

# **HEART OF THE WORLD**

BY  
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ENVOI.

# DEDICATION.

I INSCRIBE THIS STORY OF THE GOLDEN CITY  
*'HEART OF THE WORLD'*  
TO MY NAMESAKE AND GODCHILD  
HENRY RIDER HAGGARD  
OF BUTLER, U. S. A.

*Ditchingham,  
Christmas Day, 1894*

## PROLOGUE.

DON IGNATIO

THE circumstances under which the following pages come to be printed are somewhat curious and worthy of record. Within the last few years a certain English gentleman, whom we will call Jones, because it was not his name, chanced to be employed as the manager of a mine not far from the Usumacinto River, the upper reaches of which divide the Mexican State of Chiapas from the Republic of Guatemala.

Now life at a mine in Chiapas, though doubtless it has some compensations, does not altogether fulfil a European's ideal of happiness. To begin with, the work is hard, desperately hard, and though the climate is healthy enough among the mountains, there are valleys where men may die of fever. Of sport, strictly speaking, there is none, for the forests are too dense to hunt in with any comfort, and, if they were not, the swarms of venomous insects of various degree, that haunt them, would make this particular relaxation impossible.

Society also, as we understand it, is conspicuous by its absence, and should a man chance even to be married, he could not well bring his wife into regions that are still very unsettled, across forest paths, through rivers, and along the brinks of precipices, dangerous and impassable enough to strike terror to the heart of the stoutest traveller.

When Mr. Jones had dwelt for a year at the mines of La Concepcion, the fact of his loneliness, and a desire for acquaintances more congenial than the American clerk of the

stores and his Indian labourers, came home to him with some force. During the first months of his residence he had attempted to make friends with the owners of some neighbouring *fincas* or farms. This attempt, however, he soon gave up in disgust, for these men proved to be half-breeds of the lowest class, living in an atmosphere of monotonous vice.

In this emergency, being a person of intelligence, Jones fell back upon intellectual resources, and devoted himself, so far as his time would allow, to the collection of antiquities, and to the study of such of the numerous ruins of pre-Aztec cities and temples as lay within his reach. The longer he pursued these researches, the more did they fascinate his imagination. Therefore, when he chanced to hear that, on the farther side of the mountain, at a *hacienda* called Santa Cruz, there dwelt an Indian, Don Ignatio by name, the owner of the *hacienda*, who was reported to have more knowledge of the *antiguos*, their history and relics, than anybody else in this part of Mexico, he determined to visit him upon the first opportunity.

This, indeed, he would have done before, for Don Ignatio boasted an excellent reputation, had it not been for the length of the journey to his home. Now, however, the difficulty was lessened by an Indian who offered to point out a practicable path over the mountain, which brought the *hacienda* of Santa Cruz to within a three hours' ride on mule-back from La Concepcion, in place of the ten hours that were necessary to reach it by the more frequented road. Accordingly, one day in the dry season, when work was slack at the mine, owing to the water having fallen too low to turn the crushing-mill, Jones started. This was on a Saturday, for on the Monday previous he had despatched a runner to Don Ignatio announcing his intended visit, and received in reply a most courteous and well-written letter, begging him to pass the next

Sunday at the *hacienda*, “where any English gentleman would always be most welcome.”

As he approached the *hacienda*, he was astonished to see the *façade* of an enormous white stone building of a semi-Moorish style of architecture, having towers and ornamented doorways at either end, and a large dome rising from the centre of its flat roof. Riding through the *milpas*, or corn-fields, and groves of cocoa and coffee bushes, all in a perfect state of cultivation, which covered many acres on every side of the building, Jones came to the gateway of a large *patio*, or courtyard, where grew several gigantic *ceiba* trees, throwing their grateful shade over the mouth of a well. From under these trees an Indian appeared, who evidently had been watching for his arrival, and, taking the horse, informed him, with many salutations, that the Señor Ignatio was at even-song with his people in the chapel yonder, according to his habit, but that the prayers would soon be finished.

Leaving his horse in charge of the Indian, Jones went to the chapel, and, its great doors being open, he entered and sat down. So soon as his eyes became accustomed to the dim light, he perceived that the place was unusually beautiful, both in its proportions and its decorations.

The worshippers also were many—perhaps they numbered three hundred, clearly all of them Indians employed upon the estate; and so intent were they upon their devotions that his entry was not even noticed. To his mind, however, the most curious object in the building was a slab of white marble, let into the wall above the altar, whereon the following inscription was engraved in Spanish, in letters so large that he had no difficulty in reading it:

“Dedicated by Ignatio, the Indian, to the memory of his most beloved friend, James Strickland, an English gentleman, and Maya, Princess of the Heart, his wife, whom first he met upon this spot. Pray for their souls, of your charity, O passer-by.”

While Jones was wondering who this James Strickland, and Maya, Princess of the Heart, might be, and whether it was his host who had set up the tablet to their memory, the priest pronounced his benediction, and the congregation began to leave the church.

The first to pass its doors was an Indian gentleman, whom Jones rightly took to be Don Ignatio himself. He was a man of about sixty years, but one who looked much older than his age, for sorrow, hardship, and suffering had left their marks upon him. In person he was tall and spare, nor did a slight lameness detract from the dignity of his bearing. His dress was very simple and quite innocent of the finery and silver buttons which have so much attraction for the Mexican mind, consisting as it did of a sombrero of Panama straw, with a black ribbon in place of the usual gilt cord, a clean white jacket and shirt, a black tie fastened in a bow, a pair of drab-coloured trousers, and brown boots of European make.

Indeed, the only really remarkable thing about Don Ignatio was his face. Never, thought Jones, had he beheld so beautiful a countenance, or, to be more accurate, one that gave him such assurance of its owner’s absolute goodness and purity of nature. The features were those of a high-bred Indian, thin and delicately cut; the nose aquiline, the cheek-bones and brow prominent, while beneath the latter shone a pair of large and soft black eyes, so tender and trustful in their expression that they seemed almost out of place in the face of a man.

He stood by the door of the chapel, in the light of the setting sun, leaning somewhat heavily on a stick, while the Indians filed past him. Every one of these, man, woman, and child, saluted him with the utmost reverence as they went, some of them, especially the children, kissing his long and finely-shaped hand when they bade him good-night in terms of affection, such as “father,” and called on the Saints to guard him. Jones, watching them, reflected upon the difference of their attitude from that of the crouching servility which centuries of oppression have induced in their race towards any master of white blood, and wondered to what his host’s influence over them was due. It was at this moment that Don Ignatio turned and saw him.

“A thousand pardons, señor,” he said in Spanish, with a shy and singularly engaging smile as he lifted his sombrero, showing his long hair, which, like his pointed beard, was almost white. “You must indeed have thought me rude, but it is my custom at the end of the week’s work to attend worship with the peons—do not press round the noble *Inglese*, my children—also I did not think that you would arrive before the sun was down.”

“Pray don’t apologise, señor,” answered Jones; “I have been much interested in watching all your servants at their devotions. What a beautiful chapel this is! May I look at it before you shut the doors?”

“Certainly, señor. Like the rest of the house, it is fine. The old monks who designed it two hundred years ago—for this was a great monastery—knew how to build, and labour was forced in those days and cost nothing. Of course I have repaired it a great deal, for those who lived here before me did not trouble about such things.

“You would scarcely think, señor, that in the old days, twenty years ago, this place was a nest of highway robbers, smugglers, and man-slayers, and that these people whom you see to-night, or their fathers, were slaves with no more rights than a dog.

“But so it was. Many a traveller has lost his life in this house or its neighbourhood. I, myself, was nearly murdered here once. Look at the carving of that altarpiece. It is fine, is it not? Those *sapote* wood columns date from the time of the old monks. Well, I have known Don Pedro Moreno, my predecessor, tie human beings to them in order to brand them with red-hot irons.”

“To whom does that inscription refer?” asked Jones, pointing to the marble slab which has been described.

Don Ignatio’s face grew very sad as he answered:

“It refers, señor, to the greatest friend I ever had, the man who saved my life at the risk of his own when I came by this limp, and one who was dear to me with a love passing the love of woman. But there was a woman who loved him also, an Indian woman too, and he cared for her more than he did for me, as was right, for has not God decreed that a man should leave his friends, yes, his father and mother even, and cleave unto his wife?”

“He married her then?” said Jones, who was growing interested.

“Oh, yes; he married her, and in a strange place and fashion. But it is an old story, señor, and with your permission I will not tell it; even to think of it revives too many painful memories, memories of death and loss, and disappointed ambition, and high hopes unfulfilled. Perhaps, one day, if I have the courage and live long enough, I will write it all down. Indeed, some years ago I made a

beginning, but it wearied me, and what I wrote seemed foolishness, so I gave up the task.

“I have lived a rough life, señor, and met with many adventures in it, though, thanks be to God, my last years have been spent in peace. Well, well, it is coming to an end now, and were it not for the thought that my people here may fall into evil hands when I am gone, that would not trouble me.

“But come, señor, you are hungry, and the good father, who has promised to eat with us, must ride to-night to celebrate a mass to-morrow at a village three leagues away, so I have ordered supper early. The porter with your bag arrived safely; it has been placed in your chamber, the Abbot’s room it is called, and if you will follow me I will show you a short path to it from the chapel.”

Then he led the way to a little door in the wall. Unlocking this door, they passed up some narrow stairs, at the head of which was a landing-place with a window, or rather *grille*, so arranged that, while it was invisible from below, an observer standing there could hear and see all that passed in the chapel.

“This was the place,” said Don Ignatio, “whence the old abbots kept secret watch upon the monks, and it was here that once I saw a sight which I am not likely to forget.”

Then he passed on through several long and intricate passages, till he came to a sitting-room filled with handsome old Spanish furniture.

“Your sleeping-place lies beyond, señor,” he said, opening another door that led into a large and dreary-looking chamber, lighted by

heavily-barred windows, of which the sills were not less than ten feet from the ground.

On the walls were frescoes of the Last Judgment, and of scenes inspired by the bloody drama of the Inquisition, grim to look on and somewhat injured by damp, but executed with great power and vivid, if distorted, imagination. Below the centre window, and reaching to within three feet of the floor, was an ancient full-length portrait of one of the abbots of the monastery, life-size and painted in oils upon a panel, representing a man of fierce and evil countenance, over whose tonsured head the Holy Spirit was shown hovering in the shape of a dove. For the rest, the room was well, if lightly, furnished, and boasted the luxury of squares of matting laid upon the brick floor.

“I fear that you will think this but a dismal apartment, señor,” said Don Ignatio, “still it is our guest-chamber; moreover, there is a room attached which I thought might be useful to you to write in, should you wish to do so. The people here say that the place is haunted, but I know you Englishmen do not bother about such things. It is not wonderful, however, that they talk thus, seeing that murders were done in this chamber in the time of Don Pedro Moreno. Indeed, he laid a plot to kill me and my friend here, and, though he did not succeed in that instance, when I came into possession afterwards, I found several skeletons beneath the floor—two of them, I remember, just where the bed stands now—and gave them decent burial.”

Jones, as in honour bound, declared himself to be totally indifferent to representations of tortures of the Inquisition, memories of departed abbots, skeletons of murdered men beneath the floor, ghosts, and *hoc genus omne*. Still, though he never

confessed it to his host, his first night in the abbot's chamber, owing probably to the strong coffee which he had drunk, was not altogether a pleasant experience. In after days, however, he became well accustomed to the place, and, indeed, preferred it to any other room in the *hacienda*.

In contrast to the rude and ill-dressed fare with which Jones was fain to satisfy himself at the mine, Don Ignatio's supper was a feast worthy of Epicurus, especially as it was free from the horrible messes, compounded of oil and the inward parts of animals, that figure so largely in Mexican cookery.

After their meal, cigars and black coffee were handed round, of which the raw materials had been grown on the estate, and never in his life did Jones smoke better tobacco. When the *padre*—a gentle and well-informed man—had departed, Jones began to speak of the antiquities of the country. Soon he found that his host's knowledge of the subject had not been exaggerated, seeing that he was even able to decipher hieroglyphic writings of which the key was supposed to be lost, and to give an outline of the history of the races who built the great temples and palaces, whereof so many ruins are to be found in the Palenque district.

“It is sad to think,” said Jones presently, “that nothing in which the breath of life remains is left of all this civilisation. If only the old legend of the Golden City, hidden away somewhere in the unexplored recesses of Central America, were true, I think that I would give ten years of my existence to visit it. It would be a glorious thing to step back into the past, to see a system at work, and mingle with a people of which the world has lost all count and knowledge; for, let the imagination be active as it will, it is practically impossible to reconstruct these things from ruins and

traditions. In fact, Don Ignatio, I do not understand how it is that you, who have never seen the *antiguos* in the flesh, can talk about them so certainly.”

“If I had never seen them, señor,” he answered, quietly, “it would be wonderful. Indeed, you might be justified in setting me down as a teller of tales, but it chanced that I *have* seen the Golden City of fable and its civilisation, and I can assure you that its wonders were far greater than any that have been told of in legend, or even by the Spanish romancers.”

“What!” gasped Jones, “what! Have I been drinking too much of your excellent wine? Am I asleep, or did I hear you say that you, the gentleman sitting before me, with your own eyes had seen the secret city of the Indians?”

“You heard me say so, señor, though I did not in the least expect you to believe me. Indeed, it is because I cannot bear to be thought a liar, that I have never said anything of this story, and for this same reason I shall not repeat it to you, since I do not wish that one whom I hope will become my friend should hold me in contempt.

“In truth I am sorry that I have spoken so freely, but, in support of my veracity, I will beg you to remember that among the huge forests, wildernesses, and *sierras* of Central America, where no white man has set his foot, and whence the Indians vanished generations since, there is room for many ancient cities. Why, señor, within two hundred miles or less of where we sit to-night, there exist tribes of *Lacandones*, or unbaptised Indians, who have never seen a white man and who still follow their fathers’ faiths. No, señor, that story shall never be told, at any rate in my lifetime,

for I have nothing to show in proof of it, or at least only one thing——”

“What is it?” asked Jones, eagerly.

“You shall see if you wish, señor,” his host answered, and left the room.

Presently he returned with a little leather bag from which he extracted a very curious and beautiful ornament. It was a great emerald, by far the largest that Jones had ever seen, uncut, but highly polished. This stone, which was set in pure gold, obviously had formed the clasp of a belt and could also be used as a seal; for on it, cut in *intaglio*, was the mask of a solemn and death-like human face surrounded by a hieroglyphic inscription, while on the reverse were other hieroglyphics.

“Can you read this writing?” asked Jones, when he had examined the ornament.



‘Can you read this writing?’

“Yes, señor. The words in front are: ‘O Eyes and Mouth, look on me, plead for me.’ And those on the back: ‘Heart of Heaven, be thou my home.’”

“It is wonderful,” said Jones, restoring the relic with a sigh, for he would have given everything that he had, down to his shoes, to possess it. “And now will you not make an exception in my favour, and tell me the story?”

“I fear that I cannot oblige you, señor,” Don Ignatio answered, shaking his head.

“But,” pleaded Jones, “having revealed so much, it is cruel to hide the rest.”

“Señor,” said his host, “will you take some more coffee? No. Then shall we walk a little on the roof and look at the view; it is pretty by moonlight, and the roofs here are wonderful, all built of solid stone; there is a tradition that the old monks used to dine on them in summer. They have a loop-holed wall round them whence that abbot, whose portrait hangs in your sleeping-chamber, beat back a great attack of the Indians whom his oppression stirred into rebellion.

“To-morrow I shall hope to show you round the lands, which have repaid me well for my twenty years of cultivation. Everybody in Mexico runs after mines, but its soil is the richest mine of all. I knew that, and, seeing the capacities of the place, I sold the other emeralds which went with this clasp—they were fine stones, but unengraved, and therefore of no particular interest—and bought it cheap enough. Now that the country is more settled, and I have planted so much, its value has become great, and will be greater still when all the young cocoa bushes are in full bearing a few years hence.

“There, thanks be to the Saints, the stair is done—of late my back hurts me when I climb up steps. The air is sweet, is it not, señor, and the prospect pleasing? Look, the river shines like silver. Ah! how beautiful is God’s world! It makes me sad to think of leaving it, but doubtless He will provide still finer places for us to work

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