

AI-Generated Graded Readers

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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.

The text was generated using ChatGPT and prepared for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

This edition aims to support fluency development through accessible vocabulary, expanded narration, and improved readability while preserving the original story structure.

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H. Rider Haggard, *She: A History of Adventure* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified by ChatGPT)

Part 1

I am not the first person to tell this story. The papers first came to an editor, and he chose to publish them. Years before that, he had seen two men walking together in Cambridge. One was a very handsome young man with golden hair and a proud, easy way of moving. The other was older, darker, shorter, and so ugly that people noticed him at once. The editor learned that the young man was Leo Vincey and that the older man was his guardian, Horace Holly. Much later, the editor received a packet from Holly. In it were a manuscript, strange old objects, and a request. Holly and Leo were going away again, this time into Asia, and Holly wanted the story to be published if they did not return. So the editor placed Holly's account before the world and let Holly speak for himself.

There are nights that never leave the mind. I remember one such night as clearly as if it were yesterday. I was then a young man at Cambridge, working hard for my fellowship. It was late, and my head was tired from books and numbers. I threw down my work, went to the fireplace, and filled my pipe. As I struck a match, I looked into the long glass above the mantel and saw my own face. I stood still and stared. The match burned my fingers before I dropped it, but even then I did not move away. I kept looking at myself with the same old bitter thought.

"Well," I said aloud, "if I ever do anything in life, it must be by my brain. It will never be by my face."

I was not handsome. I was never handsome, even in youth, when most men have at least a little beauty. I was short and thick, with a broad chest, long arms, dark hair, heavy features, and deep eyes. Nature had made me strong, and she had also made me ugly. Because of that, I grew silent and hard. Other young men respected my strength and my work, but they did not want to be seen beside me. Women disliked my face. One had once pretended to care for me, and I had loved

her with all the feeling in my heart. Then money failed me, and she left me. She took me to a mirror, stood beside me, and said, "If I am Beauty, then what are you?" I never forgot it. So that night I looked at my reflection and felt again that lonely, bitter pride which comes when a man thinks he has been shut out from ordinary happiness.

As I stood there, there came a knock at the door. It was nearly midnight, and I had no wish to open to strangers. I listened. Then I heard a cough, and I knew it at once. I opened the door quickly. A tall man came in carrying a heavy iron box in one hand. He was about thirty, and though illness had ruined him, one could still see that he had once been a very handsome man. This was my friend Vincey, almost my only friend in the world. He set the box on the table, and then a dreadful fit of coughing seized him. He coughed till his face went purple, and at last he sank into a chair and spat blood. I poured out whisky and gave it to him. He drank, breathed more easily, and looked at me with tired eyes.

"Why did you keep me in the cold?" he said. "You know the cold is bad for me."

"I did not know it was you," I answered. "You are a late visitor."

He gave a poor, crooked smile. "Yes, and my last one, I think. Holly, I am done for. I do not believe I shall live to see tomorrow."

I told him not to talk nonsense and offered to fetch a doctor, but he would not hear of it. He said he knew his illness well and that no doctor could help him. Then he leaned toward me and spoke with great force, as if he had only a short time left and meant to use every minute. He asked what I knew of him. I told him little enough: that he was rich, that he had come late to college, that his wife had died, and that he had been the best friend I had ever had. He then asked, very quietly, "Did you know that I have a son?" I said no. He told me the child was five years old, that the birth had cost his wife her life, and that he himself had never been able to bear the sight of the boy afterward. Then he said the words that changed my whole life. He asked me to become the child's only guardian.

I was so shocked that I nearly rose from my chair. "Me?" I cried. But he went on. He said he had watched me for two years and believed I was hard outside but

sound within. He said the boy belonged to an ancient line and that one day I would learn the truth of it from the iron box. Then he began to tell a wild old family history. Far back in time, he said, one of his ancestors had been an Egyptian priest of Greek blood named Kallikrates. That man had fled from Egypt with a woman of royal blood and had later reached Africa, where a white queen of strange beauty had killed him. His wife escaped and carried away his line. Over the centuries the family moved from place to place, changed names, and at last settled in England. Vincey spoke of all this with the seriousness of a man telling plain fact, not a tale. He said he himself had once followed the mystery, had travelled far, had married in Greece, and had then been struck down by illness before he could finish what he had begun.

He stopped more than once to cough, and each time I thought he might die there in my room. Still he continued. He had left written directions for the boy's education. The child was to live with me and not be sent away to school. On the boy's twenty-fifth birthday, I was to open the iron box with the keys Vincey now placed on my table. Then the young man might decide for himself whether to follow the old quest or refuse it. Vincey said that half his income would support me for this duty and that the rest would be saved for the boy. He spoke very plainly, almost coldly, as if he had arranged every step in his own mind long before he came. Yet under that calm manner I could feel a deep fear and a still deeper hope. The matter was so strange that I hesitated.

He saw my doubt at once. "For my sake, Holly," he said. "I have no time to find another man." There was something in his face then that moved me strongly. I touched the sealed letter he had brought and said that I would do it, unless something in that letter later changed my mind. At this he thanked me warmly and asked me to swear before God that I would be a father to the boy and obey his directions exactly. I swore it. He then said something I did not understand at the time and have never fully forgotten. He told me that death was not truly the end, only a change, and that perhaps even that change might be delayed under certain conditions. He was coughing badly again when he said it, yet he spoke with complete belief. It gave me an unpleasant feeling, as if I had stepped near the edge

of some dark pit.

At last he rose to go. He held the candle up and looked at his own ruined face in the glass. "Food for worms," he said quietly. Then his voice softened. He spoke of life as a poor thing unless love made it worth the trouble, and he said that perhaps the boy Leo might have a better fate if he had courage and faith. Then, very suddenly, he put his arm around me and kissed me on the forehead. It was a strange act between men, and it shook me more than all his talk. I urged him once again to let me fetch a doctor. He refused. He said he wished to die alone, like a poisoned rat in a hole. I told him I did not believe he was dying that very night. He smiled a little, said only one word — "Remember" — and was gone.

After he left, I sat for a long time in deep confusion. The whole visit seemed impossible. Could a man know so exactly that he would die before morning? Could he truly have a son he had not seen for years? Could his family history be real? Could he honestly place a child, a fortune, and a secret iron box in the hands of a college friend? It all sounded like madness. I thought perhaps he had been drinking. I thought perhaps the fever in him had touched his brain. Yet the keys lay on my table, the sealed letter was real, and the iron chest was heavy enough when I hid it away. At last I grew too tired to think. I locked up the keys and the letter, put the chest out of sight, and went to bed.

It seemed to me that I had only just fallen asleep when someone called my name. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. Daylight was in the room. It was eight o'clock. A servant named John stood there, white and shaking. "What is the matter with you?" I asked. "You look as if you have seen a ghost." He swallowed and answered, "Worse than a ghost, sir. I went to wake Mr. Vincey, and there he lies dead." So the strange visit ended exactly as he had said it would, and from that morning my oath began to rule my life.

Part 2

Poor Vincey's sudden death caused great surprise in the college, though not much public trouble. Everyone knew that he had been very ill, and a doctor gave

a certificate that satisfied the authorities. In those days people did not ask so many questions as they do now. There was no inquest, and no one pressed me for details. I was not sorry for that, because I had no wish to speak of what had passed between us in my rooms that night. I said only that he had come to see me, as he often did. The lawyer from London arrived, attended the funeral, and took charge of Vincey's papers and property. Only the iron chest remained with me, because Vincey had left it in my keeping.

For a week after the funeral I heard nothing more. My mind was full of my fellowship examination, and the pressure of that work held every other thought down. At last the examination ended, and I returned to my rooms tired but hopeful. I believed I had done well, and for a little while I sat in peace. Then, as often happens when one heavy duty is removed, the mind rushed back to an older trouble. I began again to think of the midnight visit, the strange story, the sealed letter, the oath I had taken, and the dead man's last command. The whole thing seemed more unnatural in daylight than it had in the dark. I even asked myself whether Vincey had killed himself, for it certainly looked possible.

The more I thought, the less I liked the matter. There was something cold and fearful in it that I cannot easily describe. I am not by nature a nervous man, nor am I quick to fear things simply because they are unusual. Still, I felt uneasy, almost as if I had put my hand into something hidden and dangerous. I wished with all my heart that Vincey had never come to me that night. I wished still more that I had never given my oath. Yet the oath was given, and his dead face seemed to rise before me each time I thought of breaking it. So I sat in my chair and argued with myself, gaining no peace at all.

While I was in this state, a letter in a large blue envelope was brought to me. I knew at once that it came from a lawyer, and I guessed its business before I broke the seal. It was from the firm of Geoffrey and Jordan, who informed me that Vincey had indeed left a will and that they were its executors. The will, they said, confirmed exactly what Vincey had told me. If I accepted the guardianship of his only son, Leo, then I would receive a life interest in part of the property. They also made it plain that the arrangement was so unusual that, had they not been certain

of Vincey's full understanding, they might have asked the Court to interfere. Even the lawyers, who had drawn up the will themselves, found it strange. That alone shows how extraordinary the whole matter was.

I read the will as carefully as I could, though legal language has never been a pleasure to me. As far as I could judge, everything was exactly as Vincey had said. There was no madness there, at least none that the law could see. Then I opened the private letter that he had left with me. It added very little to what he had already told me in person. It repeated his instructions that the boy was to live with me, that he was not to be sent to school, and that on his twenty-fifth birthday the iron chest was to be opened in his presence. It also laid out parts of the child's education, and among the subjects named was Arabic, which seemed to me at that time the strangest of all. At the end, there was a note saying that if the boy died before twenty-five, I might open the chest myself and act as I thought best, but that no stranger was ever to receive its contents.

There was now only one path before me. I wrote to Geoffrey and Jordan and formally accepted the trust, asking that the child be placed in my care in ten days' time. I then went to the authorities of my college and explained as much as I thought necessary, though certainly not all. I had to persuade them with some effort, because it was not usual for a fellow to keep a small child with him. In the end they agreed, but only if I left my rooms in college and took lodgings outside. This was inconvenient, but not impossible. I found good rooms close to the college gates and prepared to receive my young charge. Since I had given my word, I meant to keep it properly.

The next matter was the child's daily care. On this point I made up my mind quickly and, as many will think, stubbornly. I would not have a woman ruling my house and taking the boy's love away from me before I had even gained it. The child was old enough, I believed, to do without a nurse in the usual sense. So I searched for a male servant and at last found one in a round-faced young fellow named Job. He had worked in a stable and claimed to know children because he came from a family of seventeen. Whether this was a great qualification or not I did not then know, but he was willing, cheerful, and respectful. I hired him,

brought the iron chest to my banker with my own hands, and then bought books about child health and child care, which I read both for myself and aloud to Job.

At last the boy arrived. He was brought by an older woman who cried bitterly when she had to leave him, and I do not blame her, for he was a child anyone might love. I have never seen a more beautiful little creature. His eyes were grey, his face was clear and fine, and his hair was a mass of bright golden curls. He stood in the room with one fist over one eye, trying not to cry too much while he looked at us with the other. I sat in a chair and held out my hand to him. Job, wishing to help, made clucking sounds like a hen and pushed a dreadful wooden horse across the floor in what he imagined was an inviting manner. After some minutes of this, the child suddenly ran straight to me, put up his arms, and said, "I like you. You are ugly, but you are good."

From that moment the matter was settled between us. Ten minutes later he was eating bread and butter with excellent appetite, and I felt that my life had changed in a way I had never expected. In a very short time he became known and loved all through the college. Rules were forgotten in his case. Men who would have frowned at any other child welcomed him gladly into their rooms, offered him little gifts, and spoiled him whenever they could. One old fellow, famous for his hard temper, secretly fed him brandy sweets, though Job later discovered the crime and spoke to him with great moral force. Those were pleasant years, and I could spend many pages on them if there were room. But I must pass over much. It is enough to say that as year followed year, the child became the center of my life, and I, who had once expected nothing from the world but work and silence, found myself living in deep content.

Leo grew from child to boy, and from boy to young man. As he grew, his beauty increased in a way that almost seemed unfair, though I never felt envy of him. I loved him too much for that. When he was about fifteen, people began to call him Beauty and me the Beast when we walked together. Leo once attacked a butcher's man for shouting the name after us and gave him a proper beating. I pretended not to see it until the fight was nearly over, and then I confess that I encouraged my boy to finish it well. Later, when he was older, the students found

new names. They called me Charon and him the Greek god. In his case the title suited him well enough. At twenty-one he might truly have stood for some young god of old Greece.

Yet Leo was not only handsome. He had a quick mind, a warm heart, and a generous temper, though he was not made to be a great scholar in the narrow college sense. He learned Greek well, and because of his father's strange command I also taught him Arabic, learning it myself so that I could guide him. In time he knew that language almost as well as I did. I was, and always had been, very fond of sport, and every autumn we went away together to shoot or fish. We visited Scotland, Norway, and once even Russia. He learned quickly in everything. He shot well, rode well, moved well, and seemed to do most things with a natural ease that others had to work to gain. I sometimes thought that if fate had chosen to make him ordinary in face, it had at least forgotten to make him ordinary in any other way.

When Leo was eighteen I returned to my rooms in college and entered him there as a student. He took his degree at twenty-one, respectably if not with high honours, and after that I told him for the first time something of his history. I explained that his father had left behind a secret, and that the time would come when he would learn it fully. Naturally he was eager and full of questions, but I refused to say more than I had the right to say. We had still some years to wait. To keep him occupied, I suggested that he should prepare for the Bar, and he agreed. He read at Cambridge and went to London only when necessary. So the years moved on, steady and quiet on the surface, though beneath them lay the old secret, waiting like fire under ash.

I had only one real trouble with him, and that was this: women were always falling in love with him. I do not say every woman, because that would be foolish, but very nearly every young woman who came much into his company seemed in danger of it. This led more than once to discomfort and confusion. On the whole he behaved fairly well, though I cannot honestly say perfectly. Perhaps no man of his age and face could have done so. Still, he was never selfish at heart, and there was much in him that remained simple and boyish. So the time passed until at last

the day approached for which all the past had been preparing. Leo reached his twenty-fifth birthday, and with it the old command of his dead father rose up before us again. It was then, and not before, that the true and terrible business of this history began.

Part 3

On the day before Leo's twenty-fifth birthday, we went up to London and took the iron chest out of the bank where I had left it so many years before. By chance, the same clerk who had hidden it away was still there, and he remembered it at once. He laughed and said that if he had not hidden it himself, he might never have found it now, because it was buried under dust and cobwebs. We brought it back with us to Cambridge that evening and set it in my rooms. Neither of us slept much that night. At daybreak Leo came to my room in his dressing-gown and wanted to open it at once, but I told him that a secret which had waited twenty years could wait until after breakfast.

Even breakfast did not go well. I was so full of thoughts that I dropped a piece of bacon into Leo's tea instead of sugar, and Job, who was excited too, broke the handle off one of my best cups. At last the table was cleared, and I told Job to stay, because I wanted a witness who could be trusted to keep silent. He locked the door, brought my despatch-box, and stood by. I took out the three keys that Vincey had given me long ago. One was modern, one was ancient, and the third was a very strange silver key unlike anything I had seen before. We looked at one another, and then I began.

The large key opened the outer iron chest after some trouble. Inside it was a second case of dark wood, black with age and bound with iron bands. That, in turn, opened with the second key. Within it stood a beautiful silver casket, old, heavy, and clearly made in Egypt, with little Sphinxes for feet and another Sphinx upon the lid. Even through its tarnish and its dents, it looked rich and noble. Then I took the silver key and fitted it to the lock. For a moment it would not turn, but at last it moved, and the casket stood open before us.

It was full of a brown, dry stuffing, like some old plant fiber. I lifted this out carefully, and the first thing I found was a modern envelope in poor Vincey's hand. On it were the words, "To my son Leo, should he live to open this casket." I handed it to Leo, but he only looked at it and told me with his eyes to keep going. Next I found a parchment in Vincey's handwriting, marked as a translation from Greek. Beneath it lay another, much older parchment, curled and yellow with age, and this one was a Latin translation in an old hand. Under that, wrapped in linen, was the object at the center of all our trouble: a large piece of yellow pottery, broken long ago and joined again with cement and rivets, covered with ancient Greek writing.

There was more still. In a little bag we found a small scarab and a miniature painted on ivory. The miniature was a picture of Leo's mother, dark-eyed and very beautiful, and on the back Vincey had written, "My beloved wife." Leo looked at it for a long time before he set it down. Then he took up the letter and read it aloud. In it, his father spoke across the years and confessed openly that he had meant to end his own life because his suffering was too great. He said he had once followed the old family story to the east coast of Africa, had seen a headland shaped like the head of a black man, had heard of marshes, caves, and a beautiful white queen inland, but had fallen ill and failed before he could go farther. He left the matter to Leo and told him to read everything, judge for himself, and either follow the mystery or destroy it forever.

When Leo finished, he laid the letter down and looked at me. "What do you make of that, Uncle Holly?" he asked. I answered, rather sharply, that his father must have been mad. I said it was wild nonsense from beginning to end. Job, who liked any opinion that sounded solid, said at once, "That is it, sir." But I do not think even he believed his own agreement very deeply. Leo then took up the English translation of the writing on the sherd and began to read that aloud as well. We all listened in complete silence.

It was the dying message of Amenartas, an Egyptian woman of royal blood, to her little son. She said that she had fled from Egypt with Kallikrates, a priest who had broken his vows for love of her. After shipwreck and much wandering, they

had been carried through marshes and waste land to a ruined place with caves and an old dead city. There they were taken to a queen of strange people, a white woman who had great knowledge, deathless beauty, and power over life and death. This queen fell in love with Kallikrates and tried to make him hers. She led them to a terrible place where there was a living fire or pillar of life, entered it herself, and came out still more beautiful than before. Then she offered Kallikrates the same gift if he would kill Amenartas and choose her.

He would not do it. In her anger, the queen killed him, and afterward Amenartas escaped and at last reached Athens, where she gave birth to the child to whom she wrote. She told him, and all his children after him, to seek out the woman, learn the secret of life if they could, and, if possible, take revenge for Kallikrates. When Leo finished reading, Job groaned aloud and asked God to forgive the woman in the story. As for me, I still wanted to call it invention, but one fact stood in my way. The Greek on the pottery was real ancient Greek, and I could read enough of it myself to see that Vincey had not simply made it all up. He might have been mistaken, but he had not written the sherd.

So I turned the relic over and studied the other side. There I found notes added by many later hands in Greek, Latin, and English. One early descendant had written only that he could not go. Another had begun the journey and failed, saying the gods were against him. There was a medieval note telling how a holy clerk had urged the family to destroy the thing as evil, and how one man had broken it in two, while another had saved the pieces and fastened them together again. There was an Elizabethan note saying that a Vincey had tried to search for the place on the African coast and had died in the attempt. Then there was a later family note, no more than a half-remembered line from Hamlet: "There are more things in Heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Horatio."

All this was odd enough, but the old Latin translation impressed me even more. It was plainly ancient and had been made by a learned man centuries ago, long before Leo's father was born. That meant the story had truly lived in the family for age after age. Whatever the truth might be, the thing itself was genuine. The pottery was old, the writing was old, the chain of notes was old, and the warning

or promise had passed from father to son over many generations. By that time my easy explanation of madness had become hard to keep. A madman may imagine a story, but he does not create ancient Greek on broken pottery and medieval Latin beside it.

Leo said little while I was examining all this. He sat still, looking first at the sherd, then at his mother's picture, then at the strange scarab on the table. At last he said quietly, "At least now we know that my father believed it with all his heart." I answered that yes, he had believed it, and perhaps many before him had done the same. Job shook his head and said that no good had ever come from writing on broken flower-pots, which, in its way, was the soundest thing spoken that morning. Yet even he kept looking at the relic as if it might move. We were all caught, each in his own manner.

So that long morning passed, with the open casket before us and the dust of many centuries upon our hands. When we began, I had expected to prove the whole thing foolish. Instead, each object we lifted from the box made the business heavier and more real. By noon the room itself seemed changed. The old college walls were still around us, the fire still burned, and Job still stood by the door, but in our minds we were no longer in Cambridge only. A road had opened out of that little silver casket, and though we had not yet set foot on it, we could already see that it ran far away toward Africa, toward danger, and toward something that none of us yet understood.

Part 4

After we had read all that the casket held, Leo and I talked long and seriously. I still said that the old story might be false, but I could no longer call it empty nonsense. Too many hands had carried it across too many years. Leo was ready to go, and in truth I was ready too, though I hid my feeling under talk of sport and buffalo. Money would not stop us, because his father's income had been gathering for years, and I had also saved much of what had been left to me. Job, when asked, said that he did not care for foreign lands, but that if we two gentlemen were going,

then he must go too, because somebody had to look after us. So we made our plans, bought guns and stores, and kept the whole matter secret. Three months later we were on the ocean, bound for Zanzibar and the dangerous coast beyond.

That first night which truly belongs to our African journey was very different from the quiet rooms of Cambridge. We were sailing south in an Arab dhow under a bright moon, with the African coast lying dark on our right. The sea was smooth, the sail was full, and even the low sounds from the land came clearly across the water. Mahomed, the Arab at the tiller, heard a lion far away and raised his hand to listen. Leo and I sat smoking and talking of the rock we hoped to reach the next day, the one shaped like a man's head that might prove the truth of the old writing. Mahomed told Leo that the country behind it was all swamp, full of snakes and game, and lived in by no settled people. Even the Arab crew would not go inland with us, and that alone was enough to show what sort of place we were seeking.

We had already moved most of our arms, food, and baggage into the whale-boat that we towed behind us. We did this because a dhow cannot easily beat back against the monsoon if it passes its mark, and also because none of us trusted the Arab sailors more than was wise. Job, in particular, was full of dark thoughts and wished to sleep in the whale-boat to protect our property from what he called "these black gentry." We laughed at him, but let him go. Then Leo and I sat on deck again under that lovely sky, talking in short, broken bits because our minds were busy. At last, without meaning to, we both fell asleep where we sat.

I do not know how long I slept. I only know that I woke in the middle of terror. A great roar of wind burst over us, the crew screamed, and a hard lash of water struck my face. Some of the sailors tried to lower the huge sail, but it jammed fast and would not come down. I saw a vast breaker, white at the top in the moonlight and black below, rushing straight upon us, driven by the squall behind it. Then came one crushing blow of water and foam, and I was clinging for my life while the dhow shuddered under me. The wave had struck us from behind, and when it passed the great sail was torn away and flying loose in the sky like a wounded bird.

In the short calm that followed, I heard Job shouting from the whale-boat. I

rushed aft, felt the dhow sinking under my feet, and saw Mahomed leap into the boat below. I pulled at the tow-rope, sprang down, and rolled into the bottom just as the dhow went bodily under. Mahomed cut the rope, and we were free, driving before the storm over the place where our vessel had been. Then I cried out for Leo and was told by Job that he was gone. I thought him drowned, and the grief of that moment was worse than fear. But before I could do more than wring my hands, another great wave came after us, and on it there was a dark shape. I put out my arm, caught a human wrist, and held on with all my strength till the rush passed. When we bailed the boat, we found that the body I had snatched from the sea was Leo himself.

After that the storm went as fast as it had come. We bailed out the whale-boat, set things as straight as we could, and let Leo sleep, because he had swallowed much water and lay in deep exhaustion. The sea grew calmer, for the headland now broke the force of the swell, and we discovered that we had drifted into the mouth of a river. Then the moon sank, the stars faded, and dawn came over sea, marsh, and mountain with a beauty so great that it made one sad. Yet all the while I could not forget that eighteen of our fellow voyagers had gone down with the dhow and would never see another sunrise. We four were saved, but others had become drift among rocks and weed in the dark waters behind us. That is the way of the world, and perhaps it is well that men learn it again and again.

When the sun at last came clear up, the rock we had risked so much to find stood between me and the east. I looked at it idly at first, then with full attention, and then with real astonishment. It was indeed shaped like the head and face of a black man, huge, ugly, and frightening in expression. There were the thick lips, the broad cheeks, and the heavy nose, all plain against the light. It matched the old account too closely for comfort. We knew then that we had reached the right place, or as close to it as men could hope to reach after so many centuries. That alone would have been enough to hold us to the road we had taken.

We followed the river inward, and before evening I managed to make one good shot at a fine buck after Leo had missed. We cut off as much meat as we could carry and rowed into a wide lagoon-like place where the river spread out in the

swamp. There we anchored some distance from shore, not daring to land because we did not know whether the ground was safe or dry, and because we feared the foul air of the marsh. We ate what we could, lit a lantern, and tried to sleep. But sleep was impossible, for clouds of giant mosquitoes came upon us and bit through everything. Smoke only made them merrier, and soon we had to sit under blankets, half boiled and wholly miserable, while lions roared somewhere in the reeds not far away.

At length, after moonrise, two of the lions swam toward the boat. We saw their eyes and the circles in the water around them. That danger was terrible enough, but something even stranger followed. Before they reached us, a great crocodile seized one, and there by the shore began a fight such as I hope never to see again. The lion tore out one of the crocodile's eyes and got at its throat, but the beast caught the lion across the body in its jaws, crushed him, and at last killed him. Then the crocodile itself rolled over dying, still fixed upon its enemy. We watched the whole awful struggle in the moonlight, unable to help and hardly able to believe what we saw. When it was over, we spent the rest of the night as quietly as the mosquitoes would let us, and waited for morning to carry us farther inland.

Part 5

At dawn we rose again in misery, washed as best we could, and made ready to move. In the clearer light I could not help laughing at the look of my companions. Job's round face had swollen so much from the mosquitoes that it was nearly twice its proper size, and Leo was little better. My own skin had suffered less, perhaps because it was darker and much of my face lay hidden under the beard I had let grow during our voyage. Mahomed, on the other hand, seemed almost untouched, and we bitterly wished that we also had whatever quality made the insects spare a true Arab. When the sun rose higher, the sea breeze began to cut paths through the marsh mist, and we sailed on again, stopping only once on a patch of dry land to cook meat and dry some of it in strips for later use. So passed day after day in toil, wet, heat, and insects, until on the fifth day from the coast we reached a place

where our river met what seemed to be another stream, though I soon judged it to be an ancient canal dug by men in some remote age.

We had no choice but to try that canal, for the river above was blocked by shallows and mud. At first we rowed, then dragged the boat by hand through weeds so thick that the labour nearly killed us. Rain fell, thunder broke over us, and all around lay one endless world of swamp. On the third day of this dreadful towing we saw a round hill in the distance, and by the fourth night it seemed closer, though still far away. We were then so worn out that I believed we must die there where we lay, and in my half-sleep I imagined the boat rotting away with our bones in it and the marsh water washing through our ribs. I woke with a cry from that dream and found that I was no longer dreaming. Two bright eyes were above me in the dark, a spear point touched my throat, and a voice speaking broken Arabic demanded to know who we were.

I answered that we were travellers who had come by chance, and then another, deeper voice asked what colour we were. "White," came the reply, and with it an order that saved our lives. Four days before, the speaker said, word had come from "She-who-must-be-obeyed" that if white men came, they were not to be killed but brought before her. Thus, by pure luck or by some darker thing, we escaped the spears. Mahomed was dragged out after us, and I heard one of the guards ask what should be done with "the black one." The answer was that nothing had been said about him, but still he was not to be killed. Then litters were brought, and because we were too spent even to stand proudly, we climbed into them with gratitude. Leo observed that it was a blessing to be carried after carrying ourselves so long, and in spite of all that had passed he sounded cheerful. That is his nature.

When I woke again the sun was high, and we were no longer in the swamp but crossing great grassy land toward a cup-shaped hill. The men who bore us were splendid in body, tall and powerful, with aquiline faces and beautiful teeth, yet I never saw a set of countenances that looked more cruel. They almost never smiled, and when they were silent, which was most of the time, their faces seemed like carved things that had never known kindness. Soon the old man whom I had heard addressed as "Father" came up in a litter beside mine. He wore a pale robe, had a

snowy beard of great length, and possessed the sharpest pair of eyes I have ever seen in an old head. He told me his name was Billali and that his people were called the Amahagger, the People of the Rocks. I asked who “She-who-must-be-obeyed” was, and he answered with a faint smile that I would soon learn, if it pleased her to let me see her in the flesh at all. That answer did not comfort me.

At last we reached the crater-like place toward which we had been travelling. It was like a great green bowl, with rocky sides, rich grass in the middle, streams, cattle, goats, and no visible houses. Soon I learned where the people lived. We stopped before the mouth of a vast cave cut by human hands, and there I saw that all our goods from the boat had been brought safely after us. Around the entrance stood many men and women of the same race as our bearers. The women were handsome, with fine eyes and thick hair, and some wore a yellowish linen robe that seemed to mark rank. Leo’s beauty made an immediate impression upon them, and when he lifted his hat and showed his golden hair there was a little murmur of delight. Then the boldest and finest of the young women stepped forward, put her arms round his neck, and kissed him on the lips. I expected him to be speared where he stood. Instead, after one look of surprise, he calmly kissed her back.

This astonishing act, which would have caused a riot in any decent English drawing-room, produced no such result there. We soon learned that among the Amahagger women choose openly, descent is counted through the mother alone, and a public embrace followed by a returned kiss serves as marriage. Men accept the arrangement because custom is stronger than complaint, and the only man called “Father” in a household is its elected chief, in this case Billali. The young woman who had chosen Leo was named Ustane, and from that hour she regarded him as hers. We were then led into the cave, which looked less like a natural hollow than a great stone hall made by men of another age. Food was brought, and we ate as starving men do. Afterward Billali told us plainly that he had first ordered our deaths when he heard strangers had entered the land, but that a message from She had arrived commanding that we be spared and brought onward. When I asked how she could know of our coming from so far away, he only laughed softly and said, “Are there none in your land who can see without eyes

and hear without ears?”

Billali then announced that he must travel to consult She herself and would be gone five days. He warned us, with a politeness that made the warning worse, that every stranger known in the memory of his grandmother, his mother, and himself had been put to death by her command or with her approval. When I pointed out that such a statement gave She a life far longer than any woman's, he answered only with that same thin smile and went away. During the days that followed, we bathed in a spring, slept in chambers that had clearly once held the dead, and tried to endure the strange life of that cave. The people were full of dark curiosity, but it was our smoking that impressed them more than our guns. They cried out that we were magicians when they saw the tobacco smoke come from our mouths. Job, who had already suffered enough, had even more trouble when one morning a woman publicly embraced him in the same way Ustane had embraced Leo. He fled in terror, declaring that there was nothing against his character and begging me to save him. The Amahagger laughed, but the woman herself was deeply offended, and I thought then, correctly, that Job's virtue had nearly cost us our throats.

Ustane, meanwhile, remained close to Leo and told us much about the country. There were ten households like Billali's, all living in raised places amid vast swamps that only the Amahagger could cross. Their land was full of ruins, caves, pillars, and old works made by men long dead. The place where She lived was called Kôr, and it seemed more and more likely that the sherd had spoken true. Ustane said that She was queen over all, that she was rarely seen, that none might question her word, and that some believed her immortal. On the fourth night after Billali had gone, Ustane stood by the fire, laid her hand on Leo's golden hair, and began to chant over him in a strange rhythmic speech. Though we could not fully understand her meaning, she seemed to speak as if she had loved him before, lost him in darkness, and seen him taken away by a woman stronger and more beautiful than herself. Suddenly she broke off, stared into the blackness as though she saw some horror there, and fell senseless at our feet. When she came to herself, she denied that she had seen anything, but then she kissed Leo on the forehead

and said, with a tenderness that moved even me, “When I am gone from thee, my chosen, think sometimes of me. Let us be happy while the hours are ours, for who knows to whom they will belong tomorrow?” Those words sank into my mind with a chill that I could not shake off.

Part 6

The next day brought the feast that had been promised in our honour, though from the first I liked the look of it very little. Just before sunset Job and I went into the great cave and found Leo there already, with Ustane near him as usual. When she heard what was planned, a look of real fear came over her face. She stopped one of the men, asked him sharp questions, and then tried to argue with him. He answered angrily, pushed her aside, and at last made her sit down in the circle by the fire between two men. That alone was enough to show me that something evil lay under the evening. The fire was larger than before, and around it sat more than thirty men in silence, with only two women among them: Ustane and the woman from whom Job had once run away in terror.

Job whispered that he did not like the company and liked even less the sight of Mahomed being led toward the circle by that same woman. The poor fellow looked full of fear and could hardly walk. We sat down with our backs against the wall, and I warned the others as quietly as I could to make sure their weapons were ready. Then a jar of strong drink went round, and after that there was a long, dreadful silence. Nothing happened for nearly an hour. The Amahagger only stared into the fire while shadows moved across their hard faces. In the open space before us stood a flat wooden tray and, on either side of the flames, long iron pincers. I kept looking at those objects, and the more I looked, the less I liked them. There was still no food in sight, and yet everyone sat as though waiting for a meal.

At last a man cried out, “Where is the flesh that we shall eat?” and the whole circle answered together, “The flesh will come.” Then came more questions, each stranger than the last, and each answered by all in one voice while their hands

touched the shafts of their spears. As the chant went on, the woman beside Mahomed began to stroke him and speak to him as if she loved him. That was the moment when I felt true horror. The thing was too calm, too practiced, too much like part of some old custom. Then came the final cry: "Is the pot hot to cook it?" and the answer: "It is hot." In the same instant Leo shouted that he remembered the old writing about "the people who place pots upon the heads of strangers." Before we could move, the two men by the fire snatched up the white-hot pot with the pincers, while the woman and others threw a cord over Mahomed and dragged him down to force the burning vessel onto his head.

I fired at the woman by instinct and killed her, but the bullet passed through and struck Mahomed too. It was a merciful accident, if such a thing can be called merciful, for he died at once instead of by that hideous torture. For one second the Amahagger stared in astonishment at the noise and the death. Then one man seized his spear, and the whole company rushed at us. I shouted to run, and we made for the upper part of the cave, where there was a low rock platform that gave us a little advantage. There we turned to face them. Leo stood between Job and me with his knife in hand, and in that moment, before the fight broke over us, he put his arm around me and said good-bye, asking me to forgive him for bringing me there. I had no time to answer more than a few words before Job fired and the press came on.

The struggle that followed was as fierce a fight as any man could imagine. Job and I emptied our pistols into the crowd, and Leo used his heavy knife with terrible force. Men fell, but more came on. Job was dragged from the ledge, though by good luck his fall killed the man beneath him instead of himself. I lost my own knife after splitting one man's skull and then had to fight two more with my bare strength, locking my arms around them and crushing the life out of them where we rolled in the dark. Meanwhile Leo, standing in the full light, fought like a lion indeed. I saw him strike one man dead, throw another body among his attackers, and hold them back for a little while by sheer power. But at last they dragged him down under numbers. Then Ustane, brave beyond all praise, threw herself over him and covered him with her own body, so that they could not kill him cleanly.

They wounded him in the side, and when the murderers cried out that the spear should be driven through man and woman together, I believed all was over. At that very instant a great voice rang through the cave with one word only: "Cease!" and I fell senseless.

When I woke, the fight was done. Leo lay near me in a faint, with Ustane bending over him and washing the spear wound. Job, bruised and shaking, was alive. Around the fire lay the bodies of those we had killed, and near them poor Mahomed, with the blackened pot beside him. Billali stood there calmly directing the binding of the surviving attackers as though such work were no more than daily business. He told me Leo would recover, for the spear had missed the bowels. Then he explained the feast. Among the Amahagger, he said, there was an old custom by which a stranger might be killed by "the pot" and eaten. She had ordered that we were to be spared, but she had said nothing of Mahomed, and the woman whom I had shot had taken advantage of that silence. She had also wished revenge upon Job for insulting her earlier. Billali promised that the guilty men would go before She herself and suffer a punishment far worse than death by the pot. I believed him.

We got Leo back to his chamber and did what we could for him. Ustane watched him with the devotion of a true wife, fierce with anyone who came too close. Job told me afterward that she nearly drew a knife on him when he tried to interfere too much in Leo's care. I slept badly that night, or rather I drifted in and out of ugly dreams, seeing again the red-hot pot and the struggle by the fire. In my dreams, too, there was always a veiled woman who changed from a young and beautiful form into a white skeleton and back again. Toward morning I woke feeling more tired than rested. My bones ached, my skin was bruised, and the whole place seemed heavy with death. Still, there was one comfort: we had escaped, for the moment at least, from a very near and terrible end.

Later that day Billali came and spoke with me in a softer mood. He led me into another little cave nearby and told me a strange memory from his youth. Long ago, he said, the preserved body of a beautiful white woman had lain there on the very bench where I now sat. He had been young and foolish and had come often

to look at her until he almost loved the dead form. At last his mother, fearing some evil, had burned the body. Yet before it was all destroyed, he had saved the feet and hidden them under the stone bench. Then, kneeling down, he searched in the dust and drew something out wrapped in old cloth. He opened it and showed me one of those feet, white, shapely, and almost fresh to the eye, though it had lain there for ages beyond counting. It was one of the strangest objects I have ever held. I took it in my hand and could not help wondering whose beauty it had once supported through the halls and nights of a world now turned wholly to dust. In the end I wrapped that little relic again and put it into my Gladstone bag, half in wonder and half in fear.

By the next day we were all somewhat stronger, and Leo, though still weak and pale from loss of blood, had his cheerful spirit back and asked for breakfast like a healthy schoolboy. The signs of the night's slaughter had all been cleared away from the cave mouth as if nothing had happened there. On the third morning Job and I were nearly recovered, and Leo too had improved enough that Billali pressed us to begin the journey to Kôr, where She herself lived. I did not wish to move the boy so soon, but Billali's anxiety was too plain to miss. It seemed to me that some danger would fall on us if we stayed where we were. So, though unwillingly, I agreed. Thus ended those dreadful days among Billali's people, and thus we moved one step nearer to the white queen whose shadow had already begun to fall across all our lives.

Part 7

Within an hour of our decision to move, litters were brought to the cave mouth for all of us, with many bearers, spare men, armed guards, and others to carry the baggage. One litter, I saw, was for Ustane, who meant to follow Leo wherever he went. When I asked Billali if this was allowed, he shrugged and said that in his country women do what they please for most of their lives, because men depend on them and therefore give way to them. Then he added, with a dry little smile, that when the women grow too hard to bear, the men rise and kill the older ones

as a warning to the younger. He spoke of this shocking custom as calmly as if he were discussing the weather. Yet when he came to Ustane, he grew more serious. She had saved Leo's life, he said, and by the law of the Amahagger she was truly his wife, unless She herself ordered otherwise.

We set out and crossed the green hollow where Billali's people lived, then climbed the farther edge and passed into new country. For four days our journey went on without any striking event, though to me the place itself was striking enough. We saw trees, flowers, streams, and much rich land rising here and there above the level of the great swamps. Ustane rode near Leo almost all the time and told us what she could of her people. The Amahagger, she said, had no written law, only custom, but custom ruled them like iron. Their caves had been cut by men long dead, and near the place called Kôr there were ruined houses, pillars, and old stone heaps which none of the living dared to approach too closely, because the place was thought to be haunted.

I asked her again and again about She, for by now that hidden ruler stood behind every thought we had. Ustane could tell us little with certainty. She said that the queen was seldom seen, perhaps once in two or three years, and that when she did appear she was wrapped so that none might look upon her face. Those who served her were deaf and dumb, and so no tales came out from her inner dwelling. Some believed that she was immortal and had power over all things. Others thought that she was only one in a line of queens, each taking a husband for a time and then passing her place to a daughter. But on one point there was no doubt at all. Her word was law through the whole land, and to question it was death.

On the morning of the fifth day we climbed a rise and came suddenly to one of the grandest views I have ever seen. Before us stretched a vast plain, rich, green, and beautiful, with scattered trees, game moving through the grass, and far away the ruins of a dead city. Beyond this plain rose the mountain wall of Kôr, huge, brown, and solemn, shaped in such a way that it seemed almost like a throne made by giants for a queen of the old world. The effect of the whole scene was wonderful and oppressive at once. It looked too large for living men. Billali,

pleased by my astonishment, asked whether any queen had ever possessed such a seat before. I answered truthfully that no earthly queen known to me had sat in a place like that.

He then showed me a straight line running over the plain toward the mountain wall, with raised banks on either side. At first I took it for a road, though an oddly made one. Billali told me that it had first been a canal cut by the ancient people of Kôr to drain the lake which once filled the whole rocky circle. They had, he said, pierced even the mountain itself so that the waters might escape, and when the basin was dry they built their mighty city on its floor. Later the canal became a roadway, while another channel carried off the stream that still ran through the place. The explanation was bold, but as I looked at the straight cutting, the embankments, the river, the plain, and the mountain, I began to think that he might well be right. Nothing there looked like the work of chance.

As we moved onward across the plain, I forgot mystery for a little while in my love of wild creatures and open country. Never had I seen such abundance of game. There were buffalo, antelope, birds of many kinds, and other great beasts wandering almost as freely as cattle in an English park. At last I could bear it no longer. Seeing a splendid fat eland under a tree, I slipped out of my litter with my rifle, crept near, and brought the beast down with a shot that pleased me greatly, though I made light of it when I returned. The Amahagger thought the thing a kind of magic and stared at me with new respect. Billali praised me warmly and begged me to teach him the same art, a request which I accepted in words, though inwardly I had grave doubts about standing anywhere near him when the lesson began.

Toward sunset we came under the full shadow of the volcanic mountain itself, and the joy of the plain gave way to a more solemn feeling. We followed the old cut channel upward until it passed between walls of rock and became a vast passage hewn by human hands. The stream ran beside us, while the road climbed a little higher on one side. Deeper and deeper we went into that great work until at last we stood before the black mouth of a tunnel opening straight into the mountain. The water flowed out of it, cold and steady, and the last light of day

was already leaving the cliff above. There we paused for a moment before entering, and I remember thinking that we were now going not only into stone, but into the very heart of the secret that had drawn us from England to this forgotten land.

Part 8

We entered the tunnel with the stream running beside us and followed it deep into the mountain. For a long time there was only the sound of water, the measured step of the bearers, and the dim forward movement of our little company through the rock. Then, little by little, the passage widened, lamps began to appear, and at last we came out into a place so vast that for a moment I could scarcely believe it had been made by human hands. It was a great cave, enormous in height and breadth, stretching away into distance after distance like some underground street of a dead empire. The last light of evening touched the mouth of it, but within all was ruled by lamps and shadow.

The walls were covered with sculptures in low relief, and I forgot even my weariness for a few minutes in looking at them. There were hunting scenes, punishments, processions, and many strange pictures of daily life, cut so skillfully that they seemed to move in the uncertain light. Among them I saw more than one picture of criminals tortured by the placing of a hot pot upon the head, and then I knew that our late hosts had inherited that wicked custom from a far older people. Between the pictures ran lines of writing of a sort wholly unknown to me, unlike Greek, Hebrew, Egyptian, or Assyrian. The nearer carvings had suffered from time, but farther within they were still sharp and fresh, as if the sculptor's hand had left them only yesterday. The whole place spoke not of one age, but of a depth of years so great that the mind grew tired in trying to measure it.

Guards in robes and leopard skins stood at the entrance and then fell back to let us pass. Within, a white-robed servant who was both deaf and dumb met us and bowed in silence. A cross-gallery ran through the great cave, and at its left opening two guards were stationed, from which I judged that the inner dwelling of She herself lay there. We were led instead to the right, where a line of chambers

opened from a passage lit with lamps and closed with hanging mats of grass. Leo, still in heavy sleep, was placed in one room, and Ustane remained with him. Job was given another, Billali a third, and I a fourth. Thus, at last, after swamp, battle, hunger, and the long march, we found shelter in the very heart of Kôr.

The first care of Job and myself, once Leo had been laid down, was to wash and put on clean clothes. We had not changed since the loss of the dhow, and I can still remember the comfort of cold water, clean flannel, and the feeling of having once more some shape of civilized life around me. Afterward a young mute girl came and told me by signs that food was ready, and I followed her into the next chamber, where I found Job already waiting in some confusion, because he suspected every female in the place of dangerous intentions. We ate very well indeed: boiled goat's flesh, cakes made from meal, and fresh milk served on clean wooden platters. It was plain food, but after our hardships it seemed excellent. Then we returned at once to Leo.

We found him in a bad state. He had woken from his deep sleep, but his mind wandered, and he talked wildly of Cambridge and boat-races on the Cam as if he were back in England. Ustane was trying to hold him still, and he was so feverish that I began to fear his wound and the long strain had at last broken him. My voice quieted him better than anything else, and we managed to make him swallow some quinine, after which he lay more peacefully, though still without clear sense. I remained beside him for perhaps an hour while the light slowly died in the chamber, looking at his bright head on the rough pillow and wondering whether all our labour had brought him only here to die in a cave under an African mountain. Then Billali came with an air of great importance and informed me that She herself had expressed a wish to see me. I was not at all pleased by the honour, but I had no choice except to go.

As I rose, I noticed something shining on the floor and stooped to pick it up. It was Leo's ring, the one in which the little scarab from the casket had been set. He must have flung it away in his fever. Thinking it would be safer with me than lost in the dust, I slipped it on my little finger and followed Billali. We passed down the passage, crossed the great central cave, and came to the guarded opening

on the other side. The men there bowed and raised their spears in salute. Beyond them the immense cavern went on and on, with side passages leading away to tombs cut in the living rock by the ancient people who had once ruled that land. At last we reached a rock platform like the one where we had nearly been killed before, and there, in the dim light, sat She.

I cannot say that I saw her clearly then, and yet I felt her presence more strongly than that of anyone I had ever met. She was robed in white and sat above us upon the dais with a stillness that made all other stillness seem restless. Even before a word was spoken, one understood why the people trembled at her name. Billali flung himself flat upon the floor and crept forward on his face, while I remained standing, partly because I would not crawl to any living creature and partly because astonishment held me where I was. The old man afterward told me that he had expected me to be blasted for that boldness. If She was angry, however, she did not show it at once. Her attention turned first to Billali, and he began his report in the tone of a slave pleading before a judge who might kill him for sport.

He told the whole shameful story of the feast: how the people of his household, led on by the woman whom Job had offended, had tried to cook and eat Mahomed because no word had come concerning the black man; how Leo and I had killed to save him from the pot; how the others had then rushed upon us in a madness of blood; and how at last Billali had come and stopped the slaughter. He praised our fighting loudly, calling Leo the Lion, me the Baboon, and Job the Pig, which last title I was glad he did not hear. When he had finished, She answered that she already knew enough of the matter and would sit in judgment upon the guilty on the morrow. She said she forgave Billali, though hardly, and warned him to govern his people better. At that, the old man rose upon his knees with astonishing quickness, bowed again and again, and backed away in fear and gratitude.

Then he vanished through the hanging curtains, and I found myself left alone with the woman whom all that land obeyed. Until that moment the danger had seemed large but public, a thing divided among many. Now it became personal, close, and strangely intense. I remember hearing my own heart beat in that vast cave, and smelling some faint sweet perfume in the air, unlike any scent I had

known before. She had said little, but her silence itself had weight. It was as if I had come at last not merely before a queen, but before the living center of the whole mystery that had drawn us from England to Kôr.

Part 9

When Billali had gone, She turned to me with a light laugh and said that old men gather wisdom as men gather water in their hands, only to let most of it run away again. She asked what people called me in my own country, and when I told her my name, she repeated it slowly, as if tasting a strange fruit. Then she asked what "Holly" meant. I said it was a prickly tree. She answered that the name suited me well enough, for I looked both rough and strong, but, she thought, honest at the center. After that she bade me come farther in and sit beside her, saying she was tired of seeing everyone crawl and shake before her.

Behind the curtains there was a smaller chamber with a couch, a table, fruit, clear water, and lamps that burned with a soft light. The air was full of sweet perfume, and even her garments and hair seemed to carry that same rich scent. I sat where she ordered me, though I was far from easy in my mind. She began by asking why I spoke Arabic and then told me that Arabic was dear to her because it was her own tongue. She said that she had been born in southern Arabia, in a city of great age and beauty, and that my speech, though good, lacked the music of the older form she had once known. She spoke quietly, almost like an educated woman in a drawing-room, yet nothing about her felt ordinary. It was plain that she knew much, had lived strangely, and had long been used to command.

Then, little by little, the talk turned to herself. She asked if women in my country covered their faces, and when I answered no, she laughed softly and asked whether men there judged beauty well. I replied, with as much sense as I could keep, that I thought most men would judge it quickly enough if beauty were placed before them. At this she seemed pleased. She said that I had looked at her veil often enough and that perhaps I wished to know what stood behind it. I told her frankly that I did. She sat very still for a moment, and then, with a movement so

calm that it seemed almost careless, she put back the wrapping from her face.

I have no power to describe fully what I then saw. I had known beautiful women, and I had imagined beauty of many kinds, but none of that had prepared me for Ayesha. Her face was not only lovely. It had a kind of light, pride, power, and life in it that made ordinary beauty seem small and thin. For a moment I could not even look straight at her. I saw her first in the still water near my knee, and only after that did I force my eyes to rise to her face itself. It was as though some perfect dream of womanhood had become flesh and stood before me, and yet there was something in it also that was dangerous and almost too strong for the senses to bear.

She watched the effect she made on me and seemed amused rather than vain. I think she had long known the force of her own presence and had grown used to it as a queen grows used to her crown. After a little, she covered her face again and asked whether I now understood why her people feared her. I answered that I understood at least why they obeyed her. Then, as I shifted my hand, the scarab ring upon my finger caught her eye. In one instant all her playful ease was gone. She seized my hand, bent over the ring, and asked in a low hard voice where I had found it. I told her that it belonged to my ward Leo, and that it had come from the chest left by his father. At that she rose at once and said she must see the young man without delay.

We went quickly back to Leo's chamber. Before we entered, Job came rushing toward me in great fear and whispered that a corpse was coming down the passage, for in her white wrappings and with that smooth silent movement she had seemed to him a spirit from the tombs. Ustane, who guessed better who it was, fell flat on the floor. I told Ayesha that my boy was near death. She answered very calmly that if he was not already dead, it was no matter, for she could bring him back. Then she ordered both Job and Ustane to leave us, because, as she said, she did not wish underlings to watch her wisdom at work. Job obeyed gladly enough, but Ustane would not go until Ayesha turned and spoke one sharp command. The girl dropped at once and crawled away trembling.

Ayesha then moved to the couch and bent over Leo, whose face lay turned

from the light. She said first only that he had a noble form. Then she saw him fully, and in the next moment the whole woman changed. She staggered backward as if struck, reached the wall, and gave a cry so terrible that it still rings in my memory. She sprang at me like a wild beast and demanded why I had hidden this from her. I had no idea what she meant. Then she broke into sobbing and broken words and told me that the man on the couch was Kallikrates, her lost love, come back to her at last as she had always known he would. If I had not been so frightened for Leo, I might have thought her mad. As it was, I cared only that the boy's breath was failing while she stood there shaking and crying out his old name.

I reminded her sharply that if she truly wished to save him, she must act at once. That brought her back to herself. From her robe she drew a tiny jar and gave it to me, saying that the liquid would cure him if life still remained. In my haste I pulled the stopper with my teeth, and one drop touched my tongue. It was sweet, and for a second the whole room seemed to swim before me. Then the feeling passed. Leo's face had turned ashen, and his breath rattled in his throat. Ayesha held his head while I poured the contents of the little vessel between his lips. For several dreadful moments nothing happened. Then a little color came back, the awful sound in his throat weakened, and by slow degrees the shadow of death moved away from him.

We waited beside him in deep silence. Ayesha, who had seemed almost beyond human feeling a short time before, now shook from head to foot and could hardly stand still. At last Leo opened his eyes and looked round in a weak, wandering way. He did not understand where he was, but he was alive, and that was enough. Ayesha looked down at him with a love so fierce and strange that it frightened me more than her anger had done. Then she drew her veil again and said that he must sleep and gain strength, for much still lay before him. She left the chamber after that, gliding away as silently as she had come, and I remained beside my ward, full of relief, wonder, and a new fear deeper than any I had yet felt in Kôr. For now I knew that Ayesha believed Leo to be no ordinary man, and I did not at all know what such a belief might lead her to do.

Part 10

It was close to ten o'clock that night when I threw myself upon my bed and tried to collect my thoughts. But the more I thought, the less I understood anything. Had I gone mad? Had some fever entered my brain? Or was I the victim of some vast trick too clever for me to see through? I, who had always laughed at stories of the supernatural, had within the last hour spoken with a woman who seemed to know events two thousand years old as plainly as I knew my own childhood. The thing was absurd, impossible, and yet I could not explain away what I had seen with my own eyes.

Her beauty troubled me even more than her story. I had believed myself long past the age at which a woman's face could disturb my peace, but now I knew that I had been mistaken. The memory of Ayesha's unveiled face would not leave me. I hated the power she had over me, yet I could not deny it. Worse still, the evil and danger in her only made her more terrible and, in some dark way, more attractive. I cursed my own foolish curiosity and thought bitterly that men have spent half their lives in pulling away veils that should have been left in place.

Then the scarab came back into my mind, and with it the old sherd and all that had followed from it. What had Ayesha meant by the look she gave that ring? Could it truly be that the ancient story was no invention at all? Could Leo indeed be, in some way beyond my understanding, the return of the man for whom she had waited through the centuries? I laughed aloud at the very thought, for it sounded like nonsense fit for a dream. Yet once one has admitted a woman who does not grow old, other impossible things come pressing in after her.

In my restlessness I began to walk up and down the chamber. At last I remembered that I had not looked in on Leo again. So I took a lamp, slipped off my shoes, and went softly down the passage to his sleeping place. The night wind moved the curtain there in a slow, uneasy way, as if unseen fingers played with it. Leo slept badly upon the couch, his face flushed and his breath heavy with fever. On the floor beside him, half sitting and half lying, Ustane held one of his hands and slept too, worn out by fear, love, and watching.

The sight touched me deeply. Poor Leo was very ill indeed, and suddenly all my ugly private jealousy died within me. For one moment I had thought of him as a rival, because youth and beauty would always stand closer to Ayesha's eyes than I could ever hope to stand. But when I saw him there, helpless and suffering, I knew again what he truly was to me. He was more than a son, and I prayed with all my heart that he might live, even if his life should give him to another. After that I went back to my own room, but sleep would still not come.

As I paced again in the silence, I noticed for the first time a narrow opening in the rock wall. It led into a passage. Since I did not like the thought of unknown ways running into my chamber, and since my mind was wild with unease, I took the lamp and followed it. The passage led to a stair cut in stone, and the stair led down to another tunnel that seemed to run beneath the great cave itself. On I went, drawn by I do not know what feeling, until a sudden draught struck the flame and put out my light. I stood there in total darkness, cold with fear and uncertain whether to go forward or back.

Then, far away, I saw a faint glow. It seemed my only hope, so I moved toward it by feeling the wall with one hand and the floor with my feet. At last I came to a hanging curtain through which the light shone. Beyond it was a small chamber lit by a strange white fire that gave no smoke. It looked like a tomb. Upon one stone shelf lay something covered with a white cloth, and before the fire stood a woman wrapped in a dark cloak. While I watched, she threw that cloak aside, and I saw that the woman was Ayesha.

I had never seen such a change in any human face. Her beauty was still there, but now it was twisted by hatred, grief, and a kind of terrible hunger of the soul. She lifted her arms, and as she did so the white fire leapt upward in answer, casting a fierce glare across the chamber and the covered form upon the stone. Then she cried out curses in Arabic against Amenartas, the Egyptian woman who had once stood between herself and Kallikrates. Again and again she lifted her hands, and again and again the fire answered her, while her voice hissed through the room like something alive and venomous. The hatred in her was so old and so deep that it seemed no longer human.

At last the fury broke and turned to grief. She sank to the floor, let down her hair, and sobbed as if her heart would tear itself apart. She cried that for two thousand years she had waited, desired, remembered, and suffered, and that time had brought her no forgetting. She called again and again upon Kallikrates, asking why he had been brought back to her only to torment her more. Then she rose, went to the covered shape upon the stone, and spoke of raising it, of making it stand before her once more. She stretched out her hands over it, and I thought I saw the cloth begin to stir, as though something beneath it had moved. Then she drew back and said it was useless, for she might force the body to seem alive, but she could not call back the true spirit that had left it.

After that she fell beside the bier and kissed the shrouded form again and again, weeping like a woman who had lost both reason and hope. The sight was more dreadful than all that had come before. It was not merely the sorrow of a woman; it was the sorrow of a being who had lived too long, loved too long, sinned too deeply, and found no rest anywhere. I could bear it no more. Shaking in every limb, I turned from that chamber and crept back through the black passages as best I could, stumbling, falling, losing my way, and finding it again. At last I reached the foot of the stair, then my room, and then my bed, where I dropped at once into a sleep more like stupor than rest, carrying with me the horrible certainty that I had looked upon a soul in hell.

Part 11

When I woke the next morning, I was stiff in every limb and more troubled in mind than before. In daylight, one would think the strange things of the night might seem smaller, but it was not so. Ayesha's beauty, her grief, her power, and the terrible secret of her love had only grown more real. I ate a little, went to see Leo, and found him still wandering in mind, with Ustane near him in tears. Billali shook his head and said the boy would die before night. While I stood there with a heavy heart, the old man brought me a message that She commanded my presence, for she was sitting in the great cave to do justice on those who had

attacked us.

I followed him through the long cavern, full now of moving Amahagger hurrying toward the place of judgment. The walls of that mighty underground hall were carved all along their length, and at every short distance side-passages opened into tombs cut in the rock by the ancient people who had once ruled Kôr. At last we reached the far end, where there was a rock platform like an altar, with passages on either side leading to other chambers of the dead. Upon this dais sat Ayesha, veiled and motionless, while before her stood the men who had been taken after the fight at the feast. Their faces, which had been so fierce when they rushed on us, were now full of fear. All the cave was silent. No one there doubted that life and death lay in the will of the woman above them.

Billali spoke first and told the story of the outrage. The prisoners made little answer, for what answer could they make? They had broken the command that strangers were not to be killed, and worse still, they had rebelled against the power of She herself. Ayesha asked only a few questions. Then she said that obedience was the first law and that rebellion must be paid for in full. I cannot now remember every word she used, but I remember clearly the dreadful calm with which she gave judgment. She lifted her arm, fixed her eyes on the culprits, and one after another they sank down before her, struck as if by an unseen blow. There was no sword, no spear, no executioner's hand. Yet death went out from her just the same, and the people crouched lower at every fall.

When it was over, the bodies were taken away and the crowd melted back into the long cave like dark water flowing from a stone. Even then I could not say with certainty by what force she killed them. Perhaps it was some strange natural power, perhaps some intensity of will beyond ordinary men, perhaps something for which we have no name at all. But I know what I saw. Those men came before her living and went out dead. From that hour onward I never again doubted that, in ways unknown to us, Ayesha held powers over life which made her little less than divine in the eyes of the Amahagger.

When the public judgment was done, I returned to Leo's chamber. He was sleeping more quietly now, and the medicine had plainly helped him. Ayesha came

there not long after, and Ustane, though frightened, remained beside the couch because she loved him too much to move. She asked in a low voice what She wanted, and said it was surely the place of a wife to remain near her husband when he was near death. Ayesha first ordered her out, and when the girl would not go at once, she spoke one single word with such force that Ustane dropped and crept away on hands and knees. Yet after Leo revived, Ayesha again sent for Ustane and made her stand before us, for she had not finished with her.

She then addressed the girl coldly and asked by what right she had taken this man to husband. Ustane answered that she had done so according to the custom of her people. Ayesha replied that the custom did not hold in this case, because Leo was a stranger and not of their race, and she told her plainly that she had done wrong. Still, because the act might have been done in ignorance, she said she would spare her life on one condition. Ustane was to return at once to her own place and never again look upon Leo or speak to him. If she broke that command, she would die at that very moment. The order was clear enough, but the poor girl, wild with grief and love, refused to obey it.

Then came one of the strangest and most fearful scenes I ever witnessed. Ustane lifted up her face and cried that Leo was her husband, that she had chosen him, saved him, and would never give him up. I spoke in Latin and begged Ayesha to be merciful, but she only answered that she was already showing mercy, because otherwise the girl would be dead where she stood. Ustane would not yield. She said again and again that she would not go. Then, with a movement so swift that I could hardly follow it, Ayesha touched or struck her lightly on the head.

At once there appeared across the dark bronze of Ustane's hair three finger-marks white as snow. The girl herself looked stunned and put her hands to her head, while I cried out in sheer horror at the sight. Ayesha laughed a little and asked whether we still thought she lacked the power to destroy. Yet she did not kill her then. Instead she said that because the girl was young and foolish and because she herself was in a happy mood, she would once more spare her. But she warned her not to forget the white marks on her hair, for they were the sign of death held back, not death cancelled. So Ustane went from us living, but under a

shadow that none of us could mistake.

The scene left me shaken and sick at heart. Leo, when he understood what had happened, was angry enough, but he was too weak from illness to fight more than with words. As for me, I now saw more clearly than before the true danger of our position. Ayesha loved Leo with all the strength of her ancient soul, and because she loved him she could be merciful one moment and terrible the next. Ustane stood in her path, and though for the time she was spared, I knew in my heart that no peace could last between those two women. Thus the day of judgment ended, not with safety, but with a pause before further trouble. In Kôr even mercy had fear hidden inside it.

Part 12

After the judgment was over and the dead men had been carried away, I seized the chance to ask Ayesha once more to come and see Leo. She refused. She said very calmly that he would not die before nightfall, because that kind of fever killed at dusk or at dawn, and that it was better to let the illness spend itself before she checked it. Then, as if nothing of great importance had happened, she told me to follow her and said she would show me the wonders of the caves. I was in no state to refuse her. Indeed, by that time I had fallen so deeply under the influence of her beauty, her mind, and the strange force that breathed from her whole person, that I went where she wished almost without resistance.

Four mute girls took lamps, two before us and two behind, and so we moved through the great cave. Ayesha asked if I had ever seen anything like it, and I answered truthfully that I had not. She told me that the people of Kôr, who had once lived in the mighty city on the plain, had hollowed that cavern and many others with their own hands. They were, she said, older than the Egyptians and in some ways greater, but like the Egyptians they cared more for the dead than for the living. Then she showed me a carving over the dais where she had sat in judgment. It was the figure of an old king seated in a chair, bearing an ivory rod. Beneath it was an inscription in the strange writing of Kôr, and with some

hesitation she translated it. It said that in the year four thousand two hundred and fifty-nine from the founding of the city, this burial cave had been completed under King Tisno after three generations of labour, and that blessings should rest upon the sleepers there until the day of awakening.

The meaning of this struck me very strongly. If the cave had been finished more than four thousand years after the city itself was founded, and if the city was already ancient and ruined when Ayesha first saw it two thousand years before our own visit, then Kôr must have belonged to a world unimaginably old. Even while I was trying to take that thought in, she led me away through the galleries that opened from the main cavern. All about us were chambers cut in the living rock, each one a tomb, and in many of them the dead still lay untouched. The lamps of the mutes floated before us through the darkness, and the silence there was so deep that our light footsteps seemed an offence. I have seen churches, ruins, catacombs, and burying grounds in many lands, but never anything that came near the solemnity of those halls.

In one sepulchre we entered, there were two stone benches, and upon them lay forms wrapped in yellow linen. Ayesha told me to uncover them. At first I drew back, for the place filled me with dread, and it seemed like sacrilege to put living hands upon those coverings. She laughed softly at my fear and drew back the cloths herself. Beneath them lay a woman and a little child. The woman had clearly been beautiful, and even after all those lost ages her face was calm and noble, with delicate brows, long lashes, and features untouched by decay. Her dark hair streamed down over her white robe, and upon her arm, pressed against her breast, lay a babe. The sight was so sweet and so awful that I could hardly keep back my tears. On the other shelf lay an older man with a long grizzled beard, perhaps her husband, who had come at last to sleep beside her after many years of life without her. I covered them again with real reverence.

We went on from tomb to tomb, and everywhere there were similar wonders. The people of Kôr had possessed some art of keeping the dead from corruption. Men and women who must have lain there for thousands of years seemed not rotten, but asleep. There were few ornaments and almost no weapons beside them,

as if rank, riches, and power had meant little at the end. The white robes, the still faces, the little drifts of fine dust, the lamps moving over them, and the deep-cut quiet of the stone all pressed one thought upon the mind again and again: that whole generations pass, are forgotten, and leave behind no more than a body on a shelf and perhaps a name cut in a wall. Ayesha walked among them like a spirit who had outlived all their names.

At last we came to a smaller tomb with only two occupants, both lying upon one shelf. I drew back the cloths and saw a young man and a young girl clasped together heart to heart. Her head rested upon his arm, and his lips were pressed against her brow. When I opened the man's robe, I found a dagger wound over his heart, and under the girl's breast was the mark of a like cruel stroke. Above them were three words which Ayesha translated as "Wedded in Death." The sight moved me beyond measure, and for a moment my imagination leapt backward across the centuries. I seemed to see a wedding in that very cave, priests, music, torches, warriors in armour, and a pale bride brought to another man while the dark-haired youth she truly loved sprang forward from the crowd, kissed her, and was struck down. Then, before they could part them forever, she drove the dagger into her own breast and fell beside him. It was only a vision of the mind, perhaps, but it came with such force that it seemed almost memory itself.

When that strange dream passed, I heard Ayesha speaking in a solemn voice as she covered the dead lovers once more. She said that this was the fate of all men and women at last: the tomb, the forgetting that hides the tomb, and the long sleep beyond pride, love, and beauty. Even she, she said, who had lived so long, must one day lie as they lay. What was ten thousand years, or a hundred thousand, against the full measure of time? Almost nothing. Life and death followed each other like day and night, she said, and perhaps they would go on doing so through age after age until all worlds died and only the Spirit that is Life remained. Then what would become even of her? She did not know. There was in her voice at that moment no pride, only weariness and a kind of greatness made sorrowful. It was the first time I understood that her long life had not freed her from the oldest human fear.

She then asked if I wished to see more, even the tomb of Tisno himself in all his dead pomp. I answered that I had seen enough. My heart was overwhelmed by the power of that present death all around us, and I felt that if I stayed longer in those caves, my mind would break under the weight of the ancient silence. So I begged her to take me away, and she did. We turned back through the dark galleries with the mute girls and their lamps floating ahead of us, and I went as a man goes in a dream, feeling that I had walked not only among the dead, but among the ruins of time itself.

Part 13

When we came back from the tombs to the outer room near her own chamber, I would gladly have taken my leave. But Ayesha would not let me go. She said that my talk pleased her, and that for two thousand years she had had no company but slaves and her own thoughts. Wisdom, she said, had come from all that lonely thinking, yet loneliness had come with it too, and she had grown tired even of herself. Then, with a strange smile, she said that I reminded her of old philosophers she had once argued with in Athens and Arabia, men full of books, dust, and difficult thoughts. So she drew back the curtain and told me to enter once more, sit beside her, eat fruit, and look at her as I had asked to do before.

Once inside, she unveiled again, and this time she was not terrible in the way I had seen her beside the flame or in the court of judgment. She seemed instead full of shining life, triumph, youth, and delight in her own beauty. Her eyes laughed, her hair moved and filled the little chamber with perfume, and the whole air around her felt warm and bright. She told me to look carefully and judge her face, her form, her hands, her feet, and the whiteness of her skin. Then, with shameless playfulness, she made me put my hands around her waist so that I might feel how slight it was. I am not proud of what followed, but I must tell the truth. I was only a man, and she was more than any woman I had ever known.

I fell on my knees before her and spoke wildly, half in one language and half in another. I said that I worshipped her and would give even my soul to marry her.

She looked surprised for a moment, and then she laughed and clapped her hands like a child pleased with a clever trick. She told me that she had wondered how long it would take to bring me to my knees, and that the sight of a man kneeling was always sweet to a woman's heart. Yet she also said that I was a fool, because she was not for me. She loved only one man, and I was not that man.

Even then she leaned nearer and, half mocking and half dangerous, told me that I might look and even kiss if I wished, but that if I once truly kissed her I would never know peace again. Her hair touched my brow, and the sweetness of her breath nearly turned my senses. I stretched out my hands. At that very instant she straightened herself and held one hand over my head. It seemed to me that some cool current ran from her into me, driving out the madness and bringing me back to reason, shame, and self-control. Then she spoke more sternly and told me that I was good and honest and that she would spare me if she could, but that I must not trouble her in that way again.

She said I knew nothing of what she truly was. I had seen beauty, power, sorrow, and anger in her, but all those were only passing moods, like changing images in water. The thing beneath them remained the same. Therefore, she said, I must not let myself be led by what she seemed at one moment or another. If I vexed her again, she would veil herself and never show me her face any more. I sat down beside her trembling and ashamed, still shaken by desire and by the sudden cold return of judgment. I did not dare tell her that I had already seen another of her faces that night in the tomb, the face of hatred and unending grief.

After that she turned to easier talk and asked me about the religion of the Hebrew teacher who, as I had told her earlier, now ruled the hearts of Rome, Greece, Egypt, and lands beyond. I explained Christianity as simply as I could, though she cared less for the common teaching than for the person who had taught it. I also told her of Mohammed and the new faith that had spread among the Arabs. She listened, but not with reverence. Her answer was that religions rise because men fear the end, long for reward, and cannot bear uncertainty. Each faith, she said, promises future good to its own followers and future evil to others, and thus human selfishness dresses itself in holy robes.

She went on to say that religions come and go, civilizations come and go, but the world and human nature remain much the same. In her view, hope ought to rise from within a man, not from outside him. He should stand upright by the strength of his own spirit and understanding, not throw himself before an imagined god shaped after his own form, only greater in power and more terrible in will. I did not agree with her, but I did not argue. I was too tired in mind, too conscious of her immense age and knowledge, and too sure that in such a contest I should be beaten. Many times afterward I regretted my silence, for it was the nearest I ever came to hearing the full shape of Ayesha's true philosophy.

She noticed that I had grown quiet and laughed at me again. She said perhaps I feared she would make me her disciple and teach me a faith of her own. Then her mood changed once more from debate to weariness. She spoke bitterly of the old gods of Arabia and of the foolishness of worshipping names, stars, stones, and blood-stained images. She said that whenever she had risen in wisdom and spoken against such things, men had been ready to kill her in the name of the very errors that held them down. Yet even while she mocked the gods of others, I could see that she herself carried burdens as heavy as any priest or prophet ever laid on the human heart. She was lonely beyond all measure, and loneliness had sharpened every power in her while wounding every softer part.

At last she said that enough had been spoken for the present and that we must go back to Leo. By then her brighter mood had grown quiet, and the proud playfulness was fading from her. When we came again to the chamber where he lay, he was sleeping deeply and more naturally than before, and the look of death had left his face. She stood over him for some time in silence, and then spoke to me in a low voice. She said that I had spoken earlier of Hell, a place where memory, desire, guilt, and hopelessness torment the living spirit without end. If such a place existed, she said, then she had lived in it for two thousand years, driven onward only by the hope that one day the man she had lost would return to her.

She said that when at last she saw Leo and knew him for the one she had waited for, the fear of losing him again had gathered all the pain of all those centuries into a single moment. Nothing in all her long life, she said, had been as terrible as

those few minutes in which she did not know whether he would live or die. Now that he was safe and sleeping, the strain passed from her, and for one instant she seemed not queen, magician, or deathless wonder, but only a woman whose long torment had broken into relief. She laid her hand softly upon his golden head, bent down, and kissed his brow with a tenderness so deep that it would have been beautiful had it not cut me to the heart. For I was jealous.

Part 14

When I woke the next morning, I found that Leo's long sleep had broken the force of the fever. He was still weak, but his mind was clear again, and his old bright spirit was coming back. Job was delighted and moved about him with great pride, as if he himself had brought the boy out of danger by strength of character alone. For my own part, I was more relieved than I can say. After all the fear, blood, and mystery through which we had passed, it was a simple joy to hear Leo speak in his ordinary voice and ask for food like a healthy man. Yet even then I could not forget that the peace was only on the surface. Ayesha was still near, and wherever she was, safety never felt complete.

Before long, Billali came to say that it was She's pleasure to receive us. We went, not gladly, but because refusal was impossible. As always, the mutes led us through the curtains and left us alone with her. Ayesha unveiled at once, and I saw that Leo was almost as deeply struck by her beauty as I had been. Indeed, who could help it? She then stretched out her hands and told him to embrace her. He did so, and with much more warmth than strict good manners required, for though he was confused, he was still a young man, and she was Ayesha.

She laid one white hand upon his golden head and looked into his eyes with a tenderness that was terrible because it was so real. Then she spoke very quietly, calling him Kallikrates and asking whether he wondered when the hour would come in which he might call her wholly his own. She answered her own question at once. First, she said, he must become as she was. Not truly immortal, for she now denied that she herself was that, but shielded so strongly against age and

decay that time could do almost nothing to him. As yet, she said, they were not fit mates, because the power and brightness in her own being would burn him up if he came too near to it as he now stood.

She spoke next of the place of Life, to which she meant to lead us soon. There, she said, Leo would pass through the same fiery mystery by which she herself had once been changed. He would come forth beautiful, strong, and in a new sense reborn, and only then could she truly call him husband. Leo muttered something in answer, but he was plainly half bewildered and half drawn onward by the force of her words. I do not think that he fully believed her, yet neither did he laugh. There are some persons in whose presence disbelief grows weak. Ayesha was one of them. She had only to speak, and impossible things began to sound like promises rather than madness.

Then, to my surprise, she turned to me and said that she would give the same gift to me also, because I had pleased her and was less foolish than most men. Leo at once laughed and nudged me, asking whether I had been making compliments to the lady behind his back. I answered with as much dignity as I could gather that I thanked her, but wanted no such gift. If there was indeed some force that held old age far away, then I still wished no part in it. I said that I was content to grow old and die in the common way, and that I did not trust powers which had not been meant for ordinary men. Ayesha smiled when I said this, but I think she also judged me a coward.

She was still smiling when Leo, with more directness than caution, asked where Ustane had gone. He said that the girl had been kind to him during his illness and that he would like to know what had become of her. At this I nudged him sharply, but too late. Ayesha answered lightly that she did not know. The girl, she said, had grown tired of waiting on the sick, as savage women often do, and had gone away, perhaps to return and perhaps not. Leo looked both troubled and displeased. It was plain that he had formed more feeling for Ustane than I would have wished, and equally plain that Ayesha saw it at once.

She then turned the subject with great skill, as a woman of the world might do when she wished to hide jealousy under ease. She spoke of the caves, of the

wonders of Kôr, and of the strange works made by the people who had lived there long ago. Leo listened and answered with outward politeness, but from time to time I could see that his thoughts went back to Ustane. Ayesha did not miss those looks. Under the softness of her voice there was a hard note, small but sharp as steel under silk. I knew then that the old struggle had not ended when Ustane left the chamber with white marks on her hair. It had only gone underground for a time.

At last Ayesha proposed that Leo, since he was better, should see some of the marvels of the caves for himself. He agreed readily enough, for the curiosity of youth was strong in him, and perhaps also because movement and novelty offered some relief from the strain he felt in her presence. So we went again among the tombs and galleries, though I shall not repeat all that we saw there, because much was like what I had seen already. Still, the effect upon Leo was great. He was astonished by the endless chambers of the dead, the piles of ancient bones, the carved walls, and the preserved bodies that lay like sleepers under linen in the rock. Job hated the whole business and muttered that no good ever came of stirring up old graves, which in that place sounded sensible enough.

When at last we returned, Billali met us and told us that again it was She's pleasure that we should attend her. So back we went into her presence, not less uneasy for having been there once before. Ayesha unveiled once more and spoke to Leo in a more intimate tone than ever, asking whether he now better understood the greatness of the place and the greatness of the destiny she offered him. Then she repeated that the time was coming soon when he would be led to the very center of the mystery, and that after that there would be no barrier between them. I looked at Leo as she spoke, and I saw in his face what I feared to see. He was no longer merely astonished by her. He was beginning to fall under her spell.

Part 15

That evening Ayesha sent for us again, and we were led out to a flat space before the cave where a great fire had been built. The sight of that fire turned my

stomach. It was not made from common wood. Dry white remains from the ancient tombs had been piled there and were burning with a fierce clear flame, so that the dead of long ago now gave light to the pleasure of the living. Ayesha, who saw my horror, laughed and said she had promised me a strange sight and had not failed. She added that the thing had its lesson, for no one knows what the future may do with even the proudest body once life has gone from it.

We sat down near her, and old black vases of drink were passed from hand to hand. For a long time nobody spoke. The fire burned, the lamps flickered, and all around us sat the dark, watchful faces of the Amahagger. On the ground before the flames lay a broad wooden tray with handles and two great iron pincers, one on either side, and the sight of them made me uneasy at once. The whole company seemed to wait for something, but there was no sign of food, no music, and no ordinary festivity. It was less like a feast than like some cruel play not yet begun.

At last one man cried out, "Where is the flesh that we shall eat?" and all the rest answered together, stretching out their right arms toward the fire, "The flesh will come." More questions followed in the same way, and each answer came back from the whole circle like one deep voice. The sound of it in that red light and under that mountain roof was dreadful beyond telling. I began once more to feel that same sick fear we had known on the night of the pot-feast, as if we were sitting among people whose customs were older than pity and harder than stone. Even Leo, who usually kept a cheerful mind, grew quiet beside me.

Then Ayesha spoke lightly and told me to look, for the play was beginning. Out of the darkness came two long lines of dancers, men on one side and women on the other, moving in perfect silence around the fire. Their dance was wild, ugly, and full of violent gestures, but it was more than a dance. It acted out an attempted murder, then a burial alive, then the struggle of the buried victim to rise again, and between each part the whole troop broke into a furious stamping motion round the one who lay upon the ground. It was all done without a word, which made it even more horrible. The minds of these people seemed to take delight only in death, fear, and mockery.

In the middle of this, one great woman among the dancers suddenly fell into a

fit and came rushing toward us screaming that she wanted a black goat. She foamed, rolled on the ground, and cried out again and again for the blood of a black goat, while the others shouted that a devil had entered her. A goat was dragged in, and there followed a disgusting little scene of lies, because the poor creature was not fully black and they tried to hide its white marks from the possessed woman. Its throat was cut, the blood was caught in a dish, and she seized it and drank it greedily. The instant she had swallowed it, the fit stopped. She got up calmly, smiled faintly, and went back to the dancers as if nothing had happened.

I thought the performance must now be over, but I was wrong. A strange figure that looked like a baboon came hopping round the fire, and from the opposite side another figure met it, this one dressed like a lion. At first I took them both for part of the show, but before long I saw that the lion moved too much like a real man whom I knew. Then another shape, wrapped in a leopard skin, slipped in and began to creep away into the dark. The lion followed it, and I understood suddenly that this was no dance at all. It was Leo leaving us, drawn away by some secret sign or message.

I rose and went after him as quietly as I could. Beyond the firelight I found the truth. The leopard was Ustane. She threw aside her disguise and whispered urgently to Leo that she was in danger of death from She-who-must-be-obeyed, that she loved him, that she had saved his life, and that he must flee with her at once across the marshes if he wished to keep her. Leo, honest and warm-hearted as always, answered that of course he would not cast her off and that perhaps they should explain matters openly to the Queen. But Ustane would not hear of that. She said Ayesha would kill them, begged him to come away at once, and then, to strengthen her plea, threw herself into his arms. As she did so, the leopard head slipped from her hair and I saw once more the three white finger-marks shining on her dark hair in the faint light.

I was just stepping forward to separate them, because I knew too well that Leo was not strong where women were concerned, when I heard behind me a little silver laugh. No sound in all that land could have struck me with greater fear. I

turned, and there stood Ayesha herself, with Billali and two male mutes at her side. For one terrible instant none of us moved. Ustane let fall her arms and covered her eyes. Leo, caught in the act and not yet understanding the full danger, looked foolish and ashamed. As for me, I felt certain that some dreadful thing was now about to happen, and that the night's dance had only been the beginning.

Part 16

For one terrible moment after Ayesha appeared behind us, nobody moved. Then she spoke first, and she spoke to Leo, not to Ustane. Her voice was soft, almost playful, but there was steel under it. She said that the sight had been a pretty one indeed, the lion and the leopard meeting in the dark. Then she turned to Ustane and said that she might have passed her by, had not the moonlight shown the white marks still lying across her hair. Ustane, broken by fear, begged her not to play with her and asked only to be killed at once and have it over.

Ayesha answered that it was too sudden a fall from love to the grave and made a sign to the mutes. They stepped forward and seized Ustane by the arms. Leo at once struck one of them down and stood over him, ready to break the man like a stick. Ayesha only laughed and said he had thrown well for a man so lately sick. Then she added that the girl should not be harmed, because she wished to receive her in her own rooms, and that anyone favoured by Leo would naturally be favoured by her as well. I pulled Leo away from the fallen mute, and though confused and furious, he yielded to me. So the whole unhappy company crossed back over the plateau toward the cave, passing the white ashes of the fire, where no dancer now remained.

In Ayesha's chamber she seated herself upon her cushions and dismissed Billali and Job. Only one mute girl remained, her favourite attendant, while the rest of us stood before her. Ustane was placed a little apart, like a prisoner already judged in all but name. Ayesha then turned to me and asked, in a cold voice, how I had come to be mixed up in that night's meeting after hearing her command that Ustane should leave. I answered that I knew nothing of it and had only followed

when I saw Leo drawn away. She said she believed me and that I was fortunate she did, because otherwise I also would have shared the blame.

Leo then burst in hotly. He said he saw no guilt in the matter at all. Ustane, he argued, had chosen him according to the custom of the country, and if she had done wrong, then he had done the same and should be punished with her. He ended by declaring that if Ayesha let one of the mutes lay hands on the girl again, he would tear the fellow to pieces. Ayesha listened without interruption and with no change of face that I could see. Then she turned away from him and spoke to Ustane, asking why she had dared to set her small desire against the force of her will. In that moment the poor girl did something I shall never forget.

Knowing perfectly what sort of death stood before her, Ustane drew herself up to her full height and answered with a courage almost beyond belief. She said she had acted because her love was stronger than death and because life without Leo would be no life at all. Therefore she had taken the risk gladly and would gladly pay the price, because he had once embraced her and told her he still loved her. Then she looked straight at Ayesha and said what no one else in Kôr would have dared to say. She said that Ayesha loved Leo herself and wished to destroy her because she stood in the way. She said she was dying and knew it, but that even while standing on the edge of doom she could see farther than the queen wished. In that last desperate speech, she prophesied that Ayesha would not profit by her crime and that Leo would never truly become her husband in this life.

Before she could say more, Ayesha rose in a blaze of rage and fear. She stretched out one trembling arm toward the girl and stood there silent, quivering from head to foot. Ustane stopped speaking at once. Her face changed, her eyes grew large, and a look of dreadful terror came over her, the same look I had once seen when she broke off in her wild song. She put her hands to her head, gave one piercing scream, turned twice where she stood, and fell backward to the floor. Leo and I sprang to her together, but there was nothing to be done. She was dead, struck down in an instant by that same awful power which Ayesha could loose at will.

Leo understood the truth a moment later, and then his grief became fury. With

a cry that was hardly human, he sprang at Ayesha to kill her if he could. But she had expected the attack. Again she stretched out her hand, and he went reeling backward as if some heavy blow had struck him in the chest. I caught him before he fell. He told me afterward that the feeling was not only of force, but of complete helplessness, as if his courage and strength had both been torn out of him in one instant. Then Ayesha, in the softest voice imaginable, asked him to forgive her if her justice had shocked him. At that he called her fiend and murderess and swore he would kill her yet.

She answered that he did not understand. He was her love, her lost Kallikrates, and she had waited two thousand years for him to return. Ustane had stood between them and therefore had been laid in the dust. Leo cried that his name was Leo Vincey and not Kallikrates, and that he would rather belong to a fiend from hell than to her. Ayesha only smiled and said that he had forgotten too long and that memory would come back. Then, with one swift motion, she cast off her veil and stood before him in the full glory of her beauty. I saw the change pass over Leo's face as plainly as if some drug had been poured into his blood. Rage loosened, resistance weakened, astonishment became admiration, and admiration turned into that fatal fascination which I myself already knew too well.

He struggled hard. I saw him try to keep his honour, his grief, and his will. Then his eye fell upon poor Ustane's body, and for a second he recovered himself. He said hoarsely that Ayesha was a murderess and that the dead girl had loved him. But Ayesha answered that if she had sinned, she had sinned for love of him, and that her beauty must answer for her sin. She held out her arms and whispered to him to come. A moment later it was over. I saw him yield, saw her lying in his arms, saw their lips meet there in the presence of the woman she had just killed. That sight filled me with shame, horror, jealousy, and pity all at once. Yet I must say the truth: the force which conquered him was more than the force of common human beauty.

Ayesha then slipped free, laughed in triumph, and said that she had told him he would soon come to her. Leo groaned with misery, for even in surrender he knew how deeply he had fallen. She veiled herself again, summoned the mutes,

and had Ustane's body dragged away through the curtains at the end of the chamber. Leo watched it go until he could bear no more, and then covered his eyes. When the dead girl had vanished, Ayesha said solemnly that the dead had passed from them. Then, with one of those sudden changes natural to her, she threw back her veil again and broke into a wild chant of triumph and love.

She sang that love is the one true flower in the desert of life and the one fixed star above human wandering. She sang that all else is shadow, wind, and vanity, but that love remains. Then she turned directly to Leo and said she had loved him long, waited for him long, and that now her reward had come at last. She said that from a grave she had raised patience like a seed and watered it with tears, and now it had borne fruit. Death itself, she cried, had brought back to her the man who had been dead. Together, she promised, they would move from triumph to triumph, crowned like rulers, feared and worshipped by all peoples. The chant was beautiful, fierce, proud, and terrible, and in another mood I might have admired it greatly. There, after what I had seen, it sounded like the song of victory from the lips of a splendid devil.

When the chant ended, she said that if Leo still doubted her words, she would show him and me a further proof at once. So she ordered us each to take a lamp and follow her. By that time thought itself had become weak in me. We obeyed almost like men in a dream. At the back of her chamber she raised a curtain and showed us a little stair cut down into the rock. As we went down, I noticed that the middle of the steps had been worn deep by passing feet, unlike the other stairs in Kôr, which were scarcely worn at all. Ayesha saw me looking and said that the hollow had been made by her own sandals, because for more than two thousand years she had gone down there day after day. That simple fact struck me harder than many greater wonders had done. At the bottom we came to a passage and then to a curtain I knew at once. It was the same place where I had once secretly watched her beside the white flame and the shrouded dead. She entered the tomb, and we followed, trembling to learn at last what hidden truth she meant to show.

The tomb into which Ayesha led us was small, but no hall of kings ever felt more solemn to me. She took the lamp from Leo and raised it high above her head, so that the light fell on three things at once: the stone bier with the wrapped body upon it, the hollow in the floor where I had once seen the strange white flame, and the rock shelf opposite, where she herself had slept. Then she laid her hand upon the worn stone and said that for more than two thousand years she had lain there night after night in the company of the dead man before us. She said she had not thought it fitting to sleep soft while her beloved lay stiff in death, and that her tossing body had worn the very slab thin. There was no pride in her voice just then. It was the voice of a woman who had made grief into a habit and faithfulness into a form of worship.

She next spoke to Leo as if no break of centuries stood between the living youth and the dead shape before him. She told him not to fear, because all who live have lived before, though memory writes no clear record and the earth takes back what it once lent. Yet she, by her arts and by the knowledge she had learned from the dead wise men of Kôr, had kept this one body from dust. She called it a mask for memory, a preserved image by which the lost past might still stand before her eyes. Then she cried, "Let the dead and the living meet," and with one swift movement tore away the shroud. What lay beneath was so fearful in its likeness that for a moment my mind refused to receive it.

There, stretched upon the stone, robed in white and perfectly preserved, lay what seemed to be Leo Vincey himself. The dead face looked perhaps a little older, a little more fixed and remote, but feature for feature it was the same face. The same clear shape of brow and cheek, the same mouth, the same form of breast and limb, the same thick crop of little golden curls, all were there. I stared from the living man beside me to the dead one on the bier and could scarcely believe that they were not twin brothers. Never in my life had I seen so exact a likeness. Leo himself stood dumb for several minutes, staring as if his mind had been struck numb. At last he only whispered, "Cover it up, and take me away."

But Ayesha would not let the matter end there. She stood with the lamp above

her, looking less like a woman than like some prophetess of an older world, and said that no part of her guilt must be hidden. Then she ordered me to open the robe upon the dead man's breast. My hands shook as I obeyed. It felt like a kind of desecration to touch that still image of the youth standing beside me in life. When the breast was uncovered, we saw at once the mark of death: a spear-wound, directly above the heart. Then Ayesha confessed plainly that it was she who had killed him in the Place of Life, maddened with jealousy because he turned not to her but to the Egyptian woman, Amenartas.

She then began to tell the whole old story more fully. She said that when Kallikrates and Amenartas came to Kôr, she had already learned much from a very ancient and pure old man named Noot, who knew deep truths about the Spirit of the world and the mystery that lay hidden under ordinary life. Noot, she said, had refused the gift of prolonged life for the sake of his conscience, and had died newly before they came. As she pointed to the dust near my feet, I put out my hand and found in it a single yellow human tooth, all that remained of that wise and ancient man. She laughed when I showed it to her and said that such was the end of all earthly wisdom: one little tooth in the dust. Then she went on to say that she herself had entered the great fiery mystery, had come out deathless and more beautiful than before, and had opened her arms to Kallikrates, asking him to take her as his immortal bride.

Instead of accepting her, she said, he turned away and held Amenartas. Then, in a fury that made her mad, she snatched up his own javelin and stabbed him there in the Place of Life. She said that later in her history she learned to strike by the force of eye and will alone, but at that time she killed with the spear. Afterward, she told us, she wept over him in such grief that, had she still been a mortal woman, her heart must have broken. Amenartas cursed her by all the gods of Egypt, but could not truly harm her, and together the two women carried the dead man away from the place where he fell. In time she sent the Egyptian away through the swamps, not knowing that she would live, bear a son, and write the tale that would one day guide the lost lover back to his murderess. It was a dreadful tale to hear spoken in that narrow tomb, with the dead body itself lying before us as witness.

When she had done, she said that now the old body had served its purpose and must return at last to the dust. From the shelf where she slept she took a great glassy double-handled vase, untied its mouth, and bent first to kiss the white forehead of the dead Kallikrates. Then, taking the utmost care that not one drop should fall upon us or upon herself, she sprinkled the liquid in the vase all over the preserved form and poured the rest upon the breast and head. Instantly a thick smoke rose and filled the tomb with choking fumes. From the bier came a fierce fizzing and cracking sound, while the stone itself seemed to hiss under the power of that terrible fluid. We could see nothing for some moments, only hear the dreadful work going on behind the smoke.

At last the vapour thinned and drifted away. Where the body had rested for all those centuries there was now nothing left but a little heap of white smoking powder. Even the stone beneath had been eaten into by the strength of the liquid. Ayesha stooped, lifted a handful of the ash, and cast it into the air, saying slowly, "Dust to dust. The past to the past. The dead to the dead. Kallikrates is dead, and is born again." The powder floated down in silence, and neither Leo nor I could speak a word. The whole thing had passed beyond astonishment into something colder and heavier, where speech seemed foolish. Then she told us to leave her, rest if we could, and be ready, because on the next night we would begin the road to the Place of Life itself.

We went back to our rooms like men walking in sleep. I looked in on Job as we passed and found him sleeping deeply, and I was glad with all my heart that his poor nerves had been spared what we had just seen. But Leo had not been spared. The moment we were alone, all the horror of the day broke over him. He cried out over Ustane's murder, cursed his own weakness, cursed the hour when we first found the writing on the sherd, and bitterly blamed himself for yielding to Ayesha's beauty while the dead girl who had loved him was scarcely cold. Yet he did not dare curse Ayesha herself. None of us dared. So that dreadful chapter closed with my ward broken by grief and terror, and with the memory of the dead and living face still burning before my eyes.

Part 18

The next morning, when I woke, it was already about nine o'clock. Job came in to call me, and I saw at once from his face that he had spent the night in a state of deep fear. He seemed honestly surprised to find both Leo and me still alive in our beds. When I told him what had happened to poor Ustane, he was greatly shocked, though she had never been his favourite, any more than he had been hers. She had called him "pig" in her rough Arabic, and he had called her "hussy" in very plain English; but all those little quarrels were forgotten now that she was dead by the hand of her queen. In the presence of such a catastrophe, Job's old dislike turned at once into pity and fear.

He then began, with much seriousness, to tell me his opinion of Ayesha. He said that she was not a woman at all in the proper Christian sense, but something much darker and more dangerous, perhaps the devil himself, or if not, then the devil's wife, since no single wicked being, in his view, could manage so much evil alone. He declared that the Witch of Endor was nothing beside her, and that she could raise every person in the Bible from the grave as easily as he himself might grow cress on a wet cloth. All this he said with perfect conviction, and though his language was often foolish, the terror under it was real enough. He called Kôr a country of devils and Ayesha the chief of them all. He added, with mournful certainty, that if we ever escaped from that place it would be more than he expected, and that a woman like Ayesha would never willingly let a fine young man such as Leo slip from her power.

I reminded him that, whatever else she might be, she had saved Leo's life. Job answered at once that she would only demand his soul in payment and make him into a being like herself. He said he had lain awake through the night reading in the little Bible his mother had given him, looking up all the passages concerning witches and sorcerers until, as he put it, his hair stood on end. There was something comic in his choice of words and something touching in the earnestness behind them. He had gone beyond common fear into that state where a plain man tries to hold himself together by the only truths he has always trusted. Even then,

however, I did not guess how deeply shaken he truly was.

After a pause he said that, if I would not think him foolish, he wished to speak very seriously now that Leo was out of the way, for Leo had risen early and gone out walking. He then told me that he knew in his heart this was the last country he would ever see in this world. In the night, he said, he had dreamed of his dead father, who appeared in a kind of long shirt like the robes worn by the people of Kôr and held in his hand a piece of the feathery grass that grew near the mouth of the cave. The old man in the dream had spoken to him very plainly. He had called him by name and said, with a grim sort of satisfaction, that time was up and that he had had great trouble hunting him out in so unpleasant a place. He had added, according to Job, that many bad characters came from Kôr and that they would soon be seeing more of one another than either of them could wish.

I tried to laugh the thing away and asked what became of a man who dreamed of his mother-in-law, if dreaming of one's father meant death. But Job was not to be moved. He said I had not known his father, and that if it had been any other dead relation, especially one less lazy, he might have made little of it. But his father, he argued, had never in life put himself out without cause, and would certainly not come so far after death merely to look at the scenery. Therefore, if he had appeared, he must have meant business. Job spoke all this with such sober conviction that, absurd as it sounded, it jarred my nerves unpleasantly. Fear is catching, and there are moments when even a sensible man dislikes hearing doom calmly expected by another.

He went on to say that every man must die some day, but that it was a hard thing to die in such a place, where no Christian burial could be had. He told me, with a pathetic attempt at dignity, that he had tried to be a good servant to me and to Mr. Leo, and that if by chance we escaped, I should remember his bones kindly and never again have anything to do with Greek writing on broken flower-pots. I answered him more seriously than and told him to cast such thoughts out of his head. We had gone through many strange dangers already, I said, and might go safely through many more. But he only shook his head and replied in a tone of complete belief that he was a doomed man and could not help wondering in what

manner the end would come. There was nothing theatrical in him, and that was what made the matter worse. He did not speak like a coward trying to gain comfort, but like a man reporting something that he felt to be certain.

When at last he left me, I sat for some time thinking over his words. I did not accept his superstition, yet I could not throw off the shadow of it. The place itself, the events through which we had passed, the death of Ustane, the preserved body of Kallikrates, and the memory of Ayesha's power had already strained my mind almost beyond bearing. Job's dream came in upon all this like another cold wind over a shaken fire. It seemed to me that we were all standing on the edge of something greater and more terrible than anything yet shown to us. Whether his presentiment was foolish or not, I could not deny that my own heart also was heavy with a sense of coming evil.

The rest of that day passed under a cloud. Leo was with us again from time to time, but he too was altered and quieter than was natural to him. None of us could return to ordinary cheerfulness after what we had seen in the tomb below Ayesha's chamber. We waited, therefore, more than lived, each man with his own thoughts. The hours moved forward toward evening and toward the further journey which Ayesha had already promised us. If Job's foreboding was foolish, it was at least a foolishness that fitted well with all around us. In Kôr, even the very air seemed full of warning.

Part 19

Our preparations for the journey did not take long. We each packed a change of clothes and spare boots into my Gladstone bag. We also took our revolvers, one express rifle each, and as much ammunition as we could reasonably carry, which was a wise choice, for before all was over those weapons saved our lives again and again. Everything else, including the heavier rifles, we left behind in the caves of Kôr. A few minutes before the time fixed by Ayesha, we attended her once more in her private chamber and found her ready, with her dark cloak drawn over the white wrappings she usually wore.

She asked whether we were prepared for the great venture. I answered that we were prepared in body, though for my own part I had no faith in the thing she promised. She smiled at my doubt and said I was like the old Jews, hard to accept what I had not known with my own senses. Still, she said, the crystal water in her chamber had shown her that the road remained open as of old, and that we should now set out upon the path to a new life. I repeated her words with more uneasiness than hope, and then we left the chamber and passed down through the great cave into the open day.

At the cave mouth we found only one litter waiting, carried by six mutes, and with them stood old Billali, whose presence gave me real comfort. It appeared that Ayesha would ride, but the rest of us were to go on foot, and this pleased us well enough after so long a confinement underground. What struck me almost at once was the complete absence of other people. The place before the cave, where once we had watched that dreadful dance, was now entirely empty. No Amahagger had come to see us go, whether by accident or by Ayesha's strict command. It seemed that even our departure, like everything else close to her person, was to be wrapped in secrecy.

We passed once more through the mighty ruins of Kôr, and all the time my mind worked darkly upon what lay ahead. It had become clear to me that if Ayesha once reached England with Leo beside her, and if the gift she promised him proved real, then nothing in the world might be able to resist her for long. She had already spoken lightly of kings, laws, and governments, as if they were no more than toys. I could easily imagine her remaking whole empires by the force of her will, and I could not decide whether that would bring glory or ruin or both together. I remember thinking, with cold discomfort, that Providence itself might be using her for purposes too large and terrible for any common man to judge. Yet all these thoughts I kept to myself, for what could be gained by speaking them?

By degrees the ruins thinned, the ground rose, and we came at last to the great temple toward which Ayesha had been leading us. It was one of the most astonishing buildings I ever beheld, even in decay. The front was vast beyond any church or hall of our own land, with columns of an unusual shape, swelling above

and below and narrowing at the middle, as though their first design had been taken from some splendid tree rather than from ordinary architecture. Later I found that palms grew on the mountain slopes in just that form, and I do not doubt that the builders of Kôr had copied them. The whole front of the temple, broken though it was, had a majesty so ancient and so solemn that it seemed less like a ruin than like a thought from the beginning of the world cut into stone.

At the foot of the temple Ayesha left her litter, and Leo, always quick where she was concerned, sprang forward to help her down. She told him that there had once been a place nearby where he, she, and Amenartas had slept together long ago, and that if it still stood, we too might rest there for the night. She led us up a vast flight of cracked and ruined steps into the outer court. The place lay in deep shadow, full of grass, broken stone, and silence. After looking round a little, she found a chamber built into the thickness of the wall, perhaps once a room for a gate-keeper or temple servant. One of the mutes lit a lamp from a tiny brazier, and by that light we entered and made our simple camp.

We ate there, and then for a while sat in silence as the moon rose and spread over the dead temple. At last Ayesha led us out into the courts again, and I shall never forget that sight. The full moon looked down upon the ruined fane of Kôr with a white, still beauty that made the place seem almost alive in its death. The shadows moved slowly across the grass-grown stones like the ghosts of long-dead priests returning to their old worship. It was impossible not to feel that the moon above and the city below had gazed upon each other thus for thousands upon thousands of years, each bearing witness to the other's lonely endurance.

After we had stood there for some time, Ayesha said she would show us the flower and crown of all that temple. She led us through further pillared courts into the innermost space, and there we saw one of the grandest works of art that ever came under my eyes. In the center of that final court stood a huge dark stone globe, and upon it rose a colossal winged woman in white marble, so beautiful that for a moment I could scarcely breathe. Her arms were outstretched as if in love or prayer, her whole figure bent forward in tender appeal, and yet her face was hidden behind a thin veil of marble, wonderfully cut so that one could trace the

features beneath without seeing them fully. The effect of that veiled loveliness in the moonlight was beyond all common praise.

I asked Ayesha who the figure was, and she answered by asking whether I could not guess. It was, she said, Truth, the highest image the ancient people of Kôr had made. Truth, in their thought, was beautiful, winged, and above the world, yet veiled, because men may long for her and move toward her, but can seldom look straight upon her face. Even now I think that was a noble idea, and nobly shaped in stone. There were lines marked upon the great globe beneath the statue, and though I could not study them well in that light, they seemed to form a map of the world, or perhaps of the universe as those old people understood it. I never saw that statue again, and I am the poorer for it, for even all these years later its image remains fixed in my mind like something seen in a high dream.

Part 20

Before dawn the mutes woke us, and after a hurried wash at a broken marble basin in the temple court, we found Ayesha already prepared to start. She was veiled as usual, but at once I noticed a change in her. The proud, light step and easy strength that always marked her seemed gone for a time. Her head was bent, and there was in her whole manner a shadow of fear such as I had never before seen in her. When Leo asked whether she had slept well, she answered that strange and ugly dreams had troubled her and that she felt as though some evil hung over her. Then, with a sudden softness that was almost pitiful, she asked him whether, if anything happened to her and she had to sleep while he remained awake, he would think kindly of her and wait till she came again, as she had waited so long for him. Without waiting for his full answer, she checked herself and bade us come on, saying that before another day was born we ought to stand in the Place of Life.

So we passed once more through ruined Kôr in the grey light, with the old walls and columns rising dimly on either side like ghosts of a lost empire. As the first sun struck across the desolation, we went out by the farther gate and crossed the moat into the plain beyond. Little by little Ayesha's dark mood lifted. By

breakfast time she had recovered much of her usual force and even laughed at her own fears, saying they came only from sleeping where so many old memories gathered round her. Yet I was not easy in my mind, for dreams mean little perhaps, but a fear in Ayesha meant more than fear in another woman. If she, who had long seemed above ordinary danger, could feel a shadow, then the shadow might well be real.

We travelled on for many hours toward the mountains. The road was steep in places and rough in all, and the higher we went, the wilder the country became. At length we reached a tremendous cave high in the mountain side, and there Billali finally descended from his litter and called Job and me to do the same. We entered the place and found it lit for a little way by the setting sun, but farther in the darkness ran on and on with lamps set along it like lights in some endless underground street. The walls were carved, as so many walls in Kôr were carved, with scenes of love, hunting, fighting, punishment, and torture. Then, leaving behind the outer escort, we pressed deeper into the mountain, until at last only our own small party remained to go farther.

The way beyond was no longer one of those regular passages cut by the old people of Kôr. It was a true natural cavern, twisted, rough, and broken, as if some frightful burst of fire or gas had once torn it bodily through the heart of the mountain. The floor was full of holes and scattered boulders, and we had to pick our steps carefully even while the lamps still burned. After some twenty minutes or more of this dangerous going, both lamps were suddenly extinguished by a rushing gust of air. We crept on to where Ayesha stood a little ahead and then saw, or rather felt, that the cave had opened out upon a sight of appalling grandeur. Before us was a mighty chasm in the living rock, jagged, dark, and terrible, split there in some age beyond memory by one of those vast convulsions of nature against which man is no more than dust.

From the mouth of the cavern projected a narrow tongue or spur of stone, running out into the gulf for perhaps fifty yards and ending in a sharp point. It looked, as Holly in the original says, like the spur on a cock's leg, fixed only at one end and hanging unsupported over emptiness. Ayesha told us that here we had

to pass and gave us no time to gather courage before she herself stepped out upon that frightful path. I followed next, then Job, dragging between us the long narrow plank we had been ordered to carry, and Leo came behind. Very soon the pressure of the air and the sense of what one false step would mean drove us all except Ayesha down on hands and knees. She alone moved upright, leaning herself against the blasts with an ease that was almost inhuman.

The farther we went, the narrower and more living that dreadful bridge seemed to become. Then a violent gust tore down the chasm, and Ayesha's dark cloak was caught under it and ripped away, flying off into the blackness like a wounded bird. Beneath us yawned a depth so great that it passed beyond common fear into something like madness. Above us was a far line of sky. Around us the wind drove cloud and spray-like vapour through the gloom, while the whole stone spur vibrated and hummed under the assault like some giant musical wire. Yet Ayesha cried to us to keep our eyes on the ground, cling close, and move on, and somehow we obeyed.

At last we reached the extreme point of the spur, a little slab of rock hardly bigger than a table and shaking under us like the deck of a straining ship. Then we understood why we had dragged the plank. Before us, still half hidden in shadow, rose a strange cone of rock, and on its summit rested an enormous flat boulder poised so exactly that it rocked in the gusts like a balanced stone. Between our point and that great rocking mass there was a gap of some twelve feet. Ayesha bade us wait. Then, in one sudden moment, a beam from the sinking sun pierced the gulf like a flaming sword, cutting through the blackness and striking directly upon us and the stone beyond. By that fierce narrow light we saw the whole dreadful arrangement clear at last.

There was no time to lose, for the light would not last. At Ayesha's order we pushed the plank across the gap, and one by one we made our way over it while the wind tore at us and the balanced rock trembled under every weight. I do not pretend to remember each movement clearly. I remember only the feel of the board beneath me, the emptiness below, the beam of sunset like fire in my eyes, and Ayesha's white form already beyond, beckoning us on. By great good fortune

we all reached the farther side alive, though Job in his terror handled the plank so awkwardly that it was at last whirled away into the gulf behind us. Under the shelter of the rocking-stone there opened a little chamber where, long before, the old wise man Noot had lived and died. Into that refuge Ayesha led us at last, and there, with the mountain round us and the last light gone from the chasm, we made our halt before the final road.

Part 21

I did as Ayesha ordered and let myself slip over the edge of the rocking stone, though I believed for one dreadful instant that she had sent me to my death. My feet touched nothing, and I cried out that I was falling. She answered at once that I must trust her and let myself go. There are moments in life when a man must place his whole weight upon a hand he does not wholly trust, because there is no other hand at all. So I obeyed. I slid a little way down the sloping rock, passed through empty air, and then came suddenly to solid ground under my feet in a place sheltered from the wind. A moment later Leo came down beside me, and after him Job, who arrived with such force that he knocked us both over.

We lit our lamps again and saw where we were. The place was a little rocky chamber, perhaps ten feet square, partly natural and partly cut by human hands into the cone beneath the great swaying stone. Compared with the chasm and the shrieking wind above, it felt almost like a bedroom in an inn. Ayesha stood there calmly, not even short of breath, and told us that long ago the wise old man Noot had lived in this very place for years, leaving it only once in twelve days to receive food, water, oil, and such other things as his followers laid for him in the mouth of the outer cave. She said he had discovered the Fire which we were now to see, the very source of earthly life, but that in his conscience he had refused its gift for himself. He believed, she said, that man is born to die, and that to escape that rule was not good for man.

Then she told us again, more fully than before, how she had first learned the secret from him. When she came as a stranger into that land, she sought him out,

charmed him with her wit and beauty, and persuaded him to lead her down to the hidden place. He had shown her the Fire and taught her much, but would not let her enter it while he lived. Soon after, however, he died, and then she returned with Kallikrates and Amenartas. She pointed to the dust near my feet and said that Noot had once lain there newly dead with his great white beard spread over him. Remembering what she said, I put down my hand into the dust and found a single yellow human tooth. She laughed when I showed it to her and said that such was all that remained of wisdom, holiness, and knowledge after the centuries had done their work. Then, in that same place, she had stepped into the living flame, taken its gift, and come out more beautiful and enduring than before.

She spoke too of the fatal moment that followed. When she came from the Fire, she said, she stretched out her arms to Kallikrates and offered herself to him as his immortal bride. But he turned instead to Amenartas, and in her rage she seized his own spear and struck him dead there in the place of life. She reminded us that only later did she learn to kill by the force of eye and will alone. At the time of that old murder, she had needed steel. She also said that she and the Egyptian had then borne the body away together across all that dreadful path from which we ourselves had only just escaped. The image of those two beautiful enemies carrying the man they both loved over the gulf and through the rock came before me so strongly that I could almost see them there in the dim light.

At last Ayesha's voice changed. Pride, memory, passion, and triumph all softened into something more human and more moving. She turned to Leo and said that before they went farther into danger, he must once and for all forgive her the old crime and the newer ones that had sprung from it. She even spoke of Ustane's death, admitting that in jealousy and anger she had struck her down. Yet she claimed that love itself, once purified and answered, might redeem what passion had once driven into evil. She asked Leo to lift her veil, look upon her without fear, and tell her from his heart that he forgave her and loved her. There was in her voice at that moment no mockery and no command, only a strange proud humility unlike anything I had yet seen in her.

Leo was deeply moved. Hitherto he had been drawn to her against his

judgment, half fascinated and half resisting. But now I think that resistance changed into something more willing and more dangerous. He stepped to her, lifted the veil, took her by the hand, and told her that he loved her with all his heart. He said that as far as forgiveness was possible, he forgave her the death of Ustane, though the deeper account must lie between her and the Power above us both. Ayesha answered by kneeling for one moment and placing his hand upon her head. Then she kissed him and swore a long and solemn oath: that she would turn from evil, follow wisdom, abandon ambition, honour him, and use her long years for good rather than pride. She called me witness to that oath and declared that there in the dark place under the mountain, with the wind and the hidden deeps around us, they were truly married for all time.

After that she spoke as if she were already crowning him with all the power of the world. She promised him beauty that would not fade, life that would outlast generations, wisdom greater than that of kings, and dominion over nations from one end of the earth to the other. Her words rolled on like some great marriage song or prophecy. She said that the mighty would bow before him, that cities and peoples would obey him, and that sickness, sorrow, and fear would no more touch him than shadows touch the sun. It was a splendid and terrible speech, and as I listened I felt again the unease that had troubled me earlier. If such gifts truly lay within her power, then what manner of beings would these two become together? Yet even in that unease I could not help being moved by the grandeur of her promise and the fierce joy with which she gave it.

When the speech was ended, she took up one of the lamps and led us farther down. At the end of the chamber beneath the rocking stone there was a rough stair formed out of natural knobs in the rock. Down this she sprang like a mountain goat, and after her we followed more slowly. At the foot of the steps the way opened into the inside of an inverted cone, steep and broken, running down and down into the mountain's very heart. We descended for a long while, then passed through a narrow passage where we had to stoop, and after that into a cavern so large that we could neither see its roof nor hear any sound except the echo of our own feet. Out of that we came into a second cavern, smaller but still immense,

and then toward a tunnel from which there shone a faint and growing light. As that light brightened, Ayesha gave a sigh of relief and told us that we were drawing near the womb of the earth itself, where the force of life is conceived in all living things.

We hurried on with hearts full of dread and curiosity. The light reached us in pulses, and with it came a crashing, thunder-like sound that seemed to shake the soul rather than merely the ear. Then we passed through the tunnel and stood in a third cavern, perhaps fifty feet long and as high, floored with fine white sand and filled with a soft rosy light so beautiful that no words can match it. For a little while there was only the glow. Then suddenly, with a roar that made us tremble, there burst across the farther end of the cave a vast pillar or cloud of many-colored fire, turning slowly round and round like a rainbow made alive and set on edge. It flamed there for some forty seconds, splendid and dreadful beyond belief, and then the noise sank and the fire passed away again, leaving behind only the same tender rose light as before.

Ayesha cried out to us to come nearer and behold the very heart of earthly life. She said that this was the spirit from which all things on earth draw their strength, the hidden force without which the world itself would grow cold and dead like the moon. We moved forward through the rosy glow until we stood near the place where the great pulse beat and the great fire passed. As we came nearer, a strange power entered us. It was not merely excitement, but an intense enlargement of life itself. I felt stronger, quicker, happier, and more alive than in any hour I had ever known. Thoughts flashed through me with extraordinary brilliance. Even Job laughed aloud in the wild joy of it, though he had scarcely smiled for many days.

Suddenly the great muttering returned from far away and rolled down upon us like thunder behind lightning. The many-colored flame came again in all its glory, stood before us for a space, and passed onward. So overwhelming was the sight that all of us except Ayesha sank down and hid our faces in the sand. Then she told Leo that the moment had come. When the flame returned, he must strip off his clothes, stand in it as long as he could bear, and take its life into his very heart. Leo answered bravely, though not without fear, that he would do it, but that he

doubted whether the raging fire would not destroy him. To reassure him, Ayesha said that she herself would first enter the flame again. She wished, she said, not only to renew her beauty and her life, if such renewal were possible, but to wash away at last the passion, hatred, and jealousy that had stained her first long draught from the Fire. This time she would go to it in joy, purity, and love, and he, when his turn came, must empty himself of evil and hold his soul in perfect peace. Then, with all the grandeur of a priestess at the final gate, she ordered him to prepare himself as if for death itself.

Part 22

For a few moments after Ayesha had spoken, there was a complete silence in that rosy cave. We clung together like children in the dark, while she stood apart from us, gathering her strength for the trial. Then, very far away, the first murmur of the returning force began again. It came softly at first, then louder, then louder still, until the whole hidden place seemed to tremble under the roll and crash of the sound. As she heard it, Ayesha swiftly cast aside the last of her thin wrappings, loosened the golden snake from her dress, and let her long dark hair fall round her like a garment. There she stood clothed in nothing but those rich masses of hair held in place by the golden band, beautiful beyond all speech and yet more than merely beautiful, as though earthly shape and some higher fire had met in one form.

As the thunder of the Life-Spirit drew near, she went first to Leo and put one white arm round his neck. "My love, my love," she murmured, and kissed him upon the forehead with a strange tenderness that was less like a lover's kiss than a mother's blessing. Then she left him and moved into the very path of the coming flame. There she turned toward it with open arms, like one greeting a long-expected guest. The crashing grew overwhelming, flashes of light shot through the rosy air, and then the edge of the great revolving pillar itself appeared. It came on slowly and folded itself about her. We saw the living fire run over her form. We saw her lift it in her hands as if it were water and pour it over her head. We

even saw her open her mouth and draw it down into herself, and the sight was both awful and wonderful beyond any words that I have.

Then she stood still with her arms stretched wide and a smile upon her face so heavenly that it made one think of spirits rather than women. The mysterious fire played through her rolling hair like threads of living gold. It shone upon her throat, her shoulders, and her face, and seemed to live in her great eyes, which gleamed even more brightly than the flame itself. No being out of heaven could have looked more glorious in that moment. I say this now after all that followed, and I do not draw back from the words. She was more lovely then than ever before, and though my heart almost breaks with the memory of what came next, still I would give much to see once more that one first vision of her in the heart of the fire.

But the glory lasted only a little while. A deeper, more dreadful note began to gather under the thunder, and the light around her changed in a way that I cannot fully describe. It seemed to grow harsher, more searching, more terrible. I saw the smile fade from her face. Her bright eyes took on a look first of surprise, then of fear, and then of utter horror. She stretched out her arms no longer in welcome, but as if to defend herself against something that had turned suddenly hostile. Her beauty, which a second before had seemed fixed and deathless, began to alter before our eyes. It did not merely lessen. It broke. It fell away. It was as if age, and pain, and corruption, and time itself had all been waiting just beyond that fiery veil and were now rushing in at once to claim their own.

The change that followed was so dreadful that even now I can scarcely set it down. Her tall and perfect form seemed to shrink where it stood. The smooth white skin wrinkled and sank. The rich dark hair loosened, thinned, and dropped about her. The splendid face collapsed and withered with fearful speed, until that which had been divine beauty became a thing so old, so shrunken, so hideous, that the mind could scarcely connect it with the woman we had known a moment before. There in the place where the Queen of Kôr had stood glorious in the flame now crouched a small, dried, horrible shape, scarcely human to the eye, more like some ancient monkey than a woman. Leo cried out in horror. I think I cried out too. Then the thing stretched its poor shrivelled arms toward us and gave voice to

a scream so full of terror and despair that it seemed to pierce the very stone of the cave.

That scream broke what little strength remained in us. Leo fell senseless. Job too went down at once. As for myself, I turned to flee, but after only a few yards my courage failed and I forced myself to look back once more, to see the end of the tragedy. What I saw was the end indeed. The dreadful little shape that had been Ayesha tottered, swayed, and then collapsed upon the white sand. Even as I looked, there was less and less of it to see. Hair, flesh, and form seemed all to dry, crumble, and sink together. The living mockery of age that had replaced her beauty did not even remain long enough to be called a body. In another few moments there was only a little heap upon the ground, dark at first and then turning to dust, the hideous ruin of the fairest being I had ever seen. By the law she had once escaped, she was swept back in shame and horror to nothingness.

For some minutes I lay there half fainting, unable to think except in broken terror. Then my strength slowly returned, quickened, no doubt, by the strange life-giving air of that cavern. The first thing I did was to take up Ayesha's fallen kirtle and gauzy veil and, turning away my eyes as much as I could, cover that dreadful relic of the glorious dead. I did it in haste, because I feared above all things that Leo might come to himself and see it clearly. Then I stepped over the perfumed masses of dark hair that still lay upon the sand and went to Job. One glance was enough. Our old servant was dead. The long strain upon his simple faithful nerves had ended at last in complete collapse, and terror had killed him where he lay. It was another blow, but so shaken were we all by that supreme horror that even this fresh loss seemed almost natural in such a place.

About ten minutes later Leo began to recover. He came to himself with a groan and a trembling of the limbs, and when I told him that Job was dead, he only said, "Oh!" in a dull broken way. It was not from hardness of heart, for he loved Job well. It was only that he had reached the limit of feeling. A man's spirit can carry only so much in one hour. I set myself to reviving him more fully, and then I saw yet another dreadful thing. When we entered that cave, his hair had been of the brightest golden color. Now it was changing as I looked, passing from gold to grey,

and by the time we reached the outer air it had turned snow-white. He also looked years older, as though some part of his youth had been burned out of him by the mere sight of what he had seen.

We looked our last upon Job and upon the veiled remains of Ayesha lying there in the rosy light, and then we left them. We did not even dream of stepping into the Life-Spirit ourselves. That chance, if chance it was, had no value for us any longer. All that made life sweet had gone out of it in that place. We both knew, even then, that after looking upon Ayesha and losing her in so dreadful a way, neither of us would ever wholly forget her while memory itself remained. She was cut into our hearts for ever. Leo loved her; I loved her also, though I had no right to do so and never shall have. Therefore we turned our backs upon the fire, upon the promise of endless days, and upon the most terrible wonder on earth, and made our way out of that cavern like broken men who had seen too much.

Part 23

We did not leave that dreadful cave at once. For a long time we lay like dead men, with the rosy light still around us and the thunder of the Life-Spirit still moving on its hidden road. Before all ended, Ayesha had spoken once more in a weak broken voice. She called to Leo by the old name, begged him not to forget her, and swore that she would come again and be beautiful once more. Those were the last words we ever heard from her, and they stayed with us afterward like a promise or a threat, I do not know which.

At last we forced ourselves to move. We turned away from Job and from the covered remains of Ayesha and began the climb back through the dark ways of the mountain. The work was terrible beyond telling. We were weak, bruised, thirsty, and half mad with grief and horror, and more than once we lost the path among the broken rocks. Still we went on, sometimes by memory, sometimes by the shape of a stone, and sometimes by nothing but blind hope.

After many hours we reached the little chamber beneath the rocking stone, and there a new terror met us. The plank was gone, and without it the gulf between

the swaying stone and the narrow spur could only be crossed by a jump. The distance was not impossible for a fresh man, but we were not fresh men, and beneath us lay a black depth into which no eye could see. There was only one choice. We must leap or remain there until hunger and thirst finished what fear had begun.

So we crawled up onto the rocking stone and lay there in the dark, waiting for the red ray of light that alone would show us the gap. The wind beat on us with full force, howling through the chasm and making the whole stone tremble beneath our bodies. While we lay there, something strange happened. Ayesha's lost cloak came floating out of the blackness and fell over Leo like a hand from the dead. Poor fellow, he broke down then and sobbed upon the stone, for the grief in him had become too heavy to carry in silence.

Suddenly the red light came. I jumped first and fell short, catching the rock only with my hands and hanging above the gulf with death beneath me. Then Leo sprang after me with splendid courage, landed safely, and threw himself down so that he would not fall. In that same second, the great rocking stone behind him lost its balance and crashed down into the chamber below, sealing forever, as I believe, the road to the Place of Life. Leo then lay flat, caught me by the wrist, and with one mighty effort drew me up beside him.

After that the light went out, but we had won the worst part. We crept back along the spur, reached the outer cave, and then had to make our way through the last great tunnel in complete darkness, for our lamps were gone and our oil with them. Never did men crawl through a more miserable night. We fell over stones, struck ourselves till we bled, lost the way, found it again, and at one point slept from pure weakness upon the ground. At last, when we had almost given up hope, morning light appeared before us, and we came out once more into the open air.

We dragged ourselves down the last slope on hands and knees, for we could no longer walk. One of the mutes saw us first and ran away in horror at our appearance. Soon Billali himself came hurrying up, crying out in astonishment at Leo's white hair and our broken state, and asking where Job was and where She-who-must-be-obeyed had gone. I told him only that both were dead and that we

needed food and water at once or we too would die before him. Good old Billali asked no more then, but had us carried to the camp, fed us with broth like children, washed our wounds, and laid us on grass to sleep.

We slept a whole day and a whole night. When at last I woke fully, Billali sat beside me and warned me that if the Amahagger learned that Ayesha was truly dead, then Leo and I would be killed at once by the pot. So I told him enough of the truth to make him understand that she would not return, though he would not wholly believe me. Still, whether from gratitude, kindness, or fear that Ayesha might one day ask what he had done with us, he chose to save us. He arranged bearers, guides, and litters, and at dawn took us away by the secret road over the mountain by which the cattle passed.

The journey that followed was hard enough, but compared with what lay behind us it seemed almost ordinary. We climbed the great wall of rock, crossed its wide top, and came safely down upon the far side. Then for three days we struggled through the dreadful marshes again, guided by Billali's men. At last we reached open country, and there old Billali blessed us, warned us never again to enter lands we did not know, and turned back with his people. We never saw him or any other Amahagger again.

From there Leo and I went on alone with little beyond our clothes, our guns, and a compass. After many terrible hardships we reached the Zambesi, were held for months by a savage tribe, escaped again, wandered south, and at last were saved by a Portuguese elephant-hunter. In the end we came home to England two years after we had set out on our absurd and fatal search, and I now write these words in my old room at Cambridge with Leo beside me. But I do not believe our story is truly ended. Often at night I think of Ayesha's last cry, of the old Egyptian line, of Kallikrates and Amenartas, and I ask myself where and when the next part of that long drama will begin. Whatever the answer may be, I am sure of one thing: we shall not forget her.