

# The Coming of The King.

BY JOSEPH HOCKING.  
Author of "All Men Are Liars," "The Flame of Fire," Etc.

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CHAPTER VIII.—(Continued).

"Ay, you may laugh, young master, but it is no laughing matter. For years he did things which no one can explain, and all sorts of things happened. Then one day he died."

"Dead!"

"Ay, it must be ten years ago now, and ever since then no man will go near it under sun or moon. While the sun shines the devil dare not go there; but after dark old Solomon and the devil do come back, and there old Solomon do plead with the devil to give him back his soul."

"Again I could not help smiling, even although the man's face was pale with fear."

"Ay, young master, but let me tell you this. One night three of the strongest men in these parts were over at the Queen's Head, in the parish of St. John, drinking. You may have heard of them even in London. Three brothers, and each man of them stood over six foot and half high. Well, they declared after they had each drunk a quart of strong ale that they feared nothing under heaven. Then one hundred made a bet that they dared not go and spend the hours from eleven to one o'clock in the middle of the night at Pycroft. Well, they took the bet, for five pounds it was, and the next night, Jack, and Jim, and Tom Turtle started for Pycroft. A lot of us walked with them to the gates, and although we were in great fear we waited for them by trying to sing psalms and saying our prayers, as the parson advised us to do. But we didn't have to wait two hours, young master. Before midnight they were back to us again, and each of them was trembling like an aspen leaf."

"Why, what did they see?"

"Ay, master, we could never get that from them, except by little bits. One spoke of blue flames, another told of howling, another said he had seen old Solomon come to life again, and so on. When they told the parson, he went up there; but though he could see every door was locked and barred, every window was fastened."

"And were there any evidences that any one had been there through the night?"

"Ay, there were; the parson saw foot-marks half of which were the marks of a man, and half of a beast. But that was not all. When the parson tried to look into the place through a window where a small pane of glass was broken, he smelt a musky odour, and so no man will go there after dark."

"But from whom did this old man Solomon get the house?"

"It is said that he was one of the Pycrofts, but I know not. Some have it that old Lord Denham had it at one time, but I do not know. One day at one time, he said to me, 'I am certain it is that parson says that on a huge stone near the front door these words are carved—'

"A Pycroft built this house  
In the hardest of stone,  
And the mortar was mixed  
With a Pycroft's blood and bone,  
If another here would live  
Because of a well-laid pun,  
The mortar shall become  
The buyer's lasting curse."

In spite of myse the laborer's tale made me pause, but I was not the son of my father for naught. The teaching of a lifetime was not to be destroyed because of an ignorant man's vain babbling, and I said to my readers, 'I therefore presently rode back, and after a hearty meal I fell asleep, from which I did not wake till sundown.'

I gathered that no one asked questions why I was there; in truth, every man seemed too much interested in the coming of the King and the changes that would be wrought in the land to trouble about me; so, telling the landlord that I should not be back until late, I left the inn about an hour after sundown and took a roundabout road to Pycroft. More over, I took good heed that I was not followed, and by an hour before midnight I had entered the dark woods that grew around the lonely house.

Now, although I had carried a brave heart during daylight, I was not able to choke down my fears in the darkness. I have been told that nature hath given me firm nerves, moreover, I can meet danger as well as another man without showing fear, but once within the shadow of the woods which surrounded the haunted house I confess that my heart well-nigh failed me. The stories which the laborer had related came back to me with great vividness, so that before I had come within sight of the house I seemed to be surrounded with all sorts of grinning things, some of which lured me on, while others warned me against going farther. The crackling of every twig made my heart beat faster, the twitter of a startled bird told me that I was in a domain where the devil held his revels and where spirits of darkness worked their will.

Still I determined to go forward, and I called enough to know that on the morrow I should laugh at these fancies, and that, did they hinder me from carrying out my plans now, I should all my life accuse myself of being a poltroon. He sides, what report should I have to give to my father, the man who knew no fear and who would be ashamed of a son who would flinch together and trudge my way through the darkness, stopping every now and then to listen if any one was near.

Never shall I forget my journey along that lonely pathway, for as I look back now it seems to mark an era in my life. But of that I must not speak now; I will tell my story in as straightforward a way as I am able, so that those who read may judge for themselves. And yet, if I

felt fear, I maintain that it was no wonder, for my experiences were not of those with which man meets every day. Besides, I had but three days left my home, where I had lived an uneventful life, and now to be cast alone amidst mystery and danger was a matter of no small moment.

Presently I emerged from the woods into the open space where the woman and I had stood on the previous night. I could see the moon, but it seemed to be in a great ring, not a sound could I hear. The songs of the birds had ceased; not an insect moved its wings; all nature seemed asleep. After waiting a few moments, I scarce daring to look around me, I heard a sound like that of a distant sigh; but it might have been only the night wind sighing through the twigs. At length I dared to look towards the house; but it was darkness, or at least so it seemed. Then I noted that I stood on a different place from that on which I had been standing when I had parted from the woman the night before, and it might be that some angle hid the window I had seen then.

I therefore went swiftly across the open space towards the tree I had spoken of, and before one might well count twenty paces I had climbed to the branch whereon I had a foretime rested, and so again obtained a view of the chamber. This I did because I feared to seek admission without being asked. If others were there as well as the old man, I might have to adopt methods different from those I should take use of if he were alone. I reflected that if what the woman Katharine Harwood had told my father was true, and that the King's marriage contract were hidden in the house, he would guard it carefully. If I was to enter, therefore, must be done warily, neither must I foolishly and with youthful wilfulness be led to betray myself.

As I have said, therefore, I again climbed the tree, and obtained a view of the chamber, and ere long saw the old man seated at a table, and by the aid of a lamp was reading some scrolls which he had spread out before him. I watched him a few moments in silence, noting the eager look upon his face, and evident ardor with which he sought to understand the meaning of the parchment before him. Presently I saw him take certain powders from a drawer, and place them in a pot, into which he also poured some liquid. This done, he placed the pot on the fire, and watched the liquid with great care.

It was at this time that I determined to seek entrance. But how? I knew that every door was securely bolted, every window was barred, and that what were the means she had used? I called myself a fool for not following her, and thus learning the means she had used; but that was futile now. Wisdom was generally foolishness, and so I ransacked my brains in thinking of what she must have done.

I have not set it down in these pages, but I did remember the previous night that, when the woman drew near the house, I heard a noise like the cry of a screech-owl. At the time I put it down to the night bird, but now it occurred to me that it might have been a means whereby she obtained entrance. At any rate, it could do no harm, and therefore I did so. I went to the door, where we women had entered.

I must confess to a fast-beating heart as I stood by the great iron-studded door. After all, I knew nothing of what I was doing, and I was to enter the very mystery made every nerve tingle, while there came to the eyes of my imagination pictures of many strange doings. So strong was this feeling upon me that I stood still, scarce daring to move. Then I saw in the moonlight what had escaped me in the early morning. A piece of string hung by the postern of the door. Indeed, I believe that it had not been there then. What did it mean? On closer examination I saw that it was passed through a hole in the woodwork.

Secretly realizing what I was doing, I tugged at the piece of string, and immediately I heard a kind of clanking noise, which I took to be the door being unlocked. I cried out almost involuntarily. A minute later the clanking ceased, and then silence reigned again. But now that I had come to the door, I pulled again, and then, using what power of mimicry I had, I cried out as I had heard the screech-owl cry among the trees around my old home.

Again I listened, and this time I heard clanking footsteps. I judged then, as I know now, that the footsteps were muffled, nevertheless there was something very weird in listening to the stealthy tread of some one creeping nearer and nearer to me. A minute later I knew that some one stood at the other side of the door, and then another silence followed. I waited I should think a minute, but no further sound came, wherefore I again reached for the piece of string, and as I pulled it, I heard the clanking of chains and the shooting of bolts, as though the one within were preparing to open the door, after which there

was again a moment's silence as if he hesitated.

"Are you prepared to pay the price of entrance?"

The words were uttered in a hoarse whisper, and at that time they seemed to contain some occult meaning, so that for a moment I hesitated to reply. But I summoned up my courage, and made an answer in a hoarse whisper—

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I could see that my entrance had astonished him. That he expected some one else was evident, and from the look in his eyes I knew that he had no knowledge nor suspicion as to who I was. He held a small oil lamp on the level of his head, by which means he caused its light to fall directly on my face. I saw, too, that his eyes were fixed on me as though he would read my thoughts, and I judged that he was at a loss how he should treat me.

"And so you would use your brute strength to enter the house of a lonely man, who desires only that he may seek to do the will of God?" he said slowly, and I could have sworn that he was calculating within himself how much he would be able to throw himself upon me.

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"You are young for your trade, young master, and you speak with the tongue of a scholar. You are not a false man, and if my old eyes do not tell me falsely, you are ill-fitted for this. Your face tells me that you should be an honest youth, not a rascal, and I will drag you to the stocks, and then, methinks, we shall see how you can rob me. Gold and silver have I none. I am a pauper, and I have lived in communion with the poor of my days in communion with his thoughts and his Maker."

"Your age hath taught you but little wisdom, if it hath taught you that I am a fool," I said. "Neither do I seek gold or silver."

"Then what do you seek?" he asked.

"A quiet hour with you."

I saw him glance quickly around the entrance hall of the house in which we stood, as though he feared we were not alone. Then he took a step nearer to me.

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"Ah, a quiet hour," he said, and his voice became bitter. "If you do not leave this house, nay, say, 'I have said, therefore, I again climbed the tree, and obtained a view of the chamber, and ere long saw the old man seated at a table, and by the aid of a lamp was reading some scrolls which he had spread out before him. I watched him a few moments in silence, noting the eager look upon his face, and evident ardor with which he sought to understand the meaning of the parchment before him. Presently I saw him take certain powders from a drawer, and place them in a pot, into which he also poured some liquid. This done, he placed the pot on the fire, and watched the liquid with great care."

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I could see that my entrance had astonished him. That he expected some one else was evident, and from the look in his eyes I knew that he had no knowledge nor suspicion as to who I was. He held a small oil lamp on the level of his head, by which means he caused its light to fall directly on my face. I saw, too, that his eyes were fixed on me as though he would read my thoughts, and I judged that he was at a loss how he should treat me.

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Again I listened, and this time I heard clanking footsteps. I judged then, as I know now, that the footsteps were muffled, nevertheless there was something very weird in listening to the stealthy tread of some one creeping nearer and nearer to me. A minute later I knew that some one stood at the other side of the door, and then another silence followed. I waited I should think a minute, but no further sound came, wherefore I again reached for the piece of string, and as I pulled it, I heard the clanking of chains and the shooting of bolts, as though the one within were preparing to open the door, after which there

was again a moment's silence as if he hesitated.

"Are you prepared to pay the price of entrance?"

The words were uttered in a hoarse whisper, and at that time they seemed to contain some occult meaning, so that for a moment I hesitated to reply. But I summoned up my courage, and made an answer in a hoarse whisper—

"I am prepared."

Then the great door began to creak and ponder. I only speed of action, no sooner was the aperture between the door and its lintel a few inches wide than, putting all my strength against it, I forced it back, and found myself inside the building before he who had opened it had been able to obtain a glimpse of me.

CHAPTER IX.

So sudden had been my movement that I had caused the old man to stagger back, nevertheless he did not lose his footing, and when he caught sight of me, I thought I detected a desire on his part to rush towards me, but he was so much startled that he could make any such action. I closed the door with a loud noise—a noise which resounded through the great lonely building.

I could see that my entrance had astonished him. That he expected some one else was evident, and from the look in his eyes I knew that he had no knowledge nor suspicion as to who I was. He held a small oil lamp on the level of his head, by which means he caused its light to fall directly on my face. I saw, too, that his eyes were fixed on me as though he would read my thoughts, and I judged that he was at a loss how he should treat me.

"And so you would use your brute strength to enter the house of a lonely man, who desires only that he may seek to do the will of God?" he said slowly, and I could have sworn that he was calculating within himself how much he would be able to throw himself upon me.

"I do not know why it was, but for an instant I thought that perhaps this was because the old man's voice had driven away the last vestige of superstitions fear."

"You are young for your trade, young master, and you speak with the tongue of a scholar. You are not a false man, and if my old eyes do not tell me falsely, you are ill-fitted for this. Your face tells me that you should be an honest youth, not a rascal, and I will drag you to the stocks, and then, methinks, we shall see how you can rob me. Gold and silver have I none. I am a pauper, and I have lived in communion with the poor of my days in communion with his thoughts and his Maker."

"Your age hath taught you but little wisdom, if it hath taught you that I am a fool," I said. "Neither do I seek gold or silver."

"Then what do you seek?" he asked.

"A quiet hour with you."

I saw him glance quickly around the entrance hall of the house in which we stood, as though he feared we were not alone. Then he took a step nearer to me.

"A quiet hour, young master?"

"Ah, a quiet hour," he said, and his voice became bitter. "If you do not leave this house, nay, say, 'I have said, therefore, I again climbed the tree, and obtained a view of the chamber, and ere long saw the old man seated at a table, and by the aid of a lamp was reading some scrolls which he had spread out before him. I watched him a few moments in silence, noting the eager look upon his face, and evident ardor with which he sought to understand the meaning of the parchment before him. Presently I saw him take certain powders from a drawer, and place them in a pot, into which he also poured some liquid. This done, he placed the pot on the fire, and watched the liquid with great care."

It was at this time that I determined to seek entrance. But how? I knew that every door was securely bolted, every window was barred, and that what were the means she had used? I called myself a fool for not following her, and thus learning the means she had used; but that was futile now. Wisdom was generally foolishness, and so I ransacked my brains in thinking of what she must have done.

I have not