond the Far Mountains, of whom rumours have reached this Lamasery from time to time. He was living, but beside him were the bodies of two of his companions who had been overwhelmed by sand and thirst. He was very fierce looking. He refused to say how he came into the desert, telling us only that he had followed the road known to the ancients before communication between his people and the outer world ceased. We gathered, however, that his brethren with whom he fled had committed some crime for which they had been condemned to die, and that he had accompanied them in their flight. He told us that there was a fine country beyond the mountains, fertile, but plagued with droughts and earthquakes, which latter, indeed, we often feel here.

“The people of that country were, he said, warlike and very numerous but followed agriculture. They had always lived there, though ruled by Khans who were descendants of the Greek king called Alexander, who conquered much country to the south-west of us. This may be true, as our records tell us that about two thousand years ago an army sent by that invader penetrated to these parts, though of his being with them nothing is said.

“The stranger-man told us also that his people worship a priestess called Hes or the Hesea, who is said to reign from generation to generation. She lives in a great mountain, apart, and is feared and adored by all, but is not the queen of the country, in the government of which she seldom interferes. To her, however, sacrifices are offered, and he who incurs her vengeance dies, so that even the chiefs of that land are afraid of her. Still their subjects often fight, for they hate each other.

“We answered that he lied when he said that this woman was immortal – for that was what we supposed he meant – since nothing is immortal; also we laughed at his tale of her power. This made the man very angry. Indeed he declared that our Buddha was not so strong as this priestess, and that she would show it by being avenged upon us.

“After this we gave him food and turned him out of the Lamasery, and he went, saying that when he returned we should learn who spoke the truth. We do not know what became of him, and he refused to reveal to us the road to his country, which lies beyond the desert and the Far Mountains. We think that perhaps he was an evil spirit sent to frighten us, in which he did not succeed.”

Such is a *precis* of this strange entry, the discovery of which, vague as it was, thrilled us with hope and excitement. Nothing more appeared about the man or his country, but within a little over a year from that date the diary of the abbot came to a sudden end without any indication that unusual events had occurred or were expected.

Indeed, the last item written in the parchment book mentioned the preparation of certain new lands to be used for the sowing of grain in future seasons, which suggested that the brethren neither feared nor expected disturbance. We wondered whether the man from beyond the mountains was as good as his word and had brought down the vengeance of that priestess called the Hesea upon the

community which sheltered him. Also we wondered – ah! how we wondered – who and what this Hesea might be.

On the day following this discovery we prayed the abbot, Kou-en, to accompany us to the library, and having read him the passage, asked if he knew anything of the matter. He swayed his wise old head, which always reminded me of that of a tortoise, and answered —

“A little. Very little, and that mostly about the army of the Greek king who is mentioned in the writing.”

We inquired what he could possibly know of this matter, whereon Kou-en replied calmly —

“In those days when the faith of the Holy One was still young, I dwelt as a humble brother in this very monastery, which was one of the first built, and I saw the army pass, that is all. That,” he added meditatively, “was in my fiftieth incarnation of this present Round – no, I am thinking of another army – in my seventy-third.”[*]

[*] As students of their lives and literature will be aware, it is common for Buddhist priests to state positively that they remember events which occurred during their previous incarnations. – ed.

Here Leo began a great laugh, but I managed to kick him beneath the table and he turned it into a sneeze. This was fortunate, as such ribald merriment would have hurt the old man’s feelings terribly. After all, also, as Leo himself had once said, surely we were not the people to mock at the theory of re-incarnation, which, by the way, is the first article of faith among nearly one quarter of the human race, and this not the most foolish quarter.

“How can that be – I ask for instruction, learned One – seeing that memory perishes with death?”

“Ah!” he answered, “Brother Holly, it may seem to do so, but oftentimes it comes back again, especially to those who are far advanced upon the Path. For instance, until you read this passage I had forgotten all about that army, but now I see it passing, passing, and myself with other monks standing by the statue of the big Buddha in front yonder, and watching it go by. It was not a very large army, for most of the soldiers had died, or been killed, and it was being pursued by the wild people who lived south of us in those days, so that it was in a great hurry to put the desert between it and them. The general of the army was a swarthy man – I wish that I could remember his name, but I cannot.

“Well,” he went on, “that general came up to the Lamasery and demanded a sleeping place for his wife and children, also provisions and medicines, and guides across the desert. The abbot of that day told him it was against our law to admit a woman under our roof, to which he answered that if we did not, we should have no roof left, for he would burn the place and kill every one of us with the sword. Now, as you know, to be killed by violence means that we must pass sundry incarnations in the forms of animals, a horrible thing, so we chose the lesser evil and gave way, and afterwards obtained absolution for our sins from the Great Lama. Myself I did not see this queen, but I saw the priestess of their worship – alas! alas!” and Kou-en beat his breast.

“Why alas?” I asked, as unconcernedly as I could, for this story interested me strangely.

“Why? Oh! because I may have forgotten the army, but I have never forgotten that priestess, and she has been a great hindrance to me through many ages, delaying me upon my journey to the Other Side, to the Shore of Salvation. I, as a humble Lama, was engaged in preparing her apartment when she entered and threw aside her veil; yes, and perceiving a young man, spoke to me, asking many questions, and even if I was not glad to look again upon a woman.”

“What – what was she like?” said Leo, anxiously.

“What was she like? Oh! She was all loveliness in one shape; she was like the dawn upon the snows; she was like the evening star above the mountains; she was like the first flower of the spring. Brother, ask me not what she was like, nay, I will say no more. Oh! my sin, my sin. I am slipping backward and you draw my black shame out into the light of day. Nay, I will confess it that you may know how vile a thing I am – I whom perhaps you have thought holy – like yourselves. That woman, if woman she were, lit a fire in my heart which will not burn out, oh! and more, more,” and Kou-

en rocked himself to and fro upon his stool while tears of contrition trickled from beneath his horn spectacles, “*she made me worship her!* For first she asked me of my faith and listened eagerly as I expounded it, hoping that the light would come into her heart; then, after I had finished she said —

“So your Path is Renunciation and your Nirvana a most excellent Nothingness which some would think it scarce worth while to strive so hard to reach. Now *I* will show you a more joyous way and a goddess more worthy of your worship.’

“What way, and what goddess?” I asked of her.

“The way of Love and Life!” she answered, ‘that makes all the world to be, that made *you*, O seeker of Nirvana, and the goddess called Nature!’

“Again I asked where is that goddess, and behold! she drew herself up, looking most royal, and touching her ivory breast, she said, ‘I am She. Now kneel you down and do me homage!’

“My brethren, I knelt, yes, I kissed her foot, and then I fled away shamed and broken-hearted, and as I went she laughed, and cried: ‘Remember me when you reach Devachan, O servant of the Budda-saint, for though I change, I do not die, and even there I shall be with you who once gave me worship!’

“And it is so, my brethren, it is so; for though I obtained absolution for my sin and have suffered much for it through this, my next incarnation, yet I cannot be rid of her, and for me the Utter Peace is far, far away,” and Kouen placed his withered hands before his face and sobbed outright.

A ridiculous sight, truly, to see a holy Khublighan well on the wrong side of eighty, weeping like a child over a dream of a beautiful woman which he imagined he had once dreamt in his last life more than two thousand years ago. So the reader will say. But I, Holly, for reasons of my own, felt deep sympathy with that poor old man, and Leo was also sympathetic. We patted him on the back; we assured him that he was the victim of some evil hallucination which could never be brought up against him in this or any future existence, since, if sin there were, it must have been forgiven long ago, and so forth. When his calm was somewhat restored we tried also to extract further information from him, but with poor results, so far as the priestess was concerned.

He said that he did not know to what religion she belonged, and did not care, but thought that it must be an evil one. She went away the next morning with the army, and he never saw or heard of her any more, though it came into his mind that he was obliged to be locked in his cell for eight days to prevent himself from following her. Yes, he had heard one thing, for the abbot of that day had told the brethren. This priestess was the real general of the army, not the king or the queen, the latter of whom hated her. It was by her will that they pushed on northwards across the desert to some country beyond the mountains, where she desired to establish herself and her worship.

We asked if there really was any country beyond the mountains, and Kou-en answered wearily that he believed so. Either in this or in a previous life he had heard that people lived there who worshipped fire. Certainly also it was true that about thirty years ago a brother who had climbed the great peak yonder to spend some days in solitary meditation, returned and reported that he had seen a marvellous thing, namely, a shaft of fire burning in the heavens beyond those same mountains, though whether this were a vision, or what, he could not say. He recalled, however, that about that time they had felt a great earthquake.

Then the memory of that fancied transgression again began to afflict Kouen’s innocent old heart, and he crept away lamenting and was seen no more for a week. Nor would he ever speak again to us of this matter.

But we spoke of it much with hope and wonder, and made up our minds that we would at once ascend this mountain.

Chapter 3

The Beacon Light

A week later came our opportunity of making this ascent of the mountain, for now in mid-winter it ceased storming, and hard frost set in, which made it possible to walk upon the surface of the snow. Learning from the monks that at this season *ovis poli* and other kinds of big-horned sheep and game descended from the hills to take refuge in certain valleys, where they scraped away the snow to find food, we announced that we were going out to hunt. The excuse we gave was that we were suffering from confinement and needed exercise, having by the teaching of our religion no scruples about killing game.

Our hosts replied that the adventure was dangerous, as the weather might change at any moment. They told us, however, that on the slopes of this very mountain which we desired to climb, there was a large natural cave where, if need be, we could take shelter, and to this cave one of them, somewhat younger and more active than the rest, offered to guide us. So, having manufactured a rough tent from skins, and laden our old yak, now in the best of condition, with food and garments, on one still morning we started as soon as it was light. Under the guidance of the monk, who, notwithstanding his years, walked very well, we reached the northern slope of the peak before mid-day. Here, as he had said, we found a great cave of which the opening was protected by an over-hanging ledge of rock. Evidently this cave was the favourite place of shelter for game at certain seasons of the year, since in it were heaped vast accumulations of their droppings, which removed any fear of a lack of fuel.

The rest of that short day we spent in setting up our tent in the cave, in front of which we lit a large fire, and in a survey of the slopes of the mountain, for we told the monk that we were searching for the tracks of wild sheep. Indeed, as it happened, on our way back to the cave we came across a small herd of ewes feeding upon the mosses in a sheltered spot where in summer a streamlet ran. Of these we were so fortunate as to kill two, for no sportsman had ever come here, and they were tame enough, poor things. As meat would keep for ever in that temperature, we had now sufficient food to last us for a fortnight, and dragging the animals down the snow slopes to the cave, we skinned them by the dying light.

That evening we supped upon fresh mutton, a great luxury, which the monk enjoyed as much as we did, since, whatever might be his views as to taking life, he liked mutton. Then we turned into the tent and huddled ourselves together for warmth, as the temperature must have been some degrees below zero. The old monk rested well enough, but neither Leo nor I slept over much, for wonder as to what we might see from the top of that mountain banished sleep.

Next morning at the dawn, the weather being still favourable, our companion returned to the monastery, whither we said we would follow him in a day or two.

Now at last we were alone, and without wasting an instant began our ascent of the peak. It was many thousand feet high and in certain places steep enough, but the deep, frozen snow made climbing easy, so that by midday we reached the top. Hence the view was magnificent. Beneath us stretched the desert, and beyond it a broad belt of fantastically shaped, snow-clad mountains, hundreds and hundreds of them; in front, to the right, to the left, as far as the eye could reach.

"They are just as I saw them in my dream so many years ago," muttered Leo; "the same, the very same."

"And where was the fiery light?" I asked.

"Yonder, I think;" and he pointed north by east.

"Well, it is not there now," I answered, "and this place is cold."

So, since it was dangerous to linger, lest the darkness should overtake us on our return journey, we descended the peak again, reaching the cave about sunset. The next four days we spent in the same

way. Every morning we crawled up those wearisome banks of snow, and every afternoon we slid and tobogganed down them again, till I grew heartily tired of the exercise.

On the fourth night, instead of coming to sleep in the tent Leo sat himself down at the entrance to the cave. I asked him why he did this, but he answered impatiently, because he wished it, so I left him alone. I could see, indeed, that he was in a strange and irritable mood, for the failure of our search oppressed him. Moreover, we knew, both of us, that it could not be much prolonged, since the weather might break at any moment, when ascents of the mountain would become impossible.

In the middle of the night I was awakened by Leo shaking me and saying —

“Come here, Horace, I have something to show you.”

Reluctantly enough I crept from between the rugs and out of the tent. To dress there was no need, for we slept in all our garments. He led me to the mouth of the cave and pointed northward. I looked. The night was very dark; but far, far away appeared a faint patch of light upon the sky, such as might be caused by the reflection of a distant fire.

“What do you make of it?” he asked anxiously.

“Nothing in particular,” I answered, “it may be anything. The moon — no, there is none, dawn — no, it is too northerly, and it does not break for three hours. Something burning, a house, or a funeral pyre, but how can there be such things here? I give it up.”

“I think it is a reflection, and that if we were on the peak we should see the light which throws it,” said Leo slowly.

“Yes, but we are not, and cannot get there in the dark.”

“Then, Horace, we must spend a night there.”

“It will be our last in this incarnation,” I answered with a laugh, “that is if it comes on to snow.”

“We must risk it, or I will risk it. Look, the light has faded;” and there at least he was right, for undoubtedly it had. The night was as black as pitch.

“Let’s talk it over to-morrow,” I said, and went back to the tent, for I was sleepy and incredulous, but Leo sat on by the mouth of the cave.

At dawn I awoke and found breakfast already cooked.

“I must start early,” Leo explained.

“Are you mad?” I asked. “How can we camp on that place?”

“I don’t know, but I am going. I must go, Horace.”

“Which means that we both must go. But how about the yak?”

“Where we can climb, it can follow,” he answered.

So we strapped the tent and other baggage, including a good supply of cooked meat, upon the beast’s back, and started. The tramp was long since we were obliged to make some detours to avoid slopes of frozen snow in which, on our previous ascents, we had cut footholds with an axe, for up these the laden animal could not clamber. Reaching the summit at length, we dug a hole, and there pitched the tent, piling the excavated snow about its sides. By this time it began to grow dark, and having descended into the tent, yak and all, we ate our food and waited.

Oh! what cold was that. The frost was fearful, and at this height a wind blew whose icy breath passed through all our wrappings, and seemed to burn our flesh beneath as though with hot irons. It was fortunate that we had brought the yak, for without the warmth from its shaggy body I believe that we should have perished, even in our tent. For some hours we watched, as indeed we must, since to sleep might mean to die, yet saw nothing save the lonely stars, and heard nothing in that awful silence, for here even the wind made no noise as it slid across the snows. Accustomed as I was to such exposure, my faculties began to grow numb and my eyes to shut, when suddenly Leo said —

“Look, below the red star!”

I looked, and there high in the sky was the same curious glow which we had seen upon the previous night. There was more than this indeed, for beneath it, almost on a line with us and just above the crests of the intervening peaks, appeared a faint sheet of fire and revealed against it, something

black. Whilst we watched, the fire widened, spread upwards and grew in power and intensity. Now against its flaming background the black object became clearly visible, and lo! it was the top of a soaring pillar surmounted by a loop. Yes, we could see its every outline. It was the *crux ansata*, the Symbol of Life itself.

The symbol vanished, the fire sank. Again it blazed up more fiercely than before and the loop appeared afresh, then once more disappeared. A third time the fire shone, and with such intensity, that no lightning could surpass its brilliance. All around the heavens were lit up, and, through the black needle-shaped eye of the symbol, as from the flare of a beacon, or the search-light of a ship, one fierce ray shot across the sea of mountain tops and the spaces of the desert, straight as an arrow to the lofty peak on which we lay. Yes, it lit upon the snow, staining it red, and upon the wild, white faces of us who watched, though to the right and left of us spread thick darkness. My compass lay before me on the snow, and I could even see its needle; and beyond us the shape of a white fox that had crept near, scenting food. Then it was gone as swiftly as it came. Gone too were the symbol and the veil of flame behind it, only the glow lingered a little on the distant sky.

For awhile there was silence between us, then Leo said —

“Do you remember, Horace, when we lay upon the Rocking Stone where *her* cloak fell upon me —” as he said the words the breath caught in his throat — “how the ray of light was sent to us in farewell, and to show us a path of escape from the Place of Death? Now I think that it has been sent again in greeting to point out the path to the Place of Life where Ayesha dwells, whom we have lost awhile.”

“It may be so,” I answered shortly, for the matter was beyond speech or argument, beyond wonder even. But I knew then, as I know now that we were players in some mighty, predestined drama; that our parts were written and we must speak them, as our path was prepared and we must tread it to the end unknown. Fear and doubt were left behind, hope was sunk in certainty; the foreshadowing visions of the night had found an actual fulfilment and the pitiful seed of the promise of her who died, growing unseen through all the cruel, empty years, had come to harvest.

No, we feared no more, not even when with the dawn rose the roaring wind, through which we struggled down the mountain slopes, as it would seem in peril of our lives at every step; not even as hour by hour we fought our way onwards through the whirling snow-storm, that made us deaf and blind. For we knew that those lives were charmed. We could not see or hear, yet we were led. Clinging to the yak, we struggled downward and homewards, till at length out of the turmoil and the gloom its instinct brought us unharmed to the door of the monastery, where the old abbot embraced us in his joy, and the monks put up prayers of thanks. For they were sure that we must be dead. Through such a storm, they said, no man had ever lived before.

It was still mid-winter, and oh! the awful weariness of those months of waiting. In our hands was the key, yonder amongst those mountains lay the door, but not yet might we set that key within its lock. For between us and these stretched the great desert, where the snow rolled like billows, and until that snow melted we dared not attempt its passage. So we sat in the monastery, and schooled our hearts to patience.

Still even to these frozen wilds of Central Asia spring comes at last. One evening the air felt warm, and that night there were only a few degrees of frost. The next the clouds banked up, and in the morning not snow was falling from them, but rain, and we found the old monks preparing their instruments of husbandry, as they said that the season of sowing was at hand. For three days it rained, while the snows melted before our eyes. On the fourth torrents of water were rushing down the mountain and the desert was once more brown and bare, though not for long, for within another week it was carpeted with flowers. Then we knew that the time had come to start.

“But whither go you? Whither go you?” asked the old abbot in dismay. “Are you not happy here? Do you not make great strides along the Path, as may be known by your pious conversation? Is not everything that we have your own? Oh! why would you leave us?”

“We are wanderers,” we answered, “and when we see mountains in front of us we must cross them.”

Kou-en looked at us shrewdly, then asked —

“What do you seek beyond the mountains? And, my brethren, what merit is gathered by hiding the truth from an old man, for such concealments are separated from falsehoods but by the length of a single barleycorn. Tell me, that at least my prayers may accompany you.”

“Holy abbot,” I said, “awhile ago yonder in the library you made a certain confession to us.”

“Oh! remind me not of it,” he said, holding up his hands. “Why do you wish to torment me?”

“Far be the thought from us, most kind friend and virtuous man,” I answered. “But, as it chances, your story is very much our own, and we think that we have experience of this same priestess.”

“Speak on,” he said, much interested.

So I told him the outlines of our tale; for an hour or more I told it while he sat opposite to us swaying his head like a tortoise and saying nothing. At length it was done.

“Now,” I added, “let the lamp of your wisdom shine upon our darkness. Do you not find this story wondrous, or do you perchance think that we are liars?”

“Brethren of the great monastery called the World,” Kou-en answered with his customary chuckle, “why should I think you liars who, from the moment my eyes fell upon you, knew you to be true men? Moreover, why should I hold this tale so very wondrous? You have but stumbled upon the fringe of a truth with which we have been acquainted for many, many ages.

“Because in a vision she showed you this monastery, and led you to a spot beyond the mountains where she vanished, you hope that this woman whom you saw die is re-incarnated yonder. Why not? In this there is nothing impossible to those who are instructed in the truth, though the lengthening of her last life was strange and contrary to experience. Doubtless you will find her there as you expect, and doubtless her *khama*, or identity, is the same as that which in some earlier life of hers once brought me to sin.

“Only be not mistaken, she is no immortal; nothing is immortal. She is but a being held back by her own pride, her own greatness if you will, upon the path towards Nirvana. That pride will be humbled, as already it has been humbled; that brow of majesty shall be sprinkled with the dust of change and death, that sinful spirit must be purified by sorrows and by separations. Brother Leo, if you win her, it will be but to lose, and then the ladder must be re-climbed. Brother Holly, for you as for me loss is our only gain, since thereby we are spared much woe. Oh! bide here and pray with me. Why dash yourselves against a rock? Why labour to pour water into a broken jar whence it must sink into the sands of profitless experience, and there be wasted, whilst you remain athirst?”

“Water makes the sand fertile,” I answered. “Where water falls, life comes, and sorrow is the seed of joy.”

“Love is the law of life,” broke in Leo; “without love there is no life. I seek love that I may live. I believe that all these things are ordained to an end which we do not know. Fate draws me on – I fulfil my fate – ”

“And do but delay your freedom. Yet I will not argue with you, brother, who must follow your own road. See now, what has this woman, this priestess of a false faith if she be so still, brought you in the past? Once in another life, or so I understand your story, you were sworn to a certain nature-goddess, who was named Isis, were you not, and to her alone? Then a woman tempted you, and you fled with her afar. And there what found you? The betrayed and avenging goddess who slew you, or if not the goddess, one who had drunk of her wisdom and was the minister of her vengeance. Having that wisdom this minister – woman or evil spirit – refused to die because she had learned to love you, but waited knowing that in your next life she would find you again, as indeed she would have done more swiftly in Devachan had she died without living on alone in so much misery. And she found you, and she died, or seemed to die, and now she is re-born, as she must be, and doubtless you will

meet once more, and again there must come misery. Oh! my friends, go not across the mountains; bide here with me and lament your sins.”

“Nay,” answered Leo, “we are sworn to a tryst, and we do not break our word.”

“Then, brethren, go keep your tryst, and when you have reaped its harvest think upon my sayings, for I am sure that the wine you crush from the vintage of your desire will run red like blood, and that in its drinking you shall find neither forgetfulness nor peace. Made blind by a passion of which well I know the sting and power, you seek to add a fair-faced evil to your lives, thinking that from this unity there shall be born all knowledge and great joy.

“Rather should you desire to live alone in holiness until at length your separate lives are merged and lost in the Good Unspeakable, the eternal bliss that lies in the last Nothingness. Ah! you do not believe me now; you shake your heads and smile; yet a day will dawn, it may be after many incarnations, when you shall bow them in the dust and weep, saying to me, ‘Brother Kou-en, yours were the words of wisdom, ours the deeds of foolishness;’” and with a deep sigh the old man turned and left us.

“A cheerful faith, truly,” said Leo, looking after him, “to dwell through aeons in monotonous misery in order that consciousness may be swallowed up at last in some void and formless abstraction called the ‘Utter Peace.’ I would rather take my share of a bad world and keep my hope of a better. Also I do not think that he knows anything of Ayesha and her destiny.”

“So would I,” I answered, “though perhaps he is right after all. Who can tell? Moreover, what is the use of reasoning? Leo, we have no choice; we follow our fate. To what that fate may lead us we shall learn in due season.”

Then we went to rest, for it was late, though I found little sleep that night. The warnings of the ancient abbot, good and learned man as he was, full also of ripe experience and of the foresighted wisdom that is given to such as he, oppressed me deeply. He promised us sorrow and bloodshed beyond the mountains, ending in death and rebirths full of misery. Well, it might be so, but no approaching sufferings could stay our feet. And even if they could, they should not, since to see her face again I was ready to brave them all. And if this was my case what must be that of Leo!

A strange theory that of Kou-en’s, that Ayesha was the goddess in old Egypt to whom Kallikrates was priest, or at the least her representative. That the royal Amenartas, with whom he fled, seduced him from the goddess to whom he was sworn. That this goddess incarnate in Ayesha – or using the woman Ayesha and her passions as her instruments – was avenged upon them both at Kôr, and that there in an after age the bolt she shot fell back upon her own head.

Well, I had often thought as much myself. Only I was sure that *She* herself could be no actual divinity, though she might be a manifestation of one, a priestess, a messenger, charged to work its will, to avenge or to reward, and yet herself a human soul, with hopes and passions to be satisfied, and a destiny to fulfil. In truth, writing now, when all is past and done with, I find much to confirm me in, and little to turn me from that theory, since life and powers of a quality which are more than human do not alone suffice to make a soul divine. On the other hand, however, it must be borne in mind that on one occasion at any rate, Ayesha did undoubtedly suggest that in the beginning she was “a daughter of Heaven,” and that there were others, notably the old Shaman Simbri, who seemed to take it for granted that her origin was supernatural. But of all these things I hope to speak in their season.

Meanwhile what lay beyond the mountains? Should we find her there who held the sceptre and upon earth wielded the power of the outraged Isis, and with her, that other woman who wrought the wrong? And if so, would the dread, inhuman struggle reach its climax around the person of the sinful priest? In a few months, a few days even, we might begin to know.

Thrilled by this thought at length I fell asleep.

Chapter 4

The Avalanche

On the morning of the second day from that night the sunrise found us already on our path across the desert. There, nearly a mile behind us, we could see the ruined statue of Buddha seated in front of the ancient monastery, and in that clear atmosphere could even distinguish the bent form of our friend, the old abbot, Kou-en, leaning against it until we were quite lost to sight. All the monks had wept when we parted from them, and Kou-en even more bitterly than the rest, for he had learned to love us.

"I am grieved," he said, "much grieved, which indeed I should not be, for such emotion partakes of sin. Yet I find comfort, for I know well that although I must soon leave this present life, yet we shall meet again in many future incarnations, and after you have put away these follies, together tread the path to perfect peace. Now take with you my blessings and my prayers and begone, forgetting not that should you live to return" – and he shook his head, doubtfully – "here you will be ever welcome."

So we embraced him and went sorrowfully.

It will be remembered that when the mysterious light fell upon us on the peak I had my compass with me and was able roughly to take its bearings. For lack of any better guide we now followed these bearings, travelling almost due north-east, for in that direction had shone the fire. All day in the most beautiful weather we marched across the flower-strewn desert, seeing nothing except bunches of game and one or two herds of wild asses which had come down from the mountains to feed upon the new grass. As evening approached we shot an antelope and made our camp – for we had brought the yak and a tent with us – among some tamarisk scrub, of which the dry stems furnished us with fuel. Nor did we lack for water, since by scraping in the sand soaked with melted snow, we found plenty of fair quality. So that night we supped in luxury upon tea and antelope meat, which indeed we were glad to have, as it spared our little store of dried provisions.

The next morning we ascertained our position as well as we could, and estimated that we had crossed about a quarter of the desert, a guess which proved very accurate, for on the evening of the fourth day of our journey we reached the bottom slopes of the opposing mountains, without having experienced either accident or fatigue. As Leo said, things were "going like clockwork," but I reminded him that a good start often meant a bad finish. Nor was I wrong, for now came our hardships. To begin with, the mountains proved to be exceeding high; it took us two days to climb their lower slopes. Also the heat of the sun had softened the snow, which made walking through it laborious, whilst, accustomed though we were to such conditions through long years of travelling, its continual glitter affected our eyes.

The morning of the seventh day found us in the mouth of a defile which wound away into the heart of the mountains. As it seemed the only possible path, we followed it, and were much cheered to discover that here must once have run a road. Not that we could see any road, indeed, for everything was buried in snow. But that one lay beneath our feet we were certain, since, although we marched along the edge of precipices, our path, however steep, was always flat; moreover, the rock upon one side of it had often been scarped by the hand of man. Of this there could be no doubt, for as the snow did not cling here, we saw the tool marks upon its bare surface.

Also we came to several places where galleries had been built out from the mountain side, by means of beams let into it, as is still a common practice in Tibet. These beams of course had long since rotted away, leaving a gulf between us and the continuation of the path. When we met with such gaps we were forced to go back and make a detour round or over some mountain; but although much delayed thereby, as it happened, we always managed to regain the road, if not without difficulty and danger.

What tried us more – for here our skill and experience as mountaineers could not help us – was the cold at night, obliged as we were to camp in the severe frost at a great altitude, and to endure through the long hours of darkness penetrating and icy winds, which souged ceaselessly down the pass.

At length on the tenth day we reached the end of the defile, and as night was falling, camped there in the most bitter cold. Those were miserable hours, for now we had no fuel with which to boil water, and must satisfy our thirst by eating frozen snow, while our eyes smarted so sorely that we could not sleep, and notwithstanding all our wraps and the warmth that we gathered from the yak in the little tent, the cold caused our teeth to chatter like castanets.

The dawn came, and, after it, the sunrise. We crept from the tent, and leaving it standing awhile, dragged our stiffened limbs a hundred yards or so to a spot where the defile took a turn, in order that we might thaw in the rays of the sun, which at that hour could not reach us where we had camped.

Leo was round it first, and I heard him utter an exclamation. In a few seconds I reached his side, and lo! before us lay our Promised Land.

Far beneath us, ten thousand feet at least – for it must be remembered that we viewed it from the top of a mountain – it stretched away and away till its distances met the horizon. In character it was quite flat, an alluvial plain that probably, in some primeval age, had been the bottom of one of the vast lakes of which a number exist in Central Asia, most of them now in process of desiccation. One object only relieved this dreary flatness, a single, snow-clad, and gigantic mountain, of which even at that distance – for it was very far from us – we could clearly see the outline. Indeed we could see more, for from its rounded crest rose a great plume of smoke, showing that it was an active volcano, and on the hither lip of the crater an enormous pillar of rock, whereof the top was formed to the shape of a loop.

Yes, there it stood before us, that symbol of our vision which we had sought these many years, and at the sight of it our hearts beat fast and our breath came quickly. We noted at once that although we had not seen it during our passage of the mountains, since the peaks ahead and the rocky sides of the defile hid it from view, so great was its height that it overtopped the tallest of them. This made it clear to us how it came to be possible that the ray of light passing through the loop could fall upon the highest snows of that towering pinnacle which we had climbed upon the further side of the desert.

Also now we were certain of the cause of that ray, for the smoke behind the loop explained this mystery. Doubtless, at times when the volcano was awake, that smoke must be replaced by flame, emitting light of fearful intensity, and this light it was that reached us, concentrated and directed by the loop.

For the rest we thought that about thirty miles away we could make out a white-roofed town set upon a mound, situated among trees upon the banks of a wide river, which flowed across the plain. Also it was evident that this country had a large population who cultivated the soil, for by the aid of a pair of field glasses, one of our few remaining and most cherished possessions, we could see the green of springing crops pierced by irrigation canals and the lines of trees that marked the limits of the fields.

Yes, there before us stretched the Promised Land, and there rose the mystic Mount, so that all we had to do was to march down the snow slopes and enter it where we would.

Thus we thought in our folly, little guessing what lay before us, what terrors and weary suffering we must endure before we stood at length beneath the shadow of the Symbol of Life.

Our fatigues forgotten, we returned to the tent, hastily swallowed some of our dried food, which we washed down with lumps of snow that gave us toothache and chilled us inside, but which thirst compelled us to eat, dragged the poor yak to its feet, loaded it up, and started.

All this while, so great was our haste and so occupied were each of us with our own thoughts that, if my memory serves me, we scarcely interchanged a word. Down the snow slopes we marched swiftly and without hesitation, for here the road was marked for us by means of pillars of rock set

opposite to one another at intervals. These pillars we observed with satisfaction, for they told us that we were still upon a highway which led to the Promised Land.

Yet, as we could not help noting, it was one which seemed to have gone out of use, since with the exception of a few wild-sheep tracks and the spoor of some bears and mountain foxes, not a single sign of beast or man could we discover. This, however, was to be explained, we reflected, by the fact that doubtless the road was only used in the summer season. Or perhaps the inhabitants of the country were now stay-at-home people who never travelled it at all.

Those slopes were longer than we thought; indeed, when darkness closed in we had not reached the foot of them. So we were obliged to spend another night in the snow, pitching our tent in the shelter of an over-hanging rock. As we had descended many thousand feet, the temperature proved, fortunately, a little milder; indeed, I do not think that there were more than eighteen or twenty degrees of frost that night. Also here and there the heat of the sun had melted the snow in secluded places, so that we were able to find water to drink, while the yak could fill its poor old stomach with dead-looking mountain mosses, which it seemed to think better than nothing.

Again, the still dawn came, throwing its red garment over the lonesome, endless mountains, and we dragged ourselves to our numbed feet, ate some of our remaining food, and started onwards. Now we could no longer see the country beneath, for it and even the towering volcano were hidden from us by an intervening ridge that seemed to be pierced by a single narrow gulley, towards which we headed. Indeed, as the pillars showed us, thither ran the buried road. By mid-day it appeared quite close to us, and we tramped on in feverish haste. As it chanced, however, there was no need to hurry, for an hour later we learned the truth.

Between us and the mouth of the gulley rose, or rather sank, a sheer precipice that was apparently three or four hundred feet in depth, and at its foot we could hear the sound of water.

Right to the edge of this precipice ran the path, for one of the stone pillars stood upon its extreme brink, and yet how could a road descend such a place as that? We stared aghast; then a possible solution occurred to us.

"Don't you see," said Leo, with a hollow laugh, "the gulf has opened since this track was used: volcanic action probably."

"Perhaps, or perhaps there was a wooden bridge or stairway which has rotted. It does not matter. We must find another path, that is all," I answered as cheerfully as I could.

"Yes, and soon," he said, "if we do not wish to stop here for ever."

So we turned to the right and marched along the edge of the precipice till, a mile or so away, we came to a small glacier, of which the surface was sprinkled with large stones frozen into its substance. This glacier hung down the face of the cliff like a petrified waterfall, but whether or no it reached the foot we could not discover. At any rate, to think of attempting its descent seemed out of the question. From this point onwards we could see that the precipice increased in depth and far as the eye could reach was absolutely sheer.

So we went back again and searched to the left of our road. Here the mountains receded, so that above us rose a mighty, dazzling slope of snow and below us lay that same pitiless, unclimbable gulf. As the light began to fade we perceived, half a mile or more in front a bare-topped hillock of rock, which stood on the verge of the precipice, and hurried to it, thinking that from its crest we might be able to discover a way of descent.

When at length we had struggled to the top, it was about a hundred and fifty feet high; what we did discover was that, here also, as beyond the glacier, the gulf was infinitely deeper than at the spot where the road ended, so deep indeed that we could not see its bottom, although from it came the sound of roaring water. Moreover, it was quite half a mile in width.

Whilst we stared round us the sinking sun vanished behind a mountain and, the sky being heavy, the light went out like that of a candle. Now the ascent of this hillock had proved so steep, especially at one place, where we were obliged to climb a sort of rock ladder, that we scarcely cared

to attempt to struggle down it again in that gloom. Therefore, remembering that there was little to choose between the top of this knoll and the snow plain at its foot in the matter of temperature or other conveniences, and being quite exhausted, we determined to spend the night upon it, thereby, as we were to learn, saving our lives.

Unloading the yak, we pitched our tent under the lee of the topmost knob of rock and ate a couple of handfuls of dried fish and corn-cake. This was the last of the food that we had brought with us from the Lamasery, and we reflected with dismay that unless we could shoot something, our commissariat was now represented by the carcass of our old friend the yak. Then we wrapped ourselves up in our thick rugs and fur garments and forgot our miseries in sleep.

It cannot have been long before daylight when we were awakened by a sudden and terrific sound like the boom of a great cannon, followed by thousands of other sounds, which might be compared to the fusillade of musketry.

“Great Heaven! What is that?” I said.

We crawled from the tent, but as yet could see nothing, whilst the yak began to low in a terrified manner. But if we could not see we could hear and feel. The booming and cracking had ceased, and was followed by a soft, grinding noise, the most sickening sound, I think, to which I ever listened. This was accompanied by a strange, steady, unnatural wind, which seemed to press upon us as water presses. Then the dawn broke and we saw.

The mountain-side was moving down upon us in a vast avalanche of snow.

Oh! what a sight was that. On from the crest of the precipitous slopes above, two miles and more away, it came, a living thing, rolling, sliding, gliding; piling itself in long, leaping waves, hollowing itself into cavernous valleys, like a tempest-driven sea, whilst above its surface hung a powdery cloud of frozen spray.

As we watched, clinging to each other terrified, the first of these waves struck our hill, causing the mighty mass of solid rock to quiver like a yacht beneath the impact of an ocean roller, or an aspen in a sudden rush of wind. It struck and slowly separated, then with a majestic motion flowed like water over the edge of the precipice on either side, and fell with a thudding sound into the unmeasured depths beneath. And this was but a little thing, a mere forerunner, for after it, with a slow, serpentine movement, rolled the body of the avalanche.

It came in combers, it came in level floods. It piled itself against our hill, yes, to within fifty feet of the head of it, till we thought that even that rooted rock must be torn from its foundations and hurled like a pebble to the deeps beneath. And the turmoil of it all! The screaming of the blast caused by the compression of the air, the dull, continuous thudding of the fall of millions of tons of snow as they rushed through space and ended their journey in the gulf.

Nor was this the worst of it, for as the deep snows above thinned, great boulders that had been buried beneath them, perhaps for centuries, were loosened from their resting-places and began to thunder down the hill. At first they moved slowly, throwing up the hard snow around them as the prow of a ship throws foam. Then gathering momentum, they sprang into the air with leaps such as those of shells ricocheting upon water, till in the end, singing and hurtling, many of them rushed past and even over us to vanish far beyond. Some indeed struck our little mountain with the force of shot fired from the great guns of a battle-ship, and shattered there, or if they fell upon its side, tore away tons of rock and passed with them into the chasm like a meteor surrounded by its satellites. Indeed, no bombardment devised and directed by man could have been half so terrible or, had there been anything to destroy, half so destructive.

The scene was appalling in its unchained and resistless might evolved suddenly from the completest calm. There in the lap of the quiet mountains, looked down upon by the peaceful, tender sky, the powers hidden in the breast of Nature were suddenly set free, and, companioned by whirlwinds and all the terrifying majesty of sound, loosed upon the heads of us two human atoms.

At the first rush of snow we had leapt back behind our protecting peak and, lying at full length upon the ground, gripped it and clung there, fearing lest the wind should whirl us to the abyss. Long ago our tent had gone like a dead leaf in an autumn gale, and at times it seemed as if we must follow.

The boulders hurtled over and past us; one of them, fell full upon the little peak, shattering its crest and bursting into fragments, which fled away, each singing its own wild song. We were not touched, but when we looked behind us it was to see the yak, which had risen in its terror, lying dead and headless. Then in our fear we lay still, waiting for the end, and wondering dimly whether we should be buried in the surging snow or swept away with the hill, or crushed by the flying rocks, or lifted and lost in the hurricane.

How long did it last? We never knew. It may have been ten minutes or two hours, for in such a scene time loses its proportion. Only we became aware that the wind had fallen, while the noise of grinding snow and hurtling boulders ceased. Very cautiously we gained our feet and looked.

In front of us was sheer mountain side, for a depth of over two miles, the width of about a thousand yards, which had been covered with many feet of snow, was now bare rock. Piled up against the face of our hill, almost to its summit, lay a tongue of snow, pressed to the consistency of ice and spotted with boulders that had lodged there. The peak itself was torn and shattered, so that it revealed great gleaming surfaces and pits, in which glittered mica, or some other mineral. The vast gulf behind was half filled with the avalanche and its debris. But for the rest, it seemed as though nothing had happened, for the sun shone sweetly overhead and the solemn snows reflected its rays from the sides of a hundred hills. And we had endured it all and were still alive; yes, and unhurt.

But what a position was ours! We dared not attempt to descend the mount, lest we should sink into the loose snow and be buried there. Moreover, all along the breadth of the path of the avalanche boulders from time to time still thundered down the rocky slope, and with them came patches of snow that had been left behind by the big slide, small in themselves, it is true, but each of them large enough to kill a hundred men. It was obvious, therefore, that until these conditions changed, or death released us, we must abide where we were upon the crest of the hillock.

So there we sat, foodless and frightened, wondering what our old friend Kou-en would say if he could see us now. By degrees hunger mastered all our other sensations and we began to turn longing eyes upon the headless body of the yak.

“Let’s skin him,” said Leo, “it will be something to do, and we shall want his hide to-night.”

So with affection, and even reverence, we performed this office for the dead companion of our journeyings, rejoicing the while that it was not we who had brought him to his end. Indeed, long residence among peoples who believed fully that the souls of men could pass into, or were risen from, the bodies of animals, had made us a little superstitious on this matter. It would be scarcely pleasant, we reflected, in some future incarnation, to find our faithful friend clad in human form and to hear him bitterly reproach us for his murder.

Being dead, however, these arguments did not apply to eating him, as we were sure he would himself acknowledge. So we cut off little bits of his flesh and, rolling them in snow till they looked as though they were nicely floured, hunger compelling us, swallowed them at a gulp. It was a disgusting meal and we felt like cannibals: but what could we do?

Chapter 5

The Glacier

Even that day came to an end at last, and after a few more lumps of yak, our tent being gone, we drew his hide over us and rested as best we could, knowing that at least we had no more avalanches to fear. That night it froze sharply, so that had it not been for the yak's hide and the other rugs and garments, which fortunately we were wearing when the snow-slide began, it would, I think, have gone hard with us. As it was, we suffered a great deal.

"Horace," said Leo at the dawn, "I am going to leave this. If we have to die, I would rather do so moving; but I don't believe that we shall die."

"Very well," I said, "let us start. If the snow won't bear us now, it never will."

So we tied up our rugs and the yak's hide in two bundles and, having cut off some more of the frozen meat, began our descent. Now, although the mount was under two hundred feet high, its base, fortunately for us – for otherwise it must have been swept away by the mighty pressure of the avalanche – was broad, so that there was a long expanse of piled-up snow between us and the level ground.

Since, owing to the overhanging conformation of the place, it was quite impossible for us to descend in front where pressure had made the snow hard as stone, we were obliged to risk a march over the looser material upon its flank. As there was nothing to be gained by waiting, off we went, Leo leading and step by step trying the snow. To our joy we discovered that the sharp night frost had so hardened its surface that it would support us. About half way down, however, where the pressure had been less, it became much softer, so that we were forced to lie upon our faces, which enabled us to distribute our weight over a larger surface, and thus slither gently down the hill.

All went well until we were within twenty paces of the bottom, where we must cross a soft mound formed of the powdery dust thrown off by the avalanche in its rush. Leo slipped over safely, but I, following a yard or two to his right, of a sudden felt the hard crust yield beneath me. An ill-judged but quite natural flounder and wriggle, such as a newly-landed flat-fish gives upon the sand, completed the mischief, and with one piercing but swiftly stifled yell, I vanished.

Any one who has ever sunk in deep water will know that the sensation is not pleasant, but I can assure him that to go through the same experience in soft snow is infinitely worse; mud alone could surpass its terrors. Down I went, and down, till at length I seemed to reach a rock which alone saved me from disappearing for ever. Now I felt the snow closing above me and with it came darkness and a sense of suffocation. So soft was the drift, however, that before I was overcome I contrived with my arms to thrust away the powdery dust from about my head, thus forming a little hollow into which air filtered slowly. Getting my hands upon the stone, I strove to rise, but could not, the weight upon me was too great.

Then I abandoned hope and prepared to die. The process proved not altogether unpleasant. I did not see visions from my past life as drowning men are supposed to do, but – and this shows how strong was her empire over me – my mind flew back to Ayesha. I seemed to behold her and a man at her side, standing over me in some dark, rocky gulf. She was wrapped in a long travelling cloak, and her lovely eyes were wild with fear. I rose to salute her, and make report, but she cried in a fierce, concentrated voice —

"What evil thing has happened here? Thou livest; then where is my lord Leo? Speak, man, and say where thou hast hid my lord – or die."

The vision was extraordinarily real and vivid, I remember, and, considered in connection with a certain subsequent event, in all ways most remarkable, but it passed as swiftly as it came.

Then my senses left me.

I saw a light again. I heard a voice, that of Leo. "Horace," he cried, "Horace, hold fast to the stock of the rifle." Something was thrust against my outstretched hand. I gripped it despairingly, and there came a strain. It was useless, I did not move. Then, bethinking me, I drew up my legs and by chance or the mercy of Heaven, I know not, got my feet against a ridge of the rock on which I was lying. Again I felt the strain, and thrust with all my might. Of a sudden the snow gave, and out of that hole I shot like a fox from its earth.

I struck something. It was Leo straining at the gun, and I knocked him backwards. Then down the steep slope we rolled, landing at length upon the very edge of the precipice. I sat up, drawing in the air with great gasps, and oh! how sweet it was. My eyes fell upon my hand, and I saw that the veins stood out on the back of it, black as ink and large as cords. Clearly I must have been near my end.

"How long was I in there?" I gasped to Leo, who sat at my side, wiping off the sweat that ran from his face in streams.

"Don't know. Nearly twenty minutes, I should think."

"Twenty minutes! It seemed like twenty centuries. How did you get me out? You could not stand upon the drift dust."

"No; I lay upon the yak skin where the snow was harder and tunnelled towards you through the powdery stuff with my hands, for I knew where you had sunk and it was not far off. At last I saw your finger tips; they were so blue that for a few seconds I took them for rock, but thrust the butt of the rifle against them. Luckily you still had life enough to catch hold of it, and you know the rest. Were we not both very strong, it could never have been done."

"Thank you, old fellow," I said simply.

"Why should you thank me?" he asked with one of his quick smiles. "Do you suppose that I wished to continue this journey alone? Come, if you have got your breath, let us be getting on. You have been sleeping in a cold bed and want exercise. Look, my rifle is broken and yours is lost in the snow. Well, it will save us the trouble of carrying the cartridges," and he laughed drearly.

Then we began our march, heading for the spot where the road ended four miles or so away, for to go forward seemed useless. In due course we reached it safely. Once a mass of snow as large as a church swept down just in front of us, and once a great boulder loosened from the mountain rushed at us suddenly like an attacking lion, or the stones thrown by Polyphemus at the ship of Odysseus, and, leaping over our heads, vanished with an angry scream into the depths beneath. But we took little heed of these things: our nerves were deadened, and no danger seemed to affect them.

There was the end of the road, and there were our own footprints and the impress of the yak's hoofs in the snow. The sight of them affected me, for it seemed strange that we should have lived to look upon them again. We stared over the edge of the precipice. Yes, it was sheer and absolutely unclimbable.

"Come to the glacier," said Leo.

So we went on to it, and scrambling a little way down its root, made an examination. Here, so far as we could judge, the cliff was about four hundred feet deep. But whether or no the tongue of ice reached to the foot of it we were unable to tell, since about two thirds of the way down it arched inwards, like the end of a bent bow, and the conformation of the overhanging rocks on either side was such that we could not see where it terminated. We climbed back again and sat down, and despair took hold of us, bitter, black despair.

"What are we to do?" I asked. "In front of us death. Behind us death, for how can we recross those mountains without food or guns to shoot it with? Here death, for we must sit and starve. We have striven and failed. Leo, our end is at hand. Only a miracle can save us."

"A miracle," he answered. "Well, what was it that led us to the top of the mount so that we were able to escape the avalanche? And what was it which put that rock in your way as you sank into the bed of dust, and gave me wit and strength to dig you out of your grave of snow? And what is it that has preserved us through seventeen years of dangers such as few men have known and lived?"

Some directing Power. Some Destiny that will accomplish itself in us. Why should the Power cease to guide? Why should the Destiny be balked at last?"

He paused, then added fiercely, "I tell you, Horace, that even if we had guns, food, and yaks, I would not turn back upon our spoor, since to do so would prove me a coward and unworthy of her. I will go on."

"How?" I asked.

"By that road," and he pointed to the glacier.

"It is a road to death!"

"Well, if so, Horace, it would seem that in this land men find life in death, or so they believe. If we die now, we shall die travelling our path, and in the country where we perish we may be born again. At least I am determined, so you must choose."

"I have chosen long ago. Leo, we began this journey together and we will end it together. Perhaps Ayesha knows and will help us," and I laughed drearily. "If not – come, we are wasting time."

Then we took counsel, and the end of it was that we cut a skin rug and the yak's tough hide into strips and knotted these together into two serviceable ropes, which we fastened about our middles, leaving one end loose, for we thought that they might help us in our descent.

Next we bound fragments of another skin rug about our legs and knees to protect them from the chafing of the ice and rocks, and for the same reason put on our thick leather gloves. This done, we took the remainder of our gear and heavy robes and, having placed stones in them, threw them over the brink of the precipice, trusting to find them again, should we ever reach its foot. Now our preparations were complete, and it was time for us to start upon perhaps one of the most desperate journeys ever undertaken by men of their own will.

Yet we stayed a little, looking at each other in piteous fashion, for we could not speak. Only we embraced, and I confess, I think I wept a little. It all seemed so sad and hopeless, these longings endured through many years, these perpetual, weary travellings, and now – the end. I could not bear to think of that splendid man, my ward, my most dear friend, the companion of my life, who stood before me so full of beauty and of vigour, but who must within a few short minutes be turned into a heap of quivering, mangled flesh. For myself it did not matter. I was old, it was time that I should die. I had lived innocently, if it were innocent to follow this lovely image, this Siren of the caves, who lured us on to doom.

No, I don't think that I thought of myself then, but I thought a great deal of Leo, and when I saw his determined face and flashing eyes as he nerved himself to the last endeavour, I was proud of him. So in broken accents I blessed him and wished him well through all the aeons, praying that I might be his companion to the end of time. In few words and short he thanked me and gave me back my blessing. Then he muttered —

"Come."

So side by side we began the terrible descent. At first it was easy enough, although a slip would have hurled us to eternity. But we were strong and skilful, accustomed to such places moreover, and made none. About a quarter of the way down we paused, standing upon a great boulder that was embedded in the ice, and, turning round cautiously, leaned our backs against the glacier and looked about us. Truly it was a horrible place, almost sheer, nor did we learn much, for beneath us, a hundred and twenty feet or more, the projecting bend cut off our view of what lay below.

So, feeling that our nerves would not bear a prolonged contemplation of that dizzy gulf, once more we set our faces to the ice and proceeded on the downward climb. Now matters were more difficult, for the stones were fewer and once or twice we must slide to reach them, not knowing if we should ever stop again. But the ropes which we threw over the angles of the rocks, or salient points of ice, letting ourselves down by their help and drawing them after us when we reached the next foothold, saved us from disaster.

Thus at length we came to the bend, which was more than half way down the precipice, being, so far as I could judge, about two hundred and fifty feet from its lip, and say one hundred and fifty from the darksome bottom of the narrow gulf. Here were no stones, but only some rough ice, on which we sat to rest.

“We must look,” said Leo presently.

But the question was, how to do this. Indeed, there was only one way, to hang over the bend and discover what lay below. We read each other’s thought without the need of words, and I made a motion as though I would start.

“No,” said Leo, “I am younger and stronger than you. Come, help me,” and he began to fasten the end of his rope to a strong, projecting point of ice. “Now,” he said, “hold my ankles.”

It seemed an insanity, but there was nothing else to be done, so, fixing my heels in a niche, I grasped them and slowly he slid forward till his body vanished to the middle. What he saw does not matter, for I saw it all afterwards, but what happened was that suddenly all his great weight came upon my arms with such a jerk that his ankles were torn from my grip.

Or, who knows! perhaps in my terror I loosed them, obeying the natural impulse which prompts a man to save his own life. If so, may I be forgiven, but had I held on, I must have been jerked into the abyss. Then the rope ran out and remained taut.

“Leo!” I screamed, “Leo!” and I heard a muffled voice saying, as I thought, “Come.” What it really said was – “Don’t come.” But indeed – and may it go to my credit – I did not pause to think, but face outwards, just as I was sitting, began to slide and scramble down the ice.

In two seconds I had reached the curve, in three I was over it. Beneath was what I can only describe as a great icicle broken off short, and separated from the cliff by about four yards of space. This icicle was not more than fifteen feet in length and sloped outwards, so that my descent was not sheer. Moreover, at the end of it the trickling of water, or some such accident, had worn away the ice, leaving a little ledge as broad, perhaps, as a man’s hand. There were roughnesses on the surface below the curve, upon which my clothing caught, also I gripped them desperately with my fingers. Thus it came about that I slid down quite gently and, my heels landing upon the little ledge, remained almost upright, with outstretched arms – like a person crucified to a cross of ice.

Then I saw everything, and the sight curdled the blood within my veins. Hanging to the rope, four or five feet below the broken point, was Leo, out of reach of it, and out of reach of the cliff; as he hung turning slowly round and round, much as – for in a dreadful, inconsequent fashion the absurd similarity struck me even then – a joint turns before the fire. Below yawned the black gulf, and at the bottom of it, far, far beneath, appeared a faint, white sheet of snow. That is what I saw.

Think of it! Think of it! I crucified upon the ice, my heels resting upon a little ledge; my fingers grasping excrescences on which a bird could scarcely have found a foothold; round and below me dizzy space. To climb back whence I came was impossible, to stir even was impossible, since one slip and I must be gone.

And below me, hung like a spider to its cord, Leo turning slowly round and round!

I could see that rope of green hide stretch beneath his weight and the double knots in it slip and tighten, and I remember wondering which would give first, the hide or the knots, or whether it would hold till he dropped from the noose limb by limb.

Oh! I have been in many a perilous place, I who sprang from the Swaying Stone to the point of the Trembling Spur, and missed my aim, but never, never in such a one as this. Agony took hold of me; a cold sweat burst from every pore. I could feel it running down my face like tears; my hair bristled upon my head. And below, in utter silence, Leo turned round and round, and each time he turned his up-cast eyes met mine with a look that was horrible to see.

The silence was the worst of it, the silence and the helplessness. If he had cried out, if he had struggled, it would have been better. But to know that he was alive there, with every nerve and perception at its utmost stretch. Oh! my God! Oh! my God!

My limbs began to ache, and yet I dared not stir a muscle. They ached horribly, or so I thought, and beneath this torture, mental and physical, my mind gave.

I remembered things: remembered how, as a child, I had climbed a tree and reached a place whence I could move neither up nor down, and what I suffered then. Remembered how once in Egypt a foolhardy friend of mine had ascended the Second Pyramid alone, and become thus crucified upon its shining cap, where he remained for a whole half hour with four hundred feet of space beneath him. I could see him now stretching his stockinged foot downwards in a vain attempt to reach the next crack, and drawing it back again; could see his tortured face, a white blot upon the red granite.

Then that face vanished and blackness gathered round me, and in the blackness visions: of the living, resistless avalanche, of the snow-grave into which I had sunk – oh! years and years ago; of Ayesha demanding Leo's life at my hands. Blackness and silence, through which I could only hear the cracking of my muscles.

Suddenly in the blackness a flash, and in the silence a sound. The flash was the flash of a knife which Leo had drawn. He was hacking at the cord with it fiercely, fiercely, to make an end. And the sound was that of the noise he made, a ghastly noise, half shout of defiance and half yell of terror, as at the third stroke it parted.

I saw it part. The tough hide was half cut through, and its severed portion curled upwards and downwards like the upper and lower lips of an angry dog, whilst that which was unsevered stretched out slowly, slowly, till it grew quite thin. Then it snapped, so that the rope flew upwards and struck me across the face like the lash of a whip.

Another instant and I heard a crackling, thudding sound. Leo had struck the ground below. Leo was dead, a mangled mass of flesh and bone as I had pictured him. I could not bear it. My nerve and human dignity came back. I would not wait until, my strength exhausted, I slid from my perch as a wounded bird falls from a tree. No, I would follow him at once, of my own act.

I let my arms fall against my sides, and rejoiced in the relief from pain that the movement gave me. Then balanced upon my heels, I stood upright, took my last look at the sky, muttered my last prayer. For an instant I remained thus poised.

Shouting, "I come," I raised my hands above my head and dived as a bather dives, dived into the black gulf beneath.

Chapter 6

In the Gate

Oh! that rush through space! Folk falling thus are supposed to lose consciousness, but I can assert that this is not true. Never were my wits and perceptions more lively than while I travelled from that broken glacier to the ground, and never did a short journey seem to take a longer time. I saw the white floor, like some living thing, leaping up through empty air to meet me, then – *finis!*

Crash! Why, what was this? I still lived. I was in water, for I could feel its chill, and going down, down, till I thought I should never rise again. But rise I did, though my lungs were nigh to bursting first. As I floated up towards the top I remembered the crash, which told me that I had passed through ice. Therefore I should meet ice at the surface again. Oh! to think that after surviving so much I must be drowned like a kitten and beneath a sheet of ice. My hands touched it. There it was above me shining white like glass. Heaven be praised! My head broke through; in this low and sheltered gorge it was but a film no thicker than a penny formed by the light frost of the previous night. So I rose from the deep and stared about me, treading water with my feet.

Then I saw the gladdest sight that ever my eyes beheld, for on the right, not ten yards away, the water running from his hair and beard, was Leo. Leo alive, for he broke the thin ice with his arms as he struggled towards the shore from the deep river.[*] He saw me also, and his grey eyes seemed to start out of his head.

[*] Usually, as we learned afterwards, the river at this spot was quite shallow; only a foot or two in depth. It was the avalanche that by damming it with fallen heaps of snow had raised its level very many feet. Therefore, to this avalanche, which had threatened to destroy us, we in reality owed our lives, for had the stream stood only at its normal height we must have been dashed to pieces upon the stones. – L. H. H.

“Still living, both of us, and the precipice passed!” he shouted in a ringing, exultant voice. “I told you we were led.”

“Aye, but whither?” I answered as I too fought my way through the film of ice.

Then it was I became aware that we were no longer alone, for on the bank of the river, some thirty yards from us, stood two figures, a man leaning upon a long staff and a woman. He was a very old man, for his eyes were horny, his snow-white hair and beard hung upon the bent breast and shoulders, and his sardonic, wrinkled features were yellow as wax. They might have been those of a death mask cut in marble. There, clad in an ample, monkish robe, and leaning upon the staff, he stood still as a statue and watched us. I noted it all, every detail, although at the time I did not know that I was doing so, as we broke our way through the ice towards them and afterwards the picture came back to me. Also I saw that the woman, who was very tall, pointed to us.

Nearer the bank, or rather to the rock edge of the river, its surface was free of ice, for here the stream ran very swiftly. Seeing this, we drew close together and swam on side by side to help each other if need were. There was much need, for in the fringe of the torrent the strength that had served me so long seemed to desert me, and I became helpless; numbed, too, with the biting coldness of the water. Indeed, had not Leo grasped my clothes I think that I should have been swept away by the current to perish. Thus aided I fought on a while, till he said —

“I am going under. Hold to the rope end.”

So I gripped the strip of yak's hide that was still fast about him, and, his hand thus freed, Leo made a last splendid effort to keep us both, cumbered as we were with the thick, soaked garments that dragged us down like lead, from being sucked beneath the surface. Moreover, he succeeded where any other swimmer of less strength must have failed. Still, I believe that we should have drowned, since here the water ran like a mill-race, had not the man upon the shore, seeing our plight and urged

thereto by the woman, run with surprising swiftness in one so aged, to a point of rock that jutted some yards into the stream, past which we were being swept, and seating himself, stretched out his long stick towards us.

With a desperate endeavour, Leo grasped it as we went by, rolling over and over each other, and held on. Round we swung into the eddy, found our feet, were knocked down again, rubbed and pounded on the rocks. But still gripping that staff of salvation, to his end of which the old man clung like a limpet to a stone, while the woman clung to him, we recovered ourselves, and, sheltered somewhat by the rock, floundered towards the shore. Lying on his face – for we were still in great danger – the man extended his arm. We could not reach it; and worse, suddenly the staff was torn from him; we were being swept away.

Then it was that the woman did a noble thing, for springing into the water – yes, up to her armpits – and holding fast to the old man by her left hand, with the right she seized Leo's hair and dragged him shorewards. Now he found his feet for a moment, and throwing one arm about her slender form, steadied himself thus, while with the other he supported me. Next followed a long confused struggle, but the end of it was that three of us, the old man, Leo and I, rolled in a heap upon the bank and lay there gasping.

Presently I looked up. The woman stood over us, water streaming from her garments, staring like one in a dream at Leo's face, smothered as it was with blood running from a deep cut in his head. Even then I noticed how stately and beautiful she was. Now she seemed to awake and, glancing at the robes that clung to her splendid shape, said something to her companion, then turned and ran towards the cliff.

As we lay before him, utterly exhausted, the old man, who had risen, contemplated us solemnly with his dim eyes. He spoke, but we did not understand. Again he tried another language and without success. A third time and our ears were opened, for the tongue he used was Greek; yes, there in Central Asia he addressed us in Greek, not very pure, it is true, but still Greek.

"Are you wizards," he said, "that you have lived to reach this land?"

"Nay," I answered in the same tongue, though in broken words – since of Greek I had thought little for many a year – "for then we should have come otherwise," and I pointed to our hurts and the precipice behind us.

"They know the ancient speech; it is as we were told from the Mountain," he muttered to himself. Then he asked —

"Strangers, what seek you?"

Now I grew cunning and did not answer, fearing lest, should he learn the truth, he would thrust us back into the river. But Leo had no such caution, or rather all reason had left him; he was light-headed.

"We seek," he stuttered out – his Greek, which had always been feeble, now was simply barbarous and mixed with various Tibetan dialects – "we seek the land of the Fire Mountain that is crowned with the Sign of Life."

The man stared at us. "So you know," he said, then broke off and added, "and *whom* do you seek?"

"Her," answered Leo wildly, "the Queen." I think that he meant to say the priestess, or the goddess, but could only think of the Greek for Queen, or rather something resembling it. Or perhaps it was because the woman who had gone looked like a queen.

"Oh!" said the man, "you seek a queen – then you *are* those for whom we were bidden to watch. Nay, how can I be sure?"

"Is this a time to put questions?" I gasped angrily. "Answer me one rather: who are you?"

"I? Strangers, my title is Guardian of the Gate, and the lady who was with me is the Khania of Kaloon."

At this point Leo began to faint.

“That man is sick,” said the Guardian, “and now that you have got your breath again, you must have shelter, both of you, and at once. Come, help me.”

So, supporting Leo on either side, we dragged ourselves away from that accursed cliff and Styx-like river up a narrow, winding gorge. Presently it opened out, and there, stretching across the glade, we saw the Gate. Of this all I observed then, for my memory of the details of this scene and of the conversation that passed is very weak and blurred, was that it seemed to be a mighty wall of rock in which a pathway had been hollowed where doubtless once passed the road. On one side of this passage was a stair, which we began to ascend with great difficulty, for Leo was now almost senseless and scarcely moved his legs. Indeed at the head of the first flight he sank down in a heap, nor did our strength suffice to lift him.

While I wondered feebly what was to be done, I heard footsteps, and looking up, saw the woman who had saved him descending the stair, and after her two robed men with a Tartar cast of countenance, very impassive; small eyes and yellowish skin. Even the sight of us did not appear to move them to astonishment. She spoke some words to them, whereon they lifted Leo’s heavy frame, apparently with ease, and carried him up the steps.

We followed, and reached a room that seemed to be hewn from the rock above the gateway, where the woman called Khania left us. From it we passed through other rooms, one of them a kind of kitchen, in which a fire burned, till we came to a large chamber, evidently a sleeping place, for in it were wooden bedsteads, mattresses and rugs. Here Leo was laid down, and with the assistance of one of his servants, the old Guardian undressed him, at the same time motioning me to take off my own garments. This I did gladly enough for the first time during many days, though with great pain and difficulty, to find that I was a mass of wounds and bruises.

Presently our host blew upon a whistle, and the other servant appeared bringing hot water in a jar, with which we were washed over. Then the Guardian dressed our hurts with some soothing ointment, and wrapped us round with blankets. After this broth was brought, into which he mixed medicine, and giving me a portion to drink where I lay upon one of the beds, he took Leo’s head upon his knee and poured the rest of it down his throat. Instantly a wonderful warmth ran through me, and my aching brain began to swim. Then I remembered no more.

After this we were very, very ill. What may be the exact medical definition of our sickness I do not know, but in effect it was such as follows loss of blood, extreme exhaustion of body, paralysing shock to the nerves and extensive cuts and contusions. These taken together produced a long period of semi-unconsciousness, followed by another period of fever and delirium. All that I can recall of those weeks while we remained the guests of the Guardian of the Gate, may be summed up in one word – dreams, that is until at last I recovered my senses.

The dreams themselves are forgotten, which is perhaps as well, since they were very confused, and for the most part awful; a hotch-potch of nightmares, reflected without doubt from vivid memories of our recent and fearsome sufferings. At times I would wake up from them a little, I suppose when food was administered to me, and receive impressions of whatever was passing in the place. Thus I can recollect that yellow-faced old Guardian standing over me like a ghost in the moonlight, stroking his long beard, his eyes fixed upon my face, as though he would search out the secrets of my soul.

“They are the men,” he muttered to himself, “without doubt they are the men,” then walked to the window and looked up long and earnestly, like one who studies the stars.

After this I remember a disturbance in the room, and dominating it, as it were, the rich sound of a woman’s voice and the rustle of a woman’s silks sweeping the stone floor. I opened my eyes and saw that it was she who had helped to rescue us, who *had* rescued us in fact, a tall and noble-looking lady with a beauteous, weary face and liquid eyes which seemed to burn. From the heavy cloak she wore I thought that she must have just returned from a journey.

She stood above me and looked at me, then turned away with a gesture of indifference, if not of disgust, speaking to the Guardian in a low voice. By way of answer he bowed, pointing to the other bed where Leo lay, asleep, and thither she passed with slow, imperious movements. I saw her bend down and lift the corner of a wrapping which covered his wounded head, and heard her utter some smothered words before she turned round to the Guardian as though to question him further.

But he had gone, and being alone, for she thought me senseless, she drew a rough stool to the side of the bed, and seating herself studied Leo, who lay thereon, with an earnestness that was almost terrible, for her soul seemed to be concentrated in her eyes, and to find expression through them. Long she gazed thus, then rose and began to walk swiftly up and down the chamber, pressing her hands now to her bosom and now to her brow, a certain passionate perplexity stamped upon her face, as though she struggled to remember something and could not.

“Where and when?” she whispered. “Oh! where and when?”

Of the end of that scene I know nothing, for although I fought hard against it, oblivion mastered me. After this I became aware that the regal-looking woman called Khania, was always in the room, and that she seemed to be nursing Leo with great care and tenderness. Sometimes even she nursed me when Leo did not need attention, and she had nothing else to do, or so her manner seemed to suggest. It was as though I excited her curiosity, and she wished me to recover that it might be satisfied.

Again I awoke, how long afterwards I cannot say. It was night, and the room was lighted by the moon only, now shining in a clear sky. Its steady rays entering at the window-place fell on Leo's bed, and by them I saw that the dark, imperial woman was watching at his side. Some sense of her presence must have communicated itself to him, for he began to mutter in his sleep, now in English, now in Arabic. She became intensely interested; as her every movement showed. Then rising suddenly she glided across the room on tiptoe to look at me. Seeing her coming I feigned to be asleep, and so well that she was deceived.

For I was also interested. Who was this lady whom the Guardian had called the Khania of Kaloon? Could it be she whom we sought? Why not? And yet if I saw Ayesha, surely I should know her, surely there would be no room for doubt.

Back she went again to the bed, kneeling down beside Leo, and in the intense silence which followed – for he had ceased his mutterings – I thought that I could hear the beating of her heart. Now she began to speak, very low and in that same bastard Greek tongue, mixed here and there with Mongolian words such as are common to the dialects of Central Asia. I could not hear or understand all she said, but some sentences I did understand, and they frightened me not a little.

“Man of my dreams,” she murmured, “whence come you? Who are you? Why did the Hesea bid me to meet you?” Then some sentences I could not catch. “You sleep; in sleep the eyes are opened. Answer, I bid you; say what is the bond between you and me? Why have I dreamt of you? Why do I know you? Why – ?” and the sweet, rich voice died slowly from a whisper into silence, as though she were ashamed to utter what was on her tongue.

As she bent over him a lock of her hair broke loose from its jewelled fillet and fell across his face. At its touch Leo seemed to wake, for he lifted his gaunt, white hand and touched the hair, then said in English —

“Where am I? Oh! I remember;” and their eyes met as he strove to lift himself and could not. Then he spoke again in his broken, stumbling Greek, “You are the lady who saved me from the water. Say, are you also that queen whom I have sought so long and endured so much to find?”

“I know not,” she answered in a voice as sweet as honey, a low, trembling voice; “but true it is I am a queen – if a Khania be a queen.”

“Say, then, Queen, do you remember me?”

“We have met in dreams,” she answered, “I think that we have met in a past that is far away. Yes; I knew it when first I saw you there by the river. Stranger with the well remembered face, tell me, I pray you, how you are named?”

“Leo Vincey.”

She shook her head, whispering —

“I know not the name, yet you I know.”

“You know me! How do you know me?” he said heavily, and seemed to sink again into slumber or swoon.

She watched him for a while very intently. Then as though some force that she could not resist drew her, I saw her bend down her head over his sleeping face. Yes; and I saw her kiss him swiftly on the lips, then spring back crimson to the hair, as though overwhelmed with shame at this victory of her mad passion.

Now it was that she discovered me.

Bewildered, fascinated, amazed, I had raised myself upon my bed, not knowing it; I suppose that I might see and hear the better. It was wrong, doubtless, but no common curiosity over-mastered me, who had my share in all this story. More, it was foolish, but illness and wonder had killed my reason.

Yes, she saw me watching them, and such fury seemed to take hold of her that I thought my hour had come.

“Man, have you dared -?” she said in an intense whisper, and snatching at her girdle. Now in her hand shone a knife, and I knew that it was destined for my heart. Then in this sore danger my wit came back to me and as she advanced I stretched out my shaking hand, saying —

“Oh! of your pity, give me to drink. The fever burns me, it burns,” and I looked round like one bewildered who sees not, repeating, “Give me drink, you who are called Guardian,” and I fell back exhausted.

She stopped like a hawk in its stoop, and swiftly sheathed the dagger. Then taking a bowl of milk that stood on a table near her, she held it to my lips, searching my face the while with her flaming eyes, for indeed passion, rage, and fear had lit them till they seemed to flame. I drank the milk in great gulps, though never in my life did I find it more hard to swallow.

“You tremble,” she said; “have dreams haunted you?”

“Aye, friend,” I answered, “dreams of that fearsome precipice and of the last leap.”

“Aught else?” she asked.

“Nay; is it not enough? Oh! what a journey to have taken to befriend a queen.”

“To befriend a queen,” she repeated puzzled. “What means the man? You swear you have had no other dreams?”

“Aye, I swear by the Symbol of Life and the Mount of the Wavering Flame, and by yourself, O Queen from the ancient days.”

Then I sighed and pretended to swoon, for I could think of nothing else to do. As I closed my eyes I saw her face that had been red as dawn turn pale as eve, for my words and all which might lie behind them, had gone home. Moreover, she was in doubt, for I could hear her fingering the handle of the dagger. Then she spoke aloud, words for my ears if they still were open.

“I am glad,” she said, “that he dreamed no other dreams, since had he done so and babbled of them it would have been ill-omened, and I do not wish that one who has travelled far to visit us should be hurled to the death-dogs for burial; one, moreover, who although old and hideous, still has the air of a wise and silent man.”

Now while I shivered at these unpleasant hints – though what the “death-dogs” in which people were buried might be, I could not conceive – to my intense joy I heard the foot of the Guardian on the stairs, heard him too enter the room and saw him bow before the lady.

“How go these sick men, niece?”[*] he said in his cold voice.

[*] I found later that the Khania, Atene, was not Simbri’s niece but his great-niece, on the mother’s side. – L. H. H.

“They swoon, both of them,” she answered.

“Indeed, is it so? I thought otherwise. I thought they woke.”

“What have you heard, Shaman (i.e. wizard)?” she asked angrily.

“I? Oh! I heard the grating of a dagger in its sheath and the distant baying of the death-hounds.”

“And what have you seen, Shaman?” she asked again, “looking through the Gate you guard?”

“Strange sight, Khania, my niece. But – men awake from swoons.”

“Aye,” she answered, “so while this one sleeps, bear him to another chamber, for he needs change, and the lord yonder needs more space and untainted air.”

The Guardian, whom she called “Shaman” or Magician, held a lamp in his hand, and by its light it was easy to see his face, which I watched out of the corner of my eye. I thought that it wore a very strange expression, one moreover that alarmed me somewhat. From the beginning I had misdoubted me of this old man, whose cast of countenance was vindictive as it was able; now I was afraid of him.

“To which chamber, Khania?” he said with meaning.

“I think,” she answered slowly, “to one that is healthful, where he will recover. The man has wisdom,” she added as though in explanation, “moreover, having the word from the Mountain, to harm him would be dangerous. But why do you ask?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I tell you I heard the death-hounds bay, that is all. Yes, with you I think that he has wisdom, and the bee which seeks honey should suck the flower – before it fades! Also, as you say, there are commands with which it is ill to trifle, even if we cannot guess their meaning.”

Then going to the door he blew upon his whistle, and instantly I heard the feet of his servants upon the stairs. He gave them an order, and gently enough they lifted the mattress on which I lay and followed him down sundry passages and past some stairs into another chamber shaped like that we had left, but not so large, where they placed me upon a bed.

The Guardian watched me awhile to see that I did not wake. Next he stretched out his hand and felt my heart and pulse; an examination the results of which seemed to *puzzle* him, for he uttered a little exclamation and shook his head. After this he left the room, and I heard him bolt the door behind him. Then, being still very weak, I fell asleep in earnest.

When I awoke it was broad daylight. My mind was clear and I felt better than I had done for many a day, signs by which I knew that the fever had left me and that I was on the high road to recovery. Now I remembered all the events of the previous night and was able to weigh them carefully. This, to be sure, I did for many reasons, among them that I knew I had been and still was, in great danger.

I had seen and heard too much, and this woman called Khania guessed that I had seen and heard. Indeed, had it not been for my hints about the Symbol of Life and the Mount of Flame, after I had disarmed her first rage by my artifice, I felt sure that she would have ordered the old Guardian or Shaman to do me to death in this way or the other; sure also that he would not have hesitated to obey her. I had been spared partly because, for some unknown reason, she was afraid to kill me, and partly that she might learn how much I knew, although the “death-hounds had bayed,” whatever that might mean. Well, up to the present I was safe, and for the rest I must take my chance. Moreover it was necessary to be cautious, and, if need were, to feign ignorance. So, dismissing the matter of my own fate from my mind, I fell to considering the scene which I had witnessed and what might be its purport.

Was our quest at an end? Was this woman Ayesha? Leo had so dreamed, but he was still delirious, therefore here was little on which to lean. What seemed more to the point was that she herself evidently appeared to think that there existed some tie between her and this sick man. Why had she embraced him? I was sure that she could be no wanton, nor indeed would any woman indulge for its own sake in such folly with a stranger who hung between life and death. What she had done was done because irresistible impulse, born of knowledge, or at least of memories, drove her on, though mayhap the knowledge was imperfect and the memories were undefined. Who save Ayesha could have known anything of Leo in the past? None who lived upon the earth to-day.

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