

QUEEN SHEBA'S RING

CHAPTER I

THE COMING OF THE RING

EVERY one has read the monograph, I believe that is the right word, of my dear friend, Professor Higgs—Ptolemy Higgs to give him his full name—descriptive of the tableland of Mur in North Central Africa, of the ancient underground city in the mountains which surround it, and of the strange tribe of Abyssinian Jews, or rather their mixed descendants, by whom it is, or was, inhabited. I say every one advisedly, for although the public which studies such works is usually select, that which will take an interest in them, if the character of a learned and pugnacious personage is concerned, is very wide indeed. Not to mince matters, I may as well explain what I mean at once.

Professor Higgs's rivals and enemies, of whom either the brilliancy of his achievements or his somewhat abrupt and pointed methods of controversy seem to have made him a great many, have risen up, or rather seated themselves, and written him down—well, an individual who strains the truth. Indeed, only this morning one of these inquired, in a letter to the press, alluding to some adventurous traveller who, I am told, lectured to the British Association several years ago, whether Professor Higgs did not, in fact, ride across the desert to Mur, not upon a camel, as he alleged, but upon a land tortoise of extraordinary size.

The innuendo contained in this epistle has made the Professor, who, as I have already hinted, is not by nature of a meek disposition, extremely angry. Indeed, notwithstanding all that I could do, he left his London house under an hour ago with a whip of hippopotamus hide such as the Egyptians call a *koorbash*, purposing to avenge himself upon the person of his defamer. In order to prevent a public scandal, however, I have taken the liberty of telephoning to that gentleman, who, bold and vicious as he may be in print, is physically small and, I should say, of a timid character, to get out of the way at once. To judge from the abrupt fashion in which our conversation came to an end, I imagine that the hip has been taken. At any rate, I hope for the best, and, as an extra precaution, have communicated with the lawyers of my justly indignant friend.

• The reader will now probably understand that I am writing this book, not to bring myself or others before the public, or to make money of which I have no present need, or for any purpose whatsoever, except to set down the bare and actual truth. In fact, so many rumours are flying about as to where we have been and what befell us that this has become almost necessary. As soon as I laid down that cruel column of gibes and insinuations to which I have alluded—yes, this very morning, before breakfast, this conviction took hold of me so strongly that I cabled to Oliver, Captain Oliver Orme, the hero of my history, if it has any particular hero, who is at present engaged upon what must be an extremely agreeable journey round the world—asking his consent. Ten minutes since the answer arrived from Tokyo. Here it is:

“Do what you like and think necessary, but please alter all names, et cetera, as propose returning via America, and fear interviewers. Japan jolly place.” Then follows some private matter which I need not insert. Oliver is always extravagant where cablegrams are concerned.

I suppose that before entering on this narration, for the reader's benefit I had better give some short description of myself.

My name is Richard Adams, and I am the son of a Cumberland yeoman who married a Welshwoman. Therefore I have Celtic blood in my veins, which perhaps accounts for my love of roving and other things. I am now an old man, near the end of my course, I suppose; at any rate, I was sixty-five last birthday. This is my appearance as I see it in the glass before me: tall, spare (I don't weigh more than a hundred and forty pounds—the desert has any superfluous flesh that I ever owned, my lot having been, like Falstaff, to lard the lean earth, but in a hot climate); my eyes are brown, my face is long, and I wear a pointed white beard, which matches the white hair above.

Truth compels me to add that my general appearance, as seen in that glass which will not lie, reminds me of that of a rather aged goat; indeed, to be frank, by the natives among whom I have sojourned, and especially among the Khalifa's people when I was a prisoner there, I have often been called the White Goat.

Of my very commonplace outward self let this suffice. As for my record, I am a doctor of the old school. Think of it! When I was a student at Bart.'s the antiseptic treatment was quite a new thing, and administered, when at all, by help of a kind of engine on wheels, out of which disinfectants were dispensed with a pump, much as the advanced gardener sprays a greenhouse to-day.

I succeeded above the average as a student, and in my early time as a doctor. But in every man's life there happen things which, whatever excuses may be found for them, would not look particularly well in cold print (nobody's record, as understood by convention and the Pharisee, could really stand cold print); also something in my blood made me its servant. In short, having no strict ties at home, and desiring to see the world, I wandered far and wide for many years, earning my living

as I went, never, in my experience, a difficult thing to do, for I was always a master of my trade.

My fortieth birthday found me practising at Cairo, which I mention only because it was here that first I met Ptolemy Higgs, who, even then in his youth, was noted for his extraordinary antiquarian and linguistic abilities. I remember that in those days the joke about him was that he could swear in fifteen languages like a native and in thirty-two with common proficiency, and could read hieroglyphics as easily as a bishop reads the *Times*.

Well, I doctored him through a bad attack of typhoid, but as he had spent every farthing he owned on scarabs or something of the sort, made him no charge. This little kindness I am bound to say he never forgot, for whatever his failings may be (personally I would not trust him alone with any object that was more than a thousand years old), Ptolemy is a good and faithful friend.

In Cairo I married a Copt. She was a lady of high descent, the tradition in her family being that they were sprung from one of the Ptolemaic Pharaohs, which is possible and even probable enough. Also, she was a Christian, and well educated in her way. But, of course, she remained an Oriental, and for a European to marry an Oriental is, as I have tried to explain to others, a very dangerous thing, especially if he continues to live in the East, where it cuts him off from social recognition and intimacy with his own race. Still, although this step of mine forced me to leave Cairo and go to Assouan, then a little-known place, to practise chiefly among the natives, God knows we were happy enough together till the plague took her, and with it my joy in life.

I pass over all that business, since there are some things too dreadful and too sacred to write about. She left me one child, a son, who, to fill up my cup of sorrow, when he was twelve years of age, was kidnapped by the Mahdi's people.

This brings me to the real story. There is nobody else to write it; Oliver will not; Higgs cannot (outside

of anything learned and antiquarian, he is hopeless); so I must. At any rate, if it is not interesting, the fault will be mine, not that of the story, which in all conscience is strange enough.

We are now in the middle of June, and it was a year ago last December that, on the evening of the day of my arrival in London after an absence of half a lifetime, I found myself knocking at the door of Professor Higgs's rooms in Guildford Street, W.C. It was opened by his housekeeper, Mrs. Reid, a thin and saturnine old woman, who reminded and still reminds me of a reanimated mummy. She told me that the Professor was in, but had a gentleman to dinner, and suggested sourly that I should call again the next morning. With difficulty I persuaded her at last to inform her master that an old Egyptian friend had brought him something which he certainly would like to see.

Five minutes later I groped my way into Higgs's sitting-room, which Mrs. Reid had contented herself with indicating from a lower floor. It is a large room, running the whole width of the house, divided into two by an arch, where once, in the Georgian days, there had been folding doors. The place was in shadow, except for the firelight, which shone upon a table laid ready for dinner, and upon an extraordinary collection of antiquities, including a couple of mummies with gold faces arranged in their coffins against the wall. At the far end of the room, however, an electric lamp was alight in the bow-window hanging over another table covered with books, and by it I saw my host, whom I had not met for twenty years, although until I vanished into the desert we frequently corresponded, and with him the friend who had come to dinner.

First, I will describe Higgs, who, I may state, is admitted, even by his enemies, to be one of the most learned antiquarians and greatest masters of dead languages in Europe, though this no one would guess from

his appearance at the age of about forty-five. In build short and stout, face round and high-coloured, hair and beard of a fiery red, eyes, when they can be seen—for generally he wears a pair of large blue spectacles—small and of an indefinite hue, but sharp as needles. Dress so untidy, peculiar, and worn that it is said the police invariably request him to move on, should he loiter in the streets at night. Such was, and is, the outward seeming of my dearest friend, Professor Ptolemy Higgs, and I only hope that he won't be offended when he sees it set down in black and white.

That of his companion who was seated at the table, his chin resting on his hand, listening to some erudite discourse with a rather distracted air, was extraordinarily different, especially by contrast. A tall well-made young man, rather thin, but broad-shouldered, and apparently five or six and twenty years of age. Face clean-cut—so much so, indeed, that the dark eyes alone relieved it from a suspicion of hardness; hair short and straight, like the eyes, brown; expression that of a man of thought and ability, and, when he smiled, singularly pleasant. Such was, and is, Captain Oliver Orme, who, by the way, I should explain, is only a captain of some volunteer engineers, although, in fact, a very able soldier, as was proved in the South African War, whence he had then but lately returned.

I ought to add also that he gave me the impression of a man not in love with fortune, or rather of one with whom fortune was not in love; indeed, his young face seemed distinctly sad. Perhaps it was this that attracted me to him so much from the first moment that my eyes fell on him—me with whom fortune had also been out of love for many years.

While I stood contemplating this pair, Higgs, looking up from the papyrus or whatever it might be that he was reading (I gathered later that he had spent the afternoon in unrolling a mummy, and was studying its spoils), caught sight of me standing in the shadow.

"Who the devil are you?" he exclaimed in a shrill and strident voice, for it acquires that quality when he is angry or alarmed, "and what are you doing in my room?"

"Steady," said his companion; "your housekeeper told you that some friend of yours had come to call."

"Oh, yes, so she did, only I can't remember any friend with a face and beard like a goat. Advance, friend, and all's well."

So I stepped into the shining circle of the electric light and halted again.

"Who is it? Who is it?" muttered Higgs. "The face is the face of—of—I have it—of old Adams, only he's been dead these ten years. The Khalifa got him, they said. Antique shade of the long-lost Adams, please be so good as to tell me your name, for we waste time over a useless mystery."

"There is no need, Higgs, since it is in your mouth already. Well, I should have known you anywhere; but then *your* hair doesn't go white."

"Not it; too much colouring matter; direct result of a sanguine disposition. Well, Adams—for Adams you must be—I am really delighted to see you, especially as you never answered some questions in my last letter as to where you got those First Dynasty scarabs, of which the genuineness, I may tell you, has been disputed by certain envious beasts. Adams, my dear old fellow, welcome a thousand times"—and he seized my hands and wrung them, adding, as his eye fell upon a ring I wore, "Why, what's that? Something quite unusual. But never mind; you shall tell me after dinner. Let me introduce you to my friend, Captain Orme, a very decent scholar of Arabic, with a quite elementary knowledge of Egyptology."

"*Mr. Orme*," interrupted the younger man, bowing to me.

"Oh, well, Mr. or Captain, whichever you like. He means that he is not in the regular army, although he

has been all through the Boer War, and wounded three times, once straight through the lungs. Here's the soup. Mrs. Reid, lay another place. I am dreadfully hungry; nothing gives me such an appetite as unrolling mummies; it involves so much intellectual wear and tear, in addition to the physical labour. Eat, man, eat. We will talk afterwards."

So we ate, Higgs largely, for his appetite was always excellent, perhaps because he was then practically a teetotaler; Mr. Orme very moderately, and I as becomes a person who has lived for months at a time on dates—mainly of vegetables, which, with fruits, form my principal diet—that is, if these are available, for at a pinch I can exist on anything.

When the meal was finished and our glasses had been filled with port, Higgs helped himself to water, lit the large meerschaum pipe he always smokes, and pushed round the tobacco-jar which had once served as a sepulchral urn for the heart of an old Egyptian.

"Now, Adams," he said when we also had filled our pipes, "tell us what has brought you back from the Shades. In short, your story, man, your story."

I drew the ring he had noticed off my hand, a thick band of rather light-coloured gold of a size such as an ordinary woman might wear upon her first or second finger, in which was set a splendid slab of sapphire engraved with curious and archaic characters. Pointing to these characters, I asked Higgs if he could read them.

"Read them? Of course," he answered, producing a magnifying glass. "Can't you? No, I remember; you never were good at anything more than fifty years old. Hullo! this is early Hebrew. Ah! I've got it," and he read:

"The gift of Solomon the ruler—no, the Great One—of Israel, Beloved of Jah, to Maqueda of Sheba-land, Queen, Daughter of Kings, Child of Wisdom, Beautiful."

"That's the writing on your ring, Adams—a really

magnificent thing. 'Queen of Sheba—Bath-Melachim, Daughter of Kings,' with our old friend Solomon chucked in. Splendid, quite splendid!"—and he touched the gold with his tongue, and tested it with his teeth. "Hum—where did you get this intelligent fraud from, Adams?"

"Oh!" I answered, laughing, "the usual thing, of course. I bought it from a donkey-boy in Cairo for about thirty shillings."

"Indeed," he replied suspiciously. "I should have thought the stone in it was worth more than that, although, of course, it may be nothing but glass. The engraving, too, is first-rate. Adams," he added with severity, "you are trying to hoax us, but let me tell you what I thought you knew by this time—that you can't take in Ptolemy Higgs. This ring is a shameless swindle; but who did the Hebrew on it? He's a good scholar, anyway."

"Don't know," I answered; "wasn't aware till now that it was Hebrew. To tell you the truth, I thought it was old Egyptian. All I do know is that it was given, or rather lent, to me by a lady whose title is Walda Nagasta, and who is supposed to be a descendant of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba."

Higgs took up the ring and looked at it again; then, as though in a fit of abstraction, slipped it into his waistcoat pocket.

"I don't want to be rude, therefore I will not contradict you," he answered with a kind of groan, "or, indeed, say anything except that if any one else had spun me that yarn I should have told him he was a common liar. But, of course, as every schoolboy knows, Walda Nagasta—that is, Child of Kings in Ethiopic—is much the same as Bath-Melachim—that is, Daughter of Kings in Hebrew."

Here Captain Orme burst out laughing, and remarked, "It is easy to see why you are not altogether popular in the antiquarian world, Higgs. Your methods of controversy are those of a savage with a stone axe."

"If you only open your mouth to show your ignorance, Oliver, you had better keep it shut. The men who carried stone axes had advanced far beyond the state of savagery. But I suggest that you had better give Doctor Adams a chance of telling his story, after which you can criticize."

"Perhaps Captain Orme does not wish to be bored with it," I said, whereon he answered at once:

"On the contrary, I should like to hear it very much—that is, if you are willing to confide in me as well as in Higgs."

I reflected a moment, since, to tell the truth, for sundry reasons, my intention had been to trust no one except the Professor, whom I knew to be as faithful as he is rough. Yet some instinct prompted me to make an exception in favour of this Captain Orme. I liked the man; there was something about those brown eyes of his that appealed to me. Also it struck me as odd that he should happen to be present on this occasion, for I have always held that there is nothing casual or accidental in the world; that even the most trivial circumstances are either ordained, or the result of the workings of some inexorable law whereof the end is known by whatever power may direct our steps, though it be not yet declared.

"Certainly I am willing," I answered; "your face and your friendship with the Professor are passport enough for me. Only I must ask you to give me your word of honour that without my leave you will repeat nothing of what I am about to tell you."

"Of course," he answered, whereon Higgs broke in:

"There, that will do; you don't want us both to kiss the Book, do you? Who sold you that ring, and where have you been for the last dozen years, and whence do you come now?"

"I have been a prisoner of the Khalifa's among other things. I had five years of that entertainment of which my back would give some evidence if I were to strip. I

think I am about the only man who never embraced Islam whom they allowed to live, and that was because I am a doctor, and, therefore, a useful person. The rest of the time I have spent wandering about the North African deserts looking for my son, Roderick. You remember the boy, or should, for you are his godfather, and I used to send you photographs of him as a little chap."

"Of course, of course," said the Professor in a new tone; "I came across a Christmas letter from him the other day. But, my dear Adams, what happened? I never heard."

"He went up the river to shoot crocodiles against my orders, when he was about twelve years old—not very long after his mother's death, and some wandering Mahdi tribesmen kidnapped him and sold him as a slave. I have been looking for him ever since, for the poor boy was passed on from tribe to tribe, among which his skill as a musician enabled me to follow him. The Arabs call him the Singer of Egypt, because of his wonderful voice, and it seems that he has learned to play upon their native instruments."

"And now where is he?" asked Higgs, as one who feared the answer.

"He is, or was, a favourite slave among a barbarous, half-negroid people called the Fung, who dwell in the far interior of North Central Africa. After the fall of the Khalifa I followed him there; it took me several years. Some Bedouin were making an expedition to trade with these Fung, and I disguised myself as one of them.

"On a certain night we camped at the foot of a valley outside a great wall which encloses the holy place where their idol is. I rode up to this wall and, through the open gateway, heard some one with a beautiful tenor voice singing in English. What he sang was a hymn that I had taught my son. It begins:

'Abide with me, fast falls the eventide.'

"I knew the voice again. I dismounted and slipped through the gateway, and presently came to an open space, where a young man sat singing upon a sort of raised bench with lamps on either side of him, and a large audience in front. I saw his face and, notwithstanding the turban which he wore and his Eastern robe—yes, and the passage of all those years—I knew it for that of my son. Some spirit of madness entered into me, and I called aloud, 'Roderick, Roderick!' and he started up, staring about him wildly. The audience started up also, and one of them caught sight of me lurking in the shadow.

"With a howl of rage, for I had desecrated their sanctuary, they sprang at me. To save my life, coward that I was, I fled back through the gates. Yes, after all those years of seeking, still I fled rather than die, and though I was wounded with a spear and stones, managed to reach and spring upon my horse. Then, as I was headed off from our camp, I galloped away anywhere, still to save my miserable life from those savages, so strongly is the instinct of self-preservation implanted in us. From a distance I looked back and saw by the light of the fired tents that the Fung were attacking the Arabs with whom I had travelled, I suppose because they thought them parties to the sacrilege. Afterwards I heard that they killed them every one, poor men, but I escaped, who unwittingly had brought their fate upon them.

"On and on I galloped up a steep road. I remember hearing lions roaring round me in the darkness. I remember one of them springing upon my horse and the poor beast's scream. Then I remember no more till I found myself—I believe it was a week or so later—lying on the veranda of a nice house, and being attended by some good-looking women of an Abyssinian cast of countenance."

"Sounds rather like one of the lost tribes of Israel," remarked Higgs sarcastically, puffing at his big meerschaum.

“Yes, something of that sort. The details I will give you later. The main facts are that these people who picked me up outside their gates are called Abati, live in a town called Mur, and allege themselves to be descended from a tribe of Abyssinian Jews who were driven out and migrated to this place four or five centuries ago. Briefly, they look something like Jews, practise a very debased form of the Jewish religion, are civilized and clever after a fashion, but in the last stage of decadence from interbreeding—about nine thousand men is their total fighting force, although three or four generations ago they had twenty thousand—and live in hourly terror of extermination by the surrounding Fung, who hold them in hereditary hate as the possessors of the wonderful mountain fortress that once belonged to their forefathers.”

“Gibraltar and Spain over again,” suggested Orme.

“Yes, with this difference—that the position is reversed, the Abati of this Central African Gibraltar are decaying, and the Fung, who answer to the Spaniards, are vigorous and increasing.”

“Well, what happened?” asked the Professor.

“Nothing particular. I tried to persuade these Abati to organize an expedition to rescue my son, but they laughed in my face. By degrees I found out that there was only one person among them who was worth anything at all, and she happened to be their hereditary ruler who bore the high-sounding titles of Walda Nagasta, or Child of Kings, and Takla Warda, or Bud of the Rose, a very handsome and spirited young woman, whose personal name is Maqueda—”

“One of the names of the first known Queens of Sheba,” muttered Higgs; “the other was Belchis.”

“Under pretence of attending her medically,” I went on, “for otherwise their wretched etiquette would scarcely have allowed me access to one so exalted, I talked things over with her. She told me that the idol of the Fung is fashioned like a huge sphinx, or so I

gathered from her description of the thing, for I have never seen it."

"What!" exclaimed Higgs, jumping up, "a sphinx in North Central Africa! Well, after all, why not? Some of the earlier Pharaohs are said to have had dealings with that part of the world, or even to have migrated from it. I think that the Makreezi repeats the legend. I suppose that it is ram-headed."

"She told me also," I continued, "that they have a tradition, or rather a belief, which amounts to an article of faith, that if this sphinx or god, which, by the way, is lion, not ram-headed, and is called Harmac——"

"Harmac!" interrupted Higgs again. "That is one of the names of the sphinx—Harmachis, god of dawn."

"If this god," I repeated, "should be destroyed, the nation of the Fung, whose forefathers fashioned it as they say, must move away from that country across the great river which lies to the south. I have forgotten its name at this moment, but I think it must be a branch of the Nile.

"I suggested to her that, in the circumstances, her people had better try to destroy the idol. Maqueda laughed and said it was impossible, since the thing was the size of a small mountain, adding that the Abati had long ago lost all courage and enterprise, and were content to sit in their fertile and mountain-ringed land, feeding themselves with tales of departed grandeur and struggling for rank and high-sounding titles, till the day of doom overtook them.

"I inquired whether she were also content, and she replied, 'Certainly not'; but what could she do to regenerate her people, she who was nothing but a woman, and the last of an endless line of rulers?

"'Rid me of the Fung,' she added passionately, 'and I will give you such a reward as you never dreamed. The old cave-city yonder is full of treasure that was buried with its ancient kings long before we came to

Mur. To us it is useless, since we have none to trade with, but I have heard that the peoples of the outside world worship gold.'

"'I do not want gold,' I answered; 'I want to rescue my son who is a prisoner yonder.'

"'Then,' said the Child of Kings, 'you must begin by helping us to destroy the idol of the Fung. Are there no means by which this can be done?'

"'There are means,' I replied, and I tried to explain to her the properties of dynamite and of other more powerful explosives.

"'Go to your own land,' she exclaimed eagerly, 'and return with that stuff and two or three who can manage it, and I swear to them all the wealth of Mur. Thus only can you win my help to save your son.'

"Well, what was the end?" asked Captain Orme.

"This: They gave me some gold and an escort with camels which were literally lowered down a secret path in the mountains so as to avoid the Fung, who ring them in and of whom they are terribly afraid. With these people I crossed the desert to Assouan in safety, a journey of many weeks, where I left them encamped about sixteen days ago, bidding them await my return. I arrived in England this morning, and as soon as I could ascertain that you still lived, and your address, from a book of reference called *Who's Who*, which they gave me in the hotel, I came on here."

"Why did you come to me? What do you want me to do?" asked the Professor.

"I came to you, Higgs, because I know how deeply you are interested in anything antiquarian, and because I wished to give you the first opportunity, not only of winning wealth, but also of becoming famous as the discoverer of the most wonderful relics of antiquity that are left in the world."

"With a very good chance of getting my throat cut thrown in," stammered Higgs.

"As to what I want you to do," I went on, "I want

you to find some one who understands explosives, and will undertake the business of blowing up the Fung idol."

"Well, that's easy enough, anyhow," said the Professor, pointing to Captain Orme with the bowl of his pipe, and adding, "he is an engineer by education, a soldier and a very fair chemist; also he knows Arabic and was brought up in Egypt as a boy—just the man for the job if he will go."

I reflected a moment, then, obeying some sort of instinct, looked up and asked:

"Will you, Captain Orme, if terms can be arranged?"

"Yesterday," he replied, colouring a little, "I should have answered, 'Certainly not.' To-day I answer that I am prepared to consider the matter—that is, if Higgs will go too, and you can enlighten me on certain points. But I warn you that I am only an amateur in the three trades that the Professor has mentioned, though, it is true, one with some experience."

"Would it be rude to inquire, Captain Orme, why twenty-four hours have made such a difference in your views and plans?"

"Not rude, only awkward," he replied, colouring again, this time more deeply. "Still, as it is best to be frank, I will tell you. Yesterday I believed myself to be the inheritor of a very large fortune from an uncle whose fatal illness brought me back from South Africa before I meant to come, and as whose heir I have been brought up. To-day I have learned for the first time that he married secretly, last year, a woman much below him in rank, and has left a child, who, of course, will take all his property, as he died intestate. But that is not all. Yesterday I believed myself to be engaged to be married; to-day I am undeceived upon that point also. The lady," he added with some bitterness, "who was willing to marry Anthony Orme's heir is no longer willing to marry Oliver Orme, whose total possessions amount to under £10,000. Well, small blame to her or to her relations, whichever

it may be, especially as I understand that she has a better alliance in view. Certainly her decision has simplified matters," and he rose and walked to the other end of the room.

"Shocking business," whispered Higgs; "been infamously treated," and he proceeded to express his opinion of the lady concerned, of her relatives, and of the late Anthony Orme, shipowner, in language that, if printed, would render this history unfit for family reading. The outspokenness of Professor Higgs is well known in the antiquarian world, so there is no need for me to enlarge upon it.

"What I do not exactly understand, Adams," he added in a loud voice, seeing that Orme had turned again, "and what I think we should both like to know, is *your* exact object in making these proposals."

"I am afraid I have explained myself badly. I thought I had made it clear that I have only one object—to attempt the rescue of my son, if he still lives, as I believe he does. Higgs, put yourself in my position. Imagine yourself with nothing and no one left to care for except a single child, and that child stolen away from you by savages. Imagine yourself, after years of search, hearing his very voice, seeing his very face, adult now, but the same, the thing you had dreamed of and desired for years; that for which you would have given a thousand lives if you could have had time to think. And then the rush of the howling, fanatic mob, the breakdown of courage, of love, of everything that is noble under the pressure of primæval instinct, which has but one song—Save your life. Lastly, imagine this coward saved, dwelling within a few miles of the son whom he had deserted, and yet utterly unable to rescue or even to communicate with him because of the poltroonery of those among whom he had refuged."

"Well," grunted Higgs, "I have imagined all that high-faluting lot. What of it? If you mean that you are to blame, I don't agree with you. You wouldn't

have helped your son by getting your own throat cut, and perhaps his also."

"I don't know," I answered. "I have brooded over the thing so long that it seems to me that I have disgraced myself. Well, there came a chance, and I took it. This lady, Walda Nagasta, or Maqueda, who, I think, had also brooded over things, made me an offer—I fancy without the knowledge or consent of her Council. 'Help me,' she said, 'and I will help you. Save my people, and I will try to save your son. I can pay for your services and those of any whom you may bring with you.'

"I answered that it was hopeless, as no one would believe the tale, whereon she drew from her finger the throne-ring or State signet which you have in your pocket, Higgs, saying: 'My mothers have worn this since the days of Maqueda, Queen of Sheba. If there are learned men among your people they will read her name upon it and know that I speak no lie. Take it as a token, and take also enough of our gold to buy the stuffs whereof you speak, which hide fires that can throw mountains skyward, and the services of skilled and trusty men who are masters of the stuff, two or three of them only, for more cannot be transported across the desert, and come back to save your son and me.' That's all the story, Higgs. Will you take the business on, or shall I try elsewhere? You must make up your mind, because I have no time to lose if I am to get into Mur again before the rains."

"Got any of that gold you spoke of about you?" asked the Professor.

I drew a skin bag from the pocket of my coat, and poured some out upon the table, which he examined carefully.

"Ring money," he said presently, "might be Anglo-Saxon, might be anything; date absolutely uncertain, but from its appearance I should say slightly alloyed with silver; yes, there is a bit which has oxydized—undoubtedly old, that."

Then he produced the signet from his pocket, and examined the ring and the stone very carefully through a powerful glass.

"Seems all right," he said, "and although I have been greened in my time, I don't make many mistakes nowadays. What do you say, Adams? Must have it back? A sacred trust! Only lent to you! All right, take it by all means. I don't want the thing. Well, it is a risky job, and if any one else had proposed it to me, I'd have told him to go to—Mur. But, Adams, my boy, you saved my life once, and never sent in a bill, because I was hard up, and I haven't forgotten that. Also things are pretty hot for me here just now over a certain controversy of which I suppose you haven't heard in Central Africa. I think I'll go. What do you say, Oliver?"

"Oh!" said Captain Orme, waking up from a reverie, "if you are satisfied, I am. It doesn't matter to me where I go."

