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Joan Haste

Henry Rider Haggard

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Captain Henry Graves is called home to his family's estate in rural England, after the death of his spendthrift elder brother. This ancestral estate is well-nigh bankrupt, and it appears that the only hope for its continued existence is for Henry to marry Emma Levinger, the daughter of their landlord. But after a chance meeting with Joan Haste--the beautiful, illegitimate woman who works in the local tavern--and after breaking his leg while helping her capture some baby jackdaws, Henry begins to realize that the family fortunes are not uppermost in his mind. As might be expected, Henry and Joan fall in love, and that is just the setup of what turns out to be one of Haggard's most poignant love stories. The author takes his time in this longish novel, letting us really get to know his characters. There are many wonderfully dramatic scenes, with consistently sterling dialogue (if only people expressed themselves so well in real-life discourse!). The book contains many memorable characters, and is almost Dickensian in its description of the Bird family (with whom Joan stays in London) and in the secret agenda of Mr. Levinger. Perhaps the most memorable character of all, though, is Samuel Rock, a long-bearded Dissenter who is jealously in love with Joan himself. Indeed, Rock becomes so insanely amorous that he must automatically be placed in the pantheon of Haggard's other great love-crazed maniacs, a pantheon that includes Frank Muller in "Jess" (1887), Owen Davies in "Beatrice" (1890), Swart Piet in "Swallow" (1899) and Hernando Pereira in "Marie" (1912). Rock's crazed conduct leads to the only real "action" in the novel's 400+-page length, and makes for one superb cliffhanger of a final chapter.

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