

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 332: King Solomon's Mines

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At length the air began to grow grey with light, then swift golden arrows came flashing across the snow,
and at last the glorious sun peeped up above the lava wall, and looked in upon our half frozen forms, and upon vent vergal, sitting there amongst us, stone dead.
No wonder his back had felt cold, poor fellow. He had died when I heard him sigh, and was now almost frozen stiff,
shocked beyond measure we dragged ourselves from the corpse, strange the horror we all have of the companionship of a dead body,
and left it still sitting there, with its arms clasped round its knees. By this time the sunlight was pouring its cold rays, for here they were cold, straight in at the mouth of the cave.
Suddenly I heard an exclamation of fear from someone, and turned my head down the cave, and this was what I saw.

Sitting at the end of it, for it was not more than twenty feet long, was another form, of which the head rested on the chest, and the long arms hung down.

I stared at it, and saw that it too was a dead man, and what was more, a white man.

So that, Dominic, is a thrilling moment from King Solomon's Minds, which was published in 1885, written by Henry Ryder Haggard,

and basically, even if you've never read it, you will be familiar with it, because it was one of the best selling novels of the Victorian age,
continues to sell in bucket loads, massively, massively influential on everything from Tolkien to computer games,

and I'm very familiar with your methods. You are a firm believer, are you not, Dominic, that it's the mass market kind of middle-brow literature

that is a much better guide to the spirit of an age than, say, the great literary classics.

I think that's, yeah, absolutely, Tom. King Solomon's Minds is not just an enormously influential kind of text of empire, of the British Empire,
and of Britain's involvement in Africa, but I would argue it's a foundational text of modern popular culture, actually.

So, I mean, Indiana Jones films, countless video games. If you've ever played Tomb Raider or Uncharted, if your children have played those games,

they're playing versions of King Solomon's Minds. It's enormously important.

So can you just give a very quick outline of the plot? We'll kind of look at the details in more later, but just kind of, because it's basically,
it's a quest plot, isn't it, set in Africa?

It is, exactly. So King Solomon's Minds is set in late 19th century Africa. Our hero is Alan Cortemaine. We'll go on to talk about him.

He's a hunter, he's an explorer, he's an adventurer, and he teams up with a sort of little fellowship, Tom, I think it's fair to say.

And they set off over this extraordinary, fantastical landscape.

So incredibly parched desert, isn't it?

Exactly.

And they arrive at this mountain, and that's where the scene of the cave with the frozen white man. Exactly, so, exactly. They are heading into the blank spaces of the map. Again, something we'll come back to a little bit later.

And they're in search of King Solomon's Treasure Minds. They believe that there's treasure there. There are also two other quests.

There are kind of overlapping quests, as in other, more familiar, more modern quest stories.

One of them is looking for his brother, who has gone missing, and one of their party, Tom, is in disguise, isn't he?

Yes.

He may or may not be the lost king of a lost kingdom.

Yes.

Very exciting. They go on all these adventures. They find this lost kingdom. Terribly wicked and formidable super villain, who is the king of it, who they fight.

And an incredibly sinister witch, isn't that? Gagool, who is, I'm sure, be talking about.

Yes, absolutely. They discover the mines. They discover the caves, but of course, they go down into the caves and they're trapped.

There's all kinds of sort of terrors and threats down in the caves.

And would you believe it? They emerge triumphant at the end of the story.

I don't think I'm giving away the end, by saying.

Not too big a spoiler there.

No, that the heroes live to fight another day.

Dominic, just one thing. One thing that really struck me when I reread it, because I read it as a child, hadn't read it since.

It has the primal scene of white explorers coming to a distant land and impressing the natives with their knowledge of eclipses.

Yes.

So I kind of, you know, that is such a familiar trope. It appears in so many kind of adventure stories.

And I checked and this is the first time it's used, apparently.

So that's what kind of gives an indication of how many, it's a massive cliché reader.

Yes, it is.

In fact, almost every chapter, when you read King Solomon's Minds Now, so I reread it as you did for this.

Having originally read it as a child and thought, well, it was brilliant as a child.

And when you read it now, almost every chapter seems stock full of stereotypes and cliches.

But often that's because it's the first time they were.

So it's all the scenes of them going into the mines and the caves and they discover dead bodies, which everybody has seen, if they've ever seen a Hollywood movie, is King Solomon's Minds that creates that.

Although having said that, of course, there are a lot of cliches that have bred of the imperial age that are liable to seem offensive now.

So we'll probably come to that as well.

Anyway, so Rider Haggard, who is he?

Right. So we're a history podcast, not a lit crit podcast.

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So let's root King Solomon's Mines in history.
So Henry Rider Haggard is a classic kind of child of empire.
Somebody who goes out to seek his fortune in empire.
So he's the eighth of 10 children born to, what's his name?
William Haggard, who claimed descent from a Danish nobleman, I read.
That's right. Yeah.
They were a family of kind of squires in Norfolk.
And what's quite interesting about Haggard is Haggard, not unlike his greatest fan, who's J.R.R. Tolkien.
So you probably spotted many of the listeners.
The similarities with the Lord of the Rings in the story.
So Tolkien was a massive fan of Haggard.
Haggard, like Tolkien, from the very beginning has a sense of kind of loss and nostalgia.
And he's backward looking because his family are one of those families who owns a lot of land in rural England.
And thanks to free trade and the import of kind of cheap foreign food and stuff, their world is embattled and their world is kind of in decline.
Well, so Dominic, did you read the Brandham Hall, which was the setting of The Go-Between, Harley's great novel, that that was based on
Ryder Haggard's child at home?
Do you know, I didn't know that at all.
What a brilliant...
Well, The Go-Between is one of my favourite books.
Well, there you go. It all connects.
Very good.
So anyway, they're sort of being squeezed.
Now, Ryder Haggard's older brothers have gone to public schools and to Oxford or Cambridge.
He was sent to Ipswich Grammar School.
He was seen as less bright than his brothers.
But in fact, his father was extremely rude to him and said he was a complete failure and you're destined to be a greengrocer.
Yes, harsh, harsh words.
Like Margaret Thatcher's father, Tom, who was a greengrocer.
Anyway, obviously, William Haggard, who was a barrister, was completely wrong about this.
But his childhood, I mean, you can see as a breeding ground for a lot that's going to appear later in his novel.
So he's, as a child, he was very kind of keen on hunting, shooting, fishing, all that kind of stuff.
Yes.
Which will reappear.
And he had a very sinister rag doll, didn't he?
He did.
Called She Who Must Be Obeyed.
And his nurse used this doll to kind of menace him into obedience.
So that's all part of the mix.

It is very much part of the mix.

She Who Must Be Abaid will definitely reappear in this story.

In 1875, his 19 years old, Ryder Haggard, and his father discovers that a family friend who lives nearby,

who's called Sir Henry Bulwer, is going off to South Africa to become the Lieutenant Governor of Natal.

And he writes to him and says, I've got this absolutely useless son.

Because he'd failed all his exams, hadn't he?

He'd kind of failed military exams.

He'd failed his, he never took his foreign office exams.

I mean, yeah.

I think people sort of now say his father was actually quite harsh.

A bit like Churchill's father.

Right.

And he's not, I mean, clearly he's not that stupid because he writes two of the best-selling books ever written.

But anyway, it's all arranged.

He will go out to South Africa and he'll basically be a dog's body for the Lieutenant Governor of Natal.

He will do things like organize big banquets and talk to the servants, which is actually what he does.

So he goes out there and he does this.

He spends his spare time out there on the Velt hunting and, you know, riding around and whatever.

I'm kind of basically falling in love with Africa and falling in love with the idea that here there is a sense of grandeur and adventure that you don't get in Norfolk.

Yeah. Oh yeah. Absolutely.

And he particularly becomes an admirer of the Zulus, doesn't he?

He does.

And he sees in the Zulus a kind of a warrior class reminiscent of the ancient Spartans.

I think that's absolutely right, Tom.

It's a, yeah, it's a very good comparison.

I think that's exactly how he sees the Zulus.

At this point, the British who are there in South Africa, they are pushing ever further into the sort of north towards the heart of the continent, taking more lands.

They're drawn eventually by diamonds and by gold.

But of course they're in conflict with not merely the Africans who are there, so like the Zulus, but another group of settlers who are the Boers.

And who were there first?

Yeah, who were there first.

So the tension between the British and the Boers we will come back to in a second.

One of his first pieces actually, Tom, is about going to Zululand.

So the British are poised basically annex Zululand.

In 1876, he goes and he sees a war dance and he writes about it, one of his first articles.

He says, it was like coming face to face with great primeval nature, not nature as we civilized people know her, smiling in cornfields, waving in well-ordered woods, but nature as she was on the morrow

of the creation.

That tells you something about the British attitude to Africa and Haggard's attitude to Africa. The idea that it's primeval, that it's unspoiled by modernity, that somehow it's truer, cleaner, more authentic, but also it's more, I hate to use the word, this is the word Haggard would have used. He would have said it was more savage.

He would, but equally this sense of a kind of pristine warrior potency that perhaps has been diminished in Britain.

Yes.

What among the Zulus is, you know, it can stretch right the way back to, as he says there, the beginning of time.

And there's this kind of amazing detail.

When he said Britain and Zulu go to war, British army gets wiped out at Isundwana.

Then there's a heroic defense by British soldiers at Rorke's Drift, which is the subject of the film Zulu.

And Ryder Haggard actually goes and he visits the battlefield of Isundwana after the battle.

And he reported seeing crushed cartridge cases and a broken cricket stump and ball.

Oh, cranky.

And there's maybe something there of that sense that you get with Kipling, who kind of despise muddy doves and flannelled fools,

that the British are in some way unserious as warriors compared to the Zulus,

that the British win because they've got the Gatling gun and the Zulus have not, to paraphrase.

I think that's right, Tom, because I think the interesting thing about Haggard will come to this, is that he's one of these people who loves the kind of romance of Africa of exploration, adventure, but the formal empire, I think he always views as a bit of a disappointment.

That's kind of too bureaucratic, pusillanimous.

There's a brilliant example of this.

So as we said, at this point in the late 1870s, the British are pushing sort of north and absorbing territory.

One of the places they absorb, they eventually end up annexing, not just Zululand after the Zulu war, but one of the Boer republics, the Transvaal.

And in 1877, Haggard is actually as a sort of dog's body.

He is part of the party that go from the Tal to north to the Transvaal to Pretoria,

that he reads out because the important official who's going to do it loses his voice.

So Haggard, the junior person, is given the proclamation of annexation to read out in Pretoria, and he hoists the Union flag.

And this is a very proud moment for him.

He thinks our empire is civilizing mission, all of this stuff.

This is great, but three years later, the Boers rebel.

There's a revolt in the Transvaal.

There's been a change of government in Britain.

So Disraeli, who is all for imperialism, has given way to Gladstone, who is much more ambivalent about it.

The British suffer a defeat at Medjuba Hill.

I mean, these are quite small forces, but they suffer a defeat.

And, meanwhile, Haggard has become an ostrich farmer, hasn't he?

An ostrich farmer, yes, exactly.
And he hears the sound of the fighting from his farm.
He does. He does indeed, exactly right.
So he's settled down. He's married by this point.
He's got this ostrich farm, which is near the border between the Transvaal and the Tal.
The British are defeated.
Gladstone doesn't want to pour in a load of money and men and all that stuff.
He just says, fine, let the Boers have their independence.
Sodom.
At that point, Haggard said, show how personal this is for him.
The peace terms are actually negotiated at his farmhouse,
which is called Hildrop, and Haggard writes himself later,
it was a strange fate which decreed that the retrocession of the Transvaal,
over which I had myself hoisted the British flag,
should be practically accomplished beneath my roof.
Dominic, do you think that Rider Haggard is the only famous British novelist
to have kept an ostrich farm? I guess he must be.
I can't imagine Jane Austen keeping ostriches.
I thought you were asking me that because you knew that Henry James or Graham Green agree.
No, I don't. It's a genuine... I simply cannot imagine.
Iris Murdoch had once, yeah.
No, I can't imagine anyone else keeping ostriches. Anyway,
but he comes back then, doesn't he, to Britain?
This is the funny thing. This is the end of Rider Haggard in Africa,
so I'm pretty much...
He's been there for five years, he comes back and he says,
this is a great betrayal by Gladstone and the Liberals.
He's like these people who are slagging off Gladstone
because they see him as abandoning General Gordon.
Anyway, this is the end of Rider Haggard in Africa.
He now comes back and he decides he's going to be a lawyer.
So he goes, he's called to the bar, he's a barrister.
He tries his hand at writing novels and he writes two that are...
Not a success.
Pretty useless. Yeah, not successful.
Then trouble the scorer.
And then an amazing story.
He is on the train one day going to London with his brother,
one of his multiple, much more successful and impressive siblings.
And they are talking about a new book which has been a tremendous hit
and the first of a genre, first of a new genre.
That book is Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island,
which was published in 1883.
Treasure Island was an enormous hit

and it appealed to an entirely new readership.
So these are people who are newly literate
because of the Education Act of 1870,
which has expanded schooling in Britain.
These are people who probably a generation or two early
would never have been able to read and write,
but they are, you know, books are cheaper,
there are new newspapers.
They love Treasure Island.
They can't get enough of this daring do
and blood and thunder and all this stuff.
And the whole thing about Treasure Island is that again,
that it's about pirates,
Spanish Maine, it's a world that is somehow more glamorous
and more dangerous than England.
It's pure escapism, rooted in a sort of kind of
fantastical version of history, I suppose.
And opens with a map.
And opens with a map.
So there's a degree of request about it.
You know, people in the 1880s love this kind of stuff.
Anyway, writer Haggard says to his brother,
well, I think I could, I think it's,
I don't think it's that great.
I think I could do better than that.
And his brother said to him, supposedly,
there are different two different stories.
One, his brother says, I'll bet you,
I think a Bob or something.
And the other is, he says,
I'll bet you five shillings, whatever.
He says, I bet you can't do it as good,
as well as Robert Louis Stevenson.
Haggard says, fine, I'll do it.
It takes him extraordinarily six weeks.
I think you can sometimes detect traces of that
in the writing, Tom, do you think?
But authors are always saying that.
Well, they know that.
I say that about writing my vampire book.
Did it take you six weeks?
I always say it took me six weeks.
Six years.
And I realized it actually didn't.

It took me slightly longer than that.
I think it's kind of shorthand for it.
He wrote it very fast.
He wrote it very fast.
And actually, when he first,
so he writes King Solomon's Mines,
his own quest story
set in a version of the African,
which he had spent five years.
Right.
Because that's the key thing, isn't it?
That actually, I mean, he's saying that,
you know, there are unknown reaches,
but that's not true.
I mean, there aren't, he knows full well
that there aren't these huge deserts
and these mysterious mountains.
And any possibility of a kind of
lost, paradisaical kingdom,
which is Kukuhana land, isn't it?
That when they arrive there,
it's kind of, it's more beautiful.
It's more intense.
Everything is kind of more glamorous
and exciting.
The warriors are braver.
The women are more beautiful.
And it's a fantastical land,
but he knows full well that that doesn't exist.
He does, Tom,
but there are still blank spaces on the map.
Kind of.
At the time that he's...
We should come back to...
But not that blank.
We'll come back to explorers.
The thing that really puts publishers off, actually,
is not the fantasies, it's the violence.
So there's a lot of violence.
There's a particular scene,
which said that there's a brilliant writer
called Catherine Rundell.
Yes.
The Bunker of Dunn.

Of John Dunn.
And also a prize-winning children's author.
And she wrote a wonderful essay about
Rider Haggard in the London Review of Books
a couple of years ago.
And she points out that...
She says the highlight for most children when they read it
is a bit when a young boy, a Zulu boy,
is literally torn apart by an elephant.
And she points out that most children love this.
Which anyone who's written for children
knows that this is almost certainly true.
But the publishers were appalled by this.
So one publisher said,
never has it been our fate
to wade through such a farago of obscene witlessness.
Nothing is more likely in the hands of the young
to do so much injury
as this recklessly immoral book.
So lots of them turn it down,
but Castle agrees to publish it.
They bring it out in autumn of 1885.
They have billboards around London
that describe it as the most amazing book ever written.
I mean, you'd love that, wouldn't you?
I would, of course, as an author.
And it's a massive, massive hit.
And it's a hit, not least,
because this is the year of the Berlin Conference
when all the European colonial powers
are meeting to divide Africa between themselves.
The onset of the scramble for Africa.
Exactly.
It gets brilliant reviews by and large.
I mean, some people don't like it,
but the Athenaeum Journal said
the fighting scenes were hardly to be beaten
outside Homer and the Great Duma.
Right.
But the echoes of Homer again,
the sense of primal,
warrior virtue and pro-es
at the beginning of time.
Exactly.

Still to be found in the heart of Africa.
Now, funny enough,
Robert Louis Stevenson,
who Haggard had set out to beat,
he actually writes to Haggard
and he says, you know,
well done, tremendous book.
Your fine, weird imagination.
But he also says to Haggard,
just be careful with your prose.
You should slow down a bit.
But Haggard presumably found very condescending.
And Haggard completely ignored
because in the next few months,
he pours out more books.
So he writes a sequel called Alan Cortemaine
and another book,
which you'll come to a little bit later,
called She,
which is another absolutely foundational text
in that kind of popular imagination.
And that sets him off.
I mean, just to finish with Haggard,
he becomes a full-time writer.
He makes lots of money.
He becomes a kind of a country landowner.
He tries to become a Tory politician.
So he stands in Norfolk in 1895,
but he loses.
That's quite a feat, isn't it?
To lose as a would-be Tory MP in Norfolk.
Well, I think in those days,
Haggard claimed that he said the area
could not have been more unfriendly
to the Unionist cause.
I think possibly because of food.
Cheap food prices meant that for agricultural labourers
in East Anglia, these were tough times in the 1890s.
Well, let's not get into free trade or anything like that.
Let's stick to...
But he becomes a famous kind of Africanist.
So he's the head of all kinds of commissions and panels.
Even though, as we said,
he's actually only spent five years...

He writes the Zulu trilogy as well,
towards the end of his life,
featuring, and this is Alan Cortemaine again,
featuring Zikali, the dwarf wizard known as
the thing that should never have been born.
Which is a tremendous name.
Imagine if you were called that.
That is a truly great name.
And then his trajectory is almost slightly predictable.
So by the 1910s and 1920s,
he spends all his time going on about radicals and Bolsheviks
and sort of international socialism and stuff.
You can imagine the kind of stuff he would have been putting
had he had the internet.
Oh yeah, absolutely.
Yes, he would have been cancelled, I think it's fair to say, Tom.
Although not everybody had read King Solomon's Minds or she,
it's a bit like Star Wars or James Bond Today
or Spider-Man, dare I say, Tom.
Never heard of it.
Almost every sort of thinking, reading person
in the English-speaking world
would have been aware of those books,
of the Alan Cortemaine character
and of the cliches and the kind of the tropes that...
Yeah, Conan Dawes Lost World,
the idea of Tarzan or all that kind of stuff,
people going from the Imperial Metropole to distant reaches
and discovering extraordinary treasures.
And Dominic, I mean, going back to the book,
one thing that we haven't explained is the title.
So what are King Solomon's Minds doing in South Africa?
I mean, it's quite a long way from Jerusalem.
And that is also a kind of enduring part.
So you mentioned Indiana Jones,
the idea that there are lost civilizations
waiting to be discovered
and this is quite kind of Atlantis.
We talked about this in the Atlantis thing.
The idea that if there are ruins
and ancient civilizations to be found in Africa,
the assumption is that they are not actually African in origin,
that it is outsiders who have brought them,
that in some way they've either brought kind of mysterious powers

or they've brought mysterious technology
or ways of, say, constructing minds.
And in this case, the argument is that Solomon
and the Phoenicians together are working to build the temple
and they go to a place called Ophir or Ophet.
And basically in King Solomon's Mines,
Ophir is identified with Kukwana land.
But in the Bible, Tom, doesn't it say
Solomon received tribute of gold, peacocks,
general stuff from this place that has never been pinned down.
And people were always, all through the medieval period,
people were fascinated by the idea that
there was some lost kingdom out there,
which was the real Ophir or Ophet.
And this place must be incredibly rich.
And that sort of became conflated with the other idea,
massively popular in the medieval period,
that there was a lost Christian king out there.
Called Presta John, which was clearly based on some
garbled memory of Abyssinia, of Ethiopia.
But there's also one other kind of Solomonic element,
which is the Queen of Sheba.
And basically everyone knew where Sheba was.
It was Southern Arabia.
But increasingly in the Middle Ages,
people don't want to be satisfied with that
and they start thinking, where else could it be?
And because Africa, to Europeans, is unknown, it's unmapped.
People start thinking that in some way,
Presta John and Ophir and Sheba are somehow kind of blended
and are to be found in the depths of Africa.
So I mean, this goes right the way back to the 16th century,
when the Portuguese are starting to really go upriver.
And they're basically the only Europeans to do it.
So in 1552, there was this guy called Joao de Barros,
who wrote a whole book in which he conflates
Presta John and the Queen of Sheba
and says that there is a ruined city in the middle of Africa.
And this proves to be an incredibly potent idea.
And over the centuries that follow,
people keep looking for it.
And then for Ryder Haggard, the key thing is that in 1871,
an explorer called Karl Mauch, is it?
Karl Mauch?

I think it's Karl Mauch, isn't it?

Karl Mauch.

He discovers a spectacular ruined city.

But that's the thing, Tom.

I mean, people have been talking about,
is there a ruined city in the middle of Africa,
a medieval city for hundreds of years?

And there is.

And this is Great Zimbabwe, which dates back to the 9th century.

And as you said, Karl Mauch finds it.

I think it'd been found by, there's another German guy
who'd found it a few years earlier.

But he takes Karl Mauch and Mauch popularizes it, doesn't he?

Yeah.

And so this is happening a decade or so before

Ryder Haggard starts work on King Solomon's Mines.

Can I read you what Karl Mauch said about what he found there?

Do.

Okay.

So he's writing here the tones of a sober and measured archaeologist.

It can be taken as a fact that the wood which we obtained
from Great Zimbabwe actually is cedar wood.

And from this, that it cannot come from anywhere else,
but from the Lebanon.

Furthermore, only the Phoenicians could have brought it here.

So that's the level of evidence.

I mean, people now read this and they say,
my gosh, this is pure imperialism.

European observers just could not get their heads around the idea
that people in what is now Zimbabwe could have built
a medieval city because they didn't think Africans were capable of it.

So they had to invent all these sort of ideas
that people had traveled ridiculously long distances
and established Phoenician colonies in South Africa or whatever.

Yeah.

I mean, it's clearly racist.

It's clearly founded on the idea that Africans can't produce
their own civilization.

Yeah.

But it is also, I think, expressive of a desire to join
this beautiful to Europeans exotic land of adventure
to reference points that they will understand.

Yeah.

And so that's basically, in King Solomon's minds,

the Homeric.

So that's the, you know, there's a kind of great war is fought in Kukuan land and it's described in very overtly Homeric terms.

The Viking.

Yeah.

So one of the heroes in King Solomon's minds, like Haggard himself, is a Viking descent.

So Henry, he's often described, isn't he, as with his big hair and his beard and his enormous muscles. Haggard absolutely is an enormous physical enthusiasm, shall we say?

Well, he absolutely does.

And so this, this figure, what's he called Sir Henry Curtis?

Sir Henry Curtis.

Yeah.

Sir Henry Curtis joins up with the Zulu guy who we described at the beginning, who has been accompanying them as a, as a servant.

But when they arrive there, turns out to be the rightful king of Kukuan land, Ignosi.

He's Aragorn basically, isn't he, Tom?

He is Aragorn.

And he and Sir Henry both dress up in the same kind of war gear and Ryder Haggard is very, very keen on it.

The dress was no doubt a savage one, but I am bound to say I never saw a finer sight than Sir Henry Curtis presented in this guys.

It showed off his magnificent physique to the greatest advantage.

And when Ignosi arrived presently arrayed in cinema costume, I thought to myself that I never before saw two such splendid men.

And I think the thing there is, is the idea that Ignosi is part of a culture in Ryder Haggard's view that is still on a level with Vikings and with American Greeks.

And Sir Henry Curtis by going there has been able to reclaim his own status as someone equivalent in a way that he would never have done had he stayed in his ancestral estate back in England.

Yeah.

I think that's absolutely right.

He has this idea that by, which I think is enormously potent.

And actually, you can see in all kinds of popular culture today, this idea that by going to Africa, you will somehow turn the clock back, cast off the degeneracy of modern life, and become more truly authentic.

But also, going back to Haggard and Great St. Barbara just before we go to the break, Haggard wrote a preface to a history of Great St. Barbara, of this site. He absolutely believed that it was Phoenician. I mean, what would strike us as just an absolutely ludicrous bonkers idea, sort of Netflix worthy, Tom, I think is fair to say. And Haggard said, what was the condition of this empire? And what the measure of the effective dignity of its emperor points rather difficult to determine? I mean, which is putting it, putting it mildly. But then he says, it is legitimate to hope. It seems probable even that in centuries to come, a town will once more nestle beneath these gray and ancient ruins, trading in gold as did that of the Phoenicians, but peopled by men of the Anglo-Saxon race. Well, and in fact, that kind of does happen because in 1890, the region that Great St. Barbara is standing in, a place called Machona Land, is occupied by Cecil Rhodes, British South Africa Company. And Rhodes becomes absolutely obsessed with the idea that St. Barbara was Phoenician. And he sets up a company which is brilliantly called Rhodesia, Ancient Ruins Limited, which claimed the exclusive tourist rights to it. And of course, Rhodesia, Machona Land gets given Rhodesia's name and Rhodesia will become a kind of white settler country. So exactly. So in some ways, Haggard got what he wanted, because of course, gold was one of the things that was driving the British deeper and deeper into Africa. Listen, we should take a breakdown. There's so much to, I mean, it's such a fascinating subject. There's so much to unpack. And we shall return after the break with talk of explorers, big game hunters. But also for any female listeners thinking this is all a bit masculine, we will also be discussing Ryder Haggard's attitude to the ladies. Exactly. We're like Mitt Romney. We've got binders full of women. And we'll be back after the break. For there, not more than 40 or 50 miles from us, glittering like silver in the early rays of the morning sun, were Sheba's breasts. And stretching away for hundreds of miles on each side of them

was the great Solomon Berg.

Now that I, sitting here, attempt to describe
the extraordinary grandeur and beauty of that site,
language seems to fail me.

I am impotent, even before its memory.

There, straight before us, were two enormous mountains,
the like of which are not I believe to be seen in Africa,
if indeed there are any other such in the world,
measuring each at least 15,000 feet in height,
standing not more than a dozen miles apart,
connected by a precipitous cliff of rock
and towering up in awful white solemnity straight into the sky.

These mountains standing thus,
like the pillars of a gigantic gateway,
are shaped exactly like a woman's breasts.

Their bases swelled gently up from the plain,
looking at that distance perfectly round and smooth.
And on the top of each was a vast round hillock,
covered with snow, exactly corresponding to the nipple
on the female breast.

So Dominic, deep waters.

I mean, frankly, one of the weirdest passages
in the whole of Victorian literature.

And the weird thing is that
Ryder Haggard makes a boast, doesn't he,
of there being no petticoats in King Solomon's minds.
And he says the kind of the opening introduction
that it is dedicated to all the big and little boys
who read it.

Yes.

And yet, actually, a kind of nervousness
about the female is present throughout the book.

There are some very deep waters here, Tom.

Right.

So there are a couple of things here.

So one is that Haggard is like so many imperial writers.
He is absolutely obsessed with the idea
of masculine brotherhood, isn't he?

Yes.

And manliness.

So he believes that you'll become more manly
by going to Africa.

But it's also incredibly important that your manliness
is connected to other men.

So the idea of the fellowship, the brotherhood,
which obviously Tolkien then copied,
critics describe it as homo-social, don't they,
rather than homoerotic.

But the way he talks about Sir Henry
with his rippling muscles and all this sort of stuff,
there is an awful lot going on there.
And that is actually very common among not just
imperial writers, but all these imperial characters,
General Gordon, Kitchener, Lord Milner,
all of these people.

It was all about kind of strapping young men,
you know, stripping off together and stuff.
The corollary of that is a certain nervousness
about women.

Definitely.

So, I mean, I don't think you'd have to be
Freud to recognize that in a way,
the whole journey is a kind of trip
across Africa represented as a female body.

So the breasts, I mean, literally she,
the Queen of Sheba's breasts.

And then they go into this beautiful
kind of paradisaal land,
and then they go deep underground.

Into the tunnels.

And they get trapped there.

Yes.

They can't get out.

I know.

There's a lot going on there.

And they get trapped there by the most
memorable character in the whole book.

Yeah.

Who is this witch called Gagool,
who is, I mean, fabulously ancient.

And when I say fabulous, I mean, literally so,
because I mentioned how they have the whole thing,
the stunt with the eclipse and things.

And how this impresses everybody with their ability
to kind of command deep magic.

But Gagool is not impressed because
she has already seen this happen.

Which implies that she is literally centuries old.

Catherine Rondell in her essay and the LRB has,
I mean, says that Ryder Haggard is obviously
obsessed with monkeys because she is described
as a monkey.
And people who are so old that they've basically
become like monkeys are a feature
throughout Ryder Haggard's fiction.
That's right.
So Gagool, by the way, we mentioned Tolkien.
I think Gagool is, I mean, Gagool is very golem-like.
She kind of capers around like a monkey.
She's different described as a monkey.
She's wizened and kind of wrinkled.
And it's as though by living so long, she has...
She's become stretched.
She has. She's become stretched.
And she's kind of degenerated into something
that's not entirely human.
And now, obviously, there are all kinds of things
going on here.
So she's a version of, she's a woman.
She's also obviously, you know, she's black.
She's African.
And there's all kinds of weird stuff going on
in Haggard's mind.
There is another woman called Fulata.
She's a kind of love interest.
So she has to die.
She's killed.
Yeah.
And she dies.
And Alan Cortemaine.
Now, she's become obsessed with one of his travelling
companions who is, was Captain Good.
Who spends the whole time walking around with that
trousers on.
She's obsessed.
All the characters are obsessed with his legs.
And it's clear that she and Good are a couple,
or going to become a couple.
And so when she dies, Alan Cortemaine says,
feel bound to say that I consider her removal
a fortunate occurrence,
since otherwise complications would have been

sure to ensue.

In other words, you can't shack up with an African woman.

Right.

But, but the complications in Haggard's mind and not just social, they're biological.

Right.

Because this is an age when racism is scientifically based increasingly.

Yes.

Absolutely.

And there's quite a lot of that in

Rider Haggard's novels.

So the masculine brotherhood and the idea of becoming, you know, more truly yourself when you're out with your friends, your male friends in Africa, hunting elephants and having adventures.

That goes hand in hand with this idea that back home in the cities surrounded by all the trappings of kind of urban industrial modernity, the race is becoming degenerate, that the white race, this is the word terminology Haggard would have used, is losing its kind of vital sap and all of this stuff.

And this fear of degenerate, of racial degeneracy runs right through, I mean, it's not just Haggard, but so much of the kind of culture of the 1880s, 1890s, 1900s.

So every British defeat, but that defeat against the Zulus, the defeat in the First Burr War and then later on much more so in the Second Burr War, they're all explained by the fact that people say, well, what do you expect?

All these people work in factories and they live in the cities, they don't hunt elephants, they become racially degenerate.

And this is, now the character who epitomizes this, the woman character, is the person from Haggard's other big best seller and that is she.

And that's another quest.

So we don't have time to kind of go into

all the details of that.

But basically the lead character and she is

a combination of Gagool and

Fulata and she's basically...

So she's very beautiful, but

thousands of years old because she's

maintained the secret of eternal youth

but is an incredible witch.

Yes, so she's Aisha, I mean, she's one

of the dominating female characters and I

would say in all popular fiction.

She gets the name that was given to

Rider Haggard's rag doll from his

childhood, She Who Must Be a Bade and

Witch in the Rumpel books.

Rumpel.

That's right.

So if you read She, I mean,

she is an intoxicating book.

It's very, I mean, it's hard not to read

it with your kind of Freudian hat on, isn't it, Tom?

Catherine Rundell had something very funny

to say about Aisha though because she

subjects the characters who've gone on

this quest to colossally long monologues.

She says she rants like Nigel Farage

and has only one point to

make. Men are powerless in the face

of beautiful women for women desire,

not men, but power. The greatest woman

to have ever lived is a disappointment,

calling sex witch.

That's basically what

happens to the characters.

They just are forced to listen to Aisha

all this time. But then at the end

she, there's more

sort of this weird kind of degeneracy

stuff because she bathes

in this sort of the fountain

of life and she shrivels

in the flames and literally

turns into a kind of

like a little wrinkled monkey

before she dies. So this
again, I mean there's all kinds
of stuff going on there with the kind of the undercurrents
of the imperial mentality
I suppose you would say. Yeah, because
V.M. is
Richard writing about
she said that
Mr. E.M. Forster once spoke of the novelist
sending down a bucket into the unconscious
the author of she
installed a suction pump.
It's very, very
ripe. But she, I mean she
is the primary text of the Lost World
genre. In Brian Aldis's
history of science fiction is kind of definitive
canonical history of science fiction.
He says she creates this idea of
the empress, the priestess, the sorceress
that is at the heart of so
many scientific romances.
So you know you go to an alien planet
and it's ruled by this terrifying
sexy but deeply
evil woman. I mean that is
pure Rider Haggard. I mean going even
deeper into the subconscious
is there a sense in which Rider
Haggard is expressing something
in the fact that she is published
in 1887 which is the year of
Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee.
And Ayesha is
a reclusive white queen
ruling over Africans and so is
Queen Victoria. And is there
some sense? I mean is there any?
Lots of critics say this. So lots of
kind of post-colonial critics and whatnot
are very interested in this and they say it's his own
anxieties or Britain's
anxieties about its own empire, about its legitimacy.
What do you think? Well,

Woke Tosh? You know I
can be a bit skeptical so there's part of me that says
yeah it's probably a coincidence. I don't
think so because I think the whole idea
of white queens is
so associated with Victoria
and even if he's not consciously
doing it to make
this villain the white queen. Well she
actually says, Ayesha says, I'm going to go
back to Britain with you, topple your
queen who's obviously useless and become queen myself.
So you know maybe there is
stuff going on there. There are a couple of other
themes I think that we should talk about. So one
is obviously these are books
of an age of exploration. So
Burton and Speak, Richard Burton
and John Hanning Speak, a couple
of decades earlier had gone in this amazing
these amazing expeditions
to discover the African Great Lakes
you know
in the heart of Africa. Henry
Morton Stanley most famously
had found Livingston in 1872
and his book on Livingston
had been a massive, massive hit
and this idea of this fascination
with maps that you get both in
she and in King Solomon's minds.
I mean that's absolutely
of the age. So
people love the idea of that
what Joseph Conrad talks about later
on in Heart of Darkness. I mean it's two ideas
and once one is that Africa is the heart
of darkness that by going
deeper into Africa you penetrate
into this sort of world of primeval
wickedness.
I mean that's obviously very common
in imperial mentality in the 19th century.
Yeah, so stopping slavery and

witchcraft. Right, but also the idea of blank spaces. There's a few blank spaces left and who knows what's there. But again there is this tension. So if Africa is a land where the savagery is expressed through slavery and witchcraft at the same time it is a land where we talked before where lost wisdom may be found a kind of primal freshness that warriors are braver, bolder, stronger. I mean so there's a kind of tension there isn't there that is I suppose if you're writing novels it results in you not just writing kind of racist propaganda. I mean there clearly is enthusiasm for the British Empire in Rider Haggard's books and there is definitely quite a deep strain of racism there. But it's not just racist, it's not just imperial. It kind of reaps narrative fruit from those tensions. It does, because as you said, he regards the character of Ignosi in King Solomon's mind as noble, as impressive and actually at the end of the book I mean spoiler alert, Ignosi surprise, surprise regains his kingdom but he explicitly says to the heroes no white men other than you may ever come into my kingdom. You know I know all you want is diamonds and gold. We won't have you, we won't have missionaries, we won't have people selling rum, you know all of this sort of stuff. That shows that Haggard is aware of the costs of empire and of what an African king would say about it. Again spoiler alert, as you said there are other

missions, so Ignosi gets his kingdom, so Henry Curtis does find his brother. But actually the quest for King Solomon's minds turns out to be a bit of a dud, because essentially many of the characters are not interested in the diamonds. Alan Cortimane is, I mean he scoops up loads of diamonds and ends up very rich and is made unhappy by it, goes back to England and builds it as an estate and is left kind of restless and unhappy. But so Henry Curtis doesn't take any diamonds at all and throughout the book the obsession of Europeans with diamonds and gold is relentlessly criticised really. It is. I mean the fascinating thing about Haggard and as such of so many of these imperial writers, Kipling I think is very similar, is that he's too good a writer to be just a racist propagandist. To be jingoistic, yeah. But when he's not writing novels he's incredibly jingoistic. He writes again and again, kind of letters to the times and things, saying in 1913 he says the future of Africa will not be a conflict between the Britons and the Boers, but the inevitable though let us hope, far off struggle for practical supremacy between the white blood and the black. And he's always saying this stuff. 1924 in his in his diary, the great ultimate war as I've always held will be that between the white and coloured races and that history will ultimately be the story of the bloody conflict between implacably opposed races. But I suppose the tension there is that he's not taking for granted who would win a war between the black and the white races. Because his anxiety

would be that the white race is degenerate
and that the black race as a
disadvantaged is
braver, stronger,
kind of less corrupted. Exactly that.
He talks again and again in his
and other writers do as well
about how life is struggle.
He's a social Darwinist, a
classic social Darwinist. So he
gives these words to Aisha and she
in this world none but the strongest can endure
those who are weak must perish.
The earth is to the strong and the
throats thereof. For every tree
that grows a score shall wither
that the strong may take their share.
I mean that's, you know, it's like something
from Nuremberg in the 1920s
but this is absolutely what people are saying
anyway at the time. It's not unusual. He's
obsessed with the idea that in Britain
people are, they've lost
their kind of manliness. And actually
the heroes that he likes are not
generally traditional imperial figures.
They are big game hunters.
I mean there's this, he's absolutely
of that generation that fantasies
about these kind of maverick, verile
sort of eccentric
characters. So there are two models for Alan
Cortemaigne. So Cortemaigne says at the
beginning of the King Solomon's Mines,
being hunting, fighting or mining all
my life, which is very kind of,
it's very Wilbur Smith. But
the real life inspirations for Cortemaigne,
there are two of them. One is a guy called Frederick
Sellus, who was an explorer and big
game hunter from the 1870s onwards.
He is an amazing character actually.
He'd never be big enough, I think
for an investor's history in his own

but when he was 19, Frederick
Sellus in 1870, I read
and I quote, he knocked unconscious a Prussian
game warden who tackled him while he
was stealing buzzard eggs for his collection.
Right. And he had to leave the country at
once to avoid imprisonment.
So he left Prussia, he went off to
Africa, he was British, he went
off to Africa, ended up working for Cecil
Rhodes. He shot
78 elephants in three years.
The Natural History Museum to this
day, Tom, has 524
animals shot by Frederick
Sellus, including 19 lions.
Wow. And he died at the age of 65
fighting the Germans in the First World War
in Genica. So he's one inspiration
for Alan Cortemaine and the other is a guy
called Joseph Thompson, who was a Scottish
geologist and explorer. He's
a nice telling link. He studied under
Thomas Huxley, Darwin's bulldog.
Ah yes, right. And he
went off to Kenya, he was gored by a buffalo
while trying to climb Mount Kilimanjaro.
Of course he was. Then he works for Cecil
Rhodes again, getting concessions
and treaties in Rhodesia
and actually Haggard was accused of plagiarising
his book about travels with the Maasai.
So all of this stuff is a sort of
network of imperial
connections and neuroses and
anxieties. All this thing about
people hunting, people
simultaneously admiring and fearing
native peoples whom they are
displacing and ripping off.
The sense of a frontier
that is slowly closing. Of course
what it reminds you of is the Wild West
in America and the role that that has played

in the American cultural imagination.
And there's a sense in which
basically Africa is playing
that role for British
fiction writers. I think
I hadn't thought of that but I think that's absolutely right.
No, you mention it. It is, isn't it?
The idea of hunting, the idea of the Indians
in America, the Native Americans
as sort of there to be feared
but also respected as, yeah.
So obviously the legacy of the Wild West continues right
the way into the future. I mean everybody is familiar
with that. I guess it's more
occluded but the influence of King Solomon's
minds and that tradition.
That is also absolutely a part of
I mean it remains a part of popular culture to this day
really, what do you say? I think
absolutely. So when Haggard died
in the 1920s, the Edinburgh Review
I found this wonderful quote,
Haggard's South African romances filled
many a young fellow with longing to go
into the wide spaces of those lands
and see their marvels for himself. And they have
thus aided far more
than we can ever know in bringing
British settlers and influence into the
new country. They have helped to
accomplish the dreams and aims of
Cecil Rhodes. So there's
two things I think. One is that
obviously Haggard is one of the
two or three great writers of
empire, like Kipling I suppose.
But also I think the themes
that you've just mentioned, you know the things
that are similar to the Wild West
but also the idea of being stuck
underground, archaeological discoveries,
lost worlds,
layers upon layers of history
that kind of adventurers are uncovering

terrifying sorceresses,
all these kinds of things.
I mean they're there all the way through aren't they?
Partly I suppose because
at the end of Haggard's life his works
were being adapted for the
screen in the first kind of Hollywood
film, adventure films and talkies
and so on. So all these people
even if they'd never read
you know King Solomon's Mines or She
all these people who end up working the
cinema or in TV or
you know all these things, they are
intimately familiar
with the kind of the themes of
Haggard's novels and that's why I think you see
them again and again in popular culture
running all the way through
you know into the, I suppose
even after the British
involvement in Africa has completely
changed which obviously it does after World War 2.
Right because it's there in Indiana Jones
and you mentioned computer
games. Yeah. And so I think that in
recent decades there
have been two kind of massive
re-workings of King Solomon's Mines
that have had global impact.
The first is a kind of very
British perspective, it's that of Wilbur Smith
who's a massive selling novelist, probably
the biggest selling
I think Africa novelist of all time, I think he sold
you know millions and millions. And so
he's from Rhodesia. Right. So he grew up
in Africa, yeah lived in Africa all his
life and Rhodesia
is the place where Zimbabwe
the great ruins of Zimbabwe were and
of course in due course when white rule
in Rhodesia gets toppled comes to be called Zimbabwe.
And Great Zimbabwe

which is kind of one of the inspirations for King Solomon's Mines. I'm betraying him my intimate knowledge of the young Wilbur Smith because in 1941 when the future best selling writer was eight I think he went on this sort of night time expedition with his dad to go and see the ruins of Great Zimbabwe and they obviously stuck in his mind because decades later he wrote all these massively best selling books in which kind of African history and lost cities and things like that all play a part, don't they? Yes and their novels that are haunted by regret for the collapse of the British Empire. So in that sense quite an unfashionable perspective I think it would be fair to say. Yeah. And maybe the success of his novels says something about how people in Britain and in the broader British Commonwealth feel about that legacy. Who can say? Well I think they appeal to a particular kind of reader probably sort of a reader who doesn't mind a bit of kind of pungent prose, Tom. Very possibly. There's certainly a lot more sex in Wilbur Smith than there is in Rider Haggard. But the other I think reworking, more recent reworking of the themes and traditions of King Solomon's Mines is perhaps Phyllis is a slightly more unexpected one because it's one that comes from a kind of American perspective on Africa and that's Black Panther. Right. Interesting. So Black Panther is part of the Marvel franchise. Yeah. Part of the MCU, Tom. MCU, whatever that is. I don't know what that means but I'm sure it is. It's the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Right. So that's what it is. As Spider-Man
you should know all about this. So Black
Panther is from
a lost city in Africa.
Yeah. And just
as Rider Haggard says
that these great
works of civilization derived from Phoenicians.
So in Black Panther
the kind of almost supernatural
power that the people of this
what is it?
Wakanda. Wakanda. Yes.
You mispronounced it in an earlier episode
of the rest of the decision called a lot of
grief from the listeners. Yes I did.
So every time I say the name
I feel nervous. But it derives from
some weird metal
that's landed and somebody
swallowed this metal and kind of
obtained superpower. Vibranium.
I believe it is. Vibranium. Yeah.
Okay. So what the Phoenicians are to
King Solomon's minds. Vibranium
is to Black Panther. I.E.
something that explains how a civilization
has arrived in the middle of Africa.
And so therefore I would say
a little bit dubious
why should it need kind of
outside cosmic intervention.
You have an ancient civilization. You
have a lost city that is in Black Panther
kind of literally veiled by a kind of
high tech screen.
A paradise or land. You have
all the kind of stuff that you get in King
Solomon's mind. So you have this sense that
people there, the warriors
and their female as well as male in Black Panther
are
stronger, harder, tougher,
cooler than

you'd get in the West. They even
have kind of combat between rival contenders
which is very much a theme of King Solomon's
minds. And so I think that
even though obviously
Black Panther, you know, the very name
is reflective of the racial politics
of America from the 60s onwards
I mean it does seem to me
indubitably to be
informed by that very unexpected legacy
of King Solomon's minds.
And to find it there is a lot more unexpected
I think than to find it say in the novels of Wilbur Smith.
Doesn't that bear out the point though that
we've talked about sometimes that the pop culture
of let's say 1870
to 1930
establishes the template for so many
of the things that we take for granted today.
I mean anybody who plays a video game
will probably have played some iteration of
King Solomon's minds.
Just as, you know, I mean it comes from
the same era that people are writing
detective fiction, spy novels
all of these things. It's actually extraordinary
to think how many of popular
cultural kind of themes and
devices that we're all familiar with
that they date from
those years
either side of the turn of the 20th century
and from actually British imperial pop culture.
Almost like it's a league of extraordinary gentlemen.
Oh that's very good Tom.
That's very good.
I see what you're doing there. You see that?
I mean you don't even know what that is. I know
because the producer told you about it yesterday
but
Alan Cortemaine is one of those
so that's a comic book in which Alan Moore
takes all these heroes

from the late 19th century
Mina Harker from Dracula and so on
and imagines them
as forming a kind of Avengers style
combo. And Alan Cortemaine
is the chief figure. Well there you go.
So there you go. His legacy
lives on. And actually Tom we've been talking so long
and I'm as such
gusto about Wilbur Smith and all these random things
that the producer has actually
changed in the course of the podcast.
So what producer has gone home and been replaced
by Alex? Or
it's the magical power of she.
It could well be. Well let's not delve
deeper into those very Freudian
depths Tom of
the powers of she. So that's
H Rider Haggard. We will be
returning. What will be returning with Tom?
With Cromwell's
Britain and indeed Ireland. Cromwell's
Britain. Which you think Cromwell would have loved all this
stuff?
I think a little bit of him.
I think he'd have found it a touch ungodly.
Yeah it's a bit ungodly. But there's
a bit of him that would have probably been
well up first. I think he'd have enjoyed an adventure
didn't he? This is madness.
I mean would Oliver Cromwell have
enjoyed the novels?
King Solomon's mind. Oh this is the questions
that we dare to ask. No other podcast
will bring you. Right and on that
note we will say thank you very much for listening
and goodbye. Bye bye.
That's RestIsHistoryPod.com