

## Foreword

When we first meet him, as the narrator of *King Solomon's Mines*, Allan Quartermain is already past middle-age, with a lifetime's experience behind him of hunting, mining, scouting and small-trading. He has a son back in England, learning to be a doctor. This background was hardly reflected in the more recent film versions, featuring Stewart Granger, Richard Chamberlain and, least likely of all, Sharon Stone: but it does make for a more interesting character.

Rider Haggard himself was twenty-nine when he wrote the book. He envisaged his hero as a grizzled old hunter and explorer. The name he took from a farmer called William Quatermain, whom he had known when he was at school in Oxfordshire. "He was a fine, handsome man," Haggard recalled afterwards, "with grey hair and aristocratic features, that came to him probably enough with his Norman blood." And he was bearded, as shown in a sketch that Haggard drew.

Having returned, with his young wife Louie, from a post with the colonial administration in South Africa, Haggard was trying to establish himself in London as a lawyer. He had written a number of articles about South Africa and its people, and three novels, none of which did particularly well.

Then came *King Solomon's Mines*. It was written fast – he always wrote fast – in response to a challenge from his brother to write anything as good as *Treasure Island*. Somehow it caught the mood of the moment. The publishers put posters all over London crying "*King Solomon's Mines* – The Most Amazing Story Ever Written". Even before it was published in the autumn of 1885 Haggard started on a sequel, *Allan Quatermain*, which he completed in just over two months, although it was not actually published for some while.

Not only were Haggard's name and fortune now assured, but

the name “Allan Quatermain” rapidly achieved iconic status almost equivalent, in a different genre, to that of Sherlock Holmes. Like Conan Doyle, Haggard made the mistake of killing his hero prematurely, and since for him there was no equivalent of the Reichenbach Falls, he had to present subsequent stories as being transcribed from newly found manuscripts that Allan had left. This he did, not just successfully, but in a hugely advantageous way, because they traced back, not only Allan’s history, but the history of South Africa throughout the dramatic years of the Great Trek, Chaka’s welding of the Zulu nation and the wars which followed.

Haggard wrote a dozen full-length novels and a handful of short stories about Allan Quatermain. The last novel, indeed, *Allan and the Ice-Gods* (which he devised in conversations with Rudyard Kipling), was published posthumously. Haggard himself, or perhaps an early publisher, divided his output of fiction into two distinct categories; some books – about fifty, including the Allan Quatermain tales – were “Romances”, meaning adventure stories, modern or historical, the rest “Novels”, which he may have intended, in some sense, more seriously but which are now mere period pieces.

His Romances range widely in time, place and theme – ancient Egypt and Israel, Montezuma and the Aztecs, Norse mythology, the Crusades, Cleopatra, Odysseus – but he reverted constantly to Africa, which is no doubt what his public most wanted, and in Africa to Allan Quatermain. “To be honest,” he said in his autobiography, “I always find it easy to write of Allan Quatermain, who, after all, is only myself set in a variety of imagined situations, thinking my thoughts and looking at life through my eyes. Indeed, there are several subjects with which I always find it not difficult to deal – for instance Old Egypt, Norsemen and African savages. Of these last, however, I prefer to write in the company of Allan Quatermain.”

Among those who found Allan’s company congenial was

Theodore Roosevelt. “He said,” wrote Haggard in his diary after a meeting with him, “that he was especially fond of the old boy’s reflectings and moralizings, and seems to think that some of my work will live.”

Allan’s name has lived. It remains iconic, and not only the adventures but the reflectings and moralizings hold their charm, for me certainly, but now surprisingly few people seem aware even of the books’ existence. Whenever I ask somebody if he’s read Rider Haggard, he (at least those of a certain age) almost always says “Yes” and it almost always turns out that he (boys more likely than girls) may once have read *King Solomon’s Mines* and *She*. All the rest of those epic tales have been forgotten.

Even more remarkable and lamentable, the same is true in South Africa, where you might think that Haggard’s vivid descriptions of the country as it was a few yesterdays ago, and his deep understanding of, and sympathy with, the Zulus in particular, would have kept interest alive. His great Zulu tetralogy, *Nada the Lily*, *Marie*, *Child of Storm* and *Finished*, about the blood-stained downfall of Chaka’s royal dynasty, which was based on stories told to Haggard as a young man, surely offers a thrilling history lesson. But no. They are not read by the English-speakers, who provide his natural audience, nor by the descendants of the Zulus about whom he wrote, nor by the Afrikaaners, who, from the Great Trek onwards, played their own obstinate role.

For me, though, when I first went to South Africa, the fascination lay, not in the modern political jigsaw, nor in sad reminders of the Boer War, nor in the beauties of the Cape, but in the fact of stepping into the land of Allan Quatermain. Here were the rolling green hills of Zululand, the towering Drakensbergs, the open veldt, no longer, alas, teeming with game but dotted still with the trees of my imagination, thorn bushes, orange trees, figs and white “ghost-gums”. What could be more romantic to the properly attuned ear than crossing the

White Mfuluzi River into what Allan called “the rough country” which divides it from the Black Mfuluzi? I could almost hear the creak of the ox-wagons. And it was a joy to discover that a friend in the University of Natal (who *has* read his Rider Haggards) lives on the Berea, the ridge in Durban where Allan built his little house.

Among authors of the Victorian-Edwardian period, Haggard must be one of the most thoroughly documented. We have his own autobiography, his journals and his correspondence (mostly with fellow authors such as Andrew Lang and Rudyard Kipling). There have been at least three relatively modern biographies, of varying quality, and, not least, a gracefully written book about him, *The Cloak that I Left*, by his youngest daughter, Liliás. I first came across Liliás’s book in the library of the Rand Club in Johannesburg. It contains a splendid photograph of Umslopogaas, who features heroically in *Allan Quatermain* and was, under the lightest of disguises, a real person, a veteran Zulu warrior, who travelled with Haggard and the British political envoy, Sir Theophilus Shepstone. There he sits with his great axe. His axe is very wise, he says. Why? Because it has seen inside the brains of so many men.

On my own first trip to Africa (West Africa, as it happens), I came across a procession of men waving umbrellas. What a pity, I said, that they should be carrying umbrellas and not spears. “*Vous l’avez voulu, George Dandin, vous l’avez voulu,*” said the Irish journalist, an old Africa hand, who was with me. The quotation, from Molière, new to me at the time, has haunted me ever since.

There were no pitched battles in southern Africa then. I could only imagine Zulu impi rushing past, shouting the royal salute “*Bayete!*”. We sometimes forget how recently the whole of Africa has become at least superficially familiar to the outside world. Much in Haggard’s day was still unexplored. It has been erroneously suggested that he based the ruined city in which

dwelt Ayesha, She-Who-Must-Be-Obeded, on the ruins at Zimbabwe: but in fact he had only heard vaguely that such a place existed. He did later set a novel, *Elissa*, there. He assumed, which was the current belief, that those astonishing walls had probably been built by Phoenician gold traders. (“Why don’t you come out and say that those ruins of yours are Phoenician work?” said Cecil Rhodes to Lord Acton. “Well, I’m not sure they are Phoenician work,” replied Acton. “That’s no way to build empires!” said Rhodes.)

An episode in *Allan Quatermain* describes a mission station on the Tana River being attacked by the Masai. In subsequent editions of the book Haggard felt obliged to add a note: “By a very strange and sad coincidence, since this book was written, the Masai, in April 1886, massacred a missionary and his wife – Mr and Mrs Houghton – on this same Tana River and at the spot described. These are, I believe, the first white people who are known to have fallen victims to this cruel tribe.”

One of my own favourite Quatermain books, but oddly one of the least known, is *She and Allan*, in which Allan, seeking a glimpse of what may lie beyond death’s gateway, is dispatched by the wizard Zikali to see the fabled White Witch, Ayesha. Umslopogaas comes into it as do many threads and characters from other books. There are “slaughters grim and great”, but made more explicit than usual is the strong vein of mysticism which runs through much of Haggard’s work.

Half of his “Romances” are set in Africa: the second most frequent setting is Ancient Egypt, another culture of which he felt an intuitive understanding. The worship of the Egyptian gods, he thought, had not been wasted but was just a stage in man’s long spiritual ascent. His own beliefs are hard to pin down. At home he punctiliously performed the Anglican duties of a Norfolk squire, reading the lessons impressively in Church. But there was always more to it than that. He at least half believed (as did Allan) that in another world or another incarnation he

would be reunited with those he had lost in this one. If pressed, he would probably have been content to reply in Allan's words "that each of us is a mystery living in the midst of mysteries, bringing these with us when we are born and taking them away with us when we die; doubtless into a land of other and yet deeper mysteries."

There were two great tragedies in Haggard's life – in his youth a disastrous love affair, rendered much worse by the sad fate of the girl concerned, and, later, the unexpected death of his five-year-old only son, which had been strangely pre-figured in *Allan Quatermain* by the death of Allan's son. A weird echo of this event is recorded by Lilius Haggard (who refers to herself in the third person).

Many years after the boy died she and her father were in a family party travelling up the Nile. "A fortune teller came on board, a high-class Arab, wearing the green turban which denoted that he had been on the pilgrimage to Mecca. Squatting on the deck he poured from a bag he carried a little pile of silver sand, smoothed it flat and with the aid of various dots and lines drawn with his finger on the surface, proceeded to tell the fortunes of the chattering crowd which gathered round. Rider stood behind him watching. He had seen the same thing done many times with the 'bones' of the Zulu witch doctors and had learned to respect their powers of divination. When it came towards the turn of his nephew (who had joined the party on his honeymoon trip) he said to him quietly: 'Leave the man alone, my boy – you may hear something you don't like.' The Arab caught the tone if not the sense of the words, and suddenly swept his hand across the sand, wiping out the little maze of lines he had been tracing. Then he looked up at Rider – the evening sun pouring in across the covered deck, lighting the harsh, dark face which reflected a sudden malignancy – and said in a low voice: 'You call me a common cheat, is it not so? – Then what of the son of whom you always think?'

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“A moment later he had turned back to his audience and the soft patter of his voice flowed on. Only Rider and Lilius heard the remark and the former made no comment, but walked away and stood looking out over the river to where the road ran over the desert to the Valley of the Kings.”

That might well be a made-up episode in one of Haggard’s Romances, and the warning to his nephew might have come from Allan Quatermain. But Lilius was a truthful witness. The more one reads the stories, and the closer one comes to the author, the more clear it becomes that Allan speaks for Haggard. Their backgrounds are different, of course, but essentially they are the same person. And that is not a bad person to be.

As the years go by I have become steadily more fond of Allan. Romantic fiction offers many more glamorous heroes. Sir Percy Blakeney and Rudolf Rassendyll would be fine company, no doubt, but perhaps a touch overwhelming, whereas what could be more pleasant, more comfortable, than to sit in the evening on the *stoep* of that little house on the Berea while old Hunter Quatermain smokes his pipe and reminisces, telling stories full of adventure, garnished with a grain or two of commonsense wisdom?

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