

John W Green

Rod of Moses



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ROD OF MOSES

by
John W Green

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Yesterday upon the stair
I met a man that wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
I wish I wish he'd go away

William Hughes Mearns

Preface

Jack went inside the ruin. He had a good look round and decided that the side in the shade would be the best place to dig the latrine. Apart from the shade, the remains of the wall would also afford some privacy. There was a shrub growing in the corner, so he decided to dig midway along that wall.

On the second jab of the shovel he hit wood. *'Well it can't be floorboards,'* he thought. *'The houses only have mud or stone floors.'* He scraped the soil off the wood and it became apparent that it was the top of a box. He dug all around it and lifted it out of the hole that he'd now made. It was about four feet long, eight inches wide and eight inches deep. Maybe someone had buried a rifle or a large sword? Maybe it was buried treasure? He levered off the top of the box with the edge of the shovel. He figured he had made enough mistakes for one day so he didn't put his hand into the box to find out what treasure was hidden in it. *'Probably crawling with snakes or scorpions,'* he thought, remembering how every morning it was standard practice to check boots and socks before putting them on, to make sure that there were no venomous temporary lodgers hiding in them, having a siesta. He took out a match and lit it so that he could see what the box contained. No snakes or unpleasant creepy-crawlies and disappointingly no precious stones reflecting their presence back at him – no gold coins, not even a sword or a gun. The only thing in the box was an old stick, which had what looked like Arabic writing carved on it. There were a few bits of yellowed paper stuck to the stick and a square piece of wax with some sort of imprint on it, half attached to one of the pieces of paper. Jack carefully pulled the stick from the box, gave it a cursory inspection, threw it to one side, then continued digging the latrine.

Chapter One

Shuffling into a more comfortable position in the relative luxury of the third-class railway seat, Jack took a closer look at his travelling companions. Opposite was a young man probably about the same age as him – eighteen or nineteen – but his fresh complexion, accentuated by his black hair, contrasted so markedly with Jack's weather-beaten features that it made the traveller opposite look almost like a schoolboy.

'*Simmer down lad,*' thought Jack as he watched the young man fidget nervously, continually adjusting the position of his hands – their smooth skin and carefully cut nails revealed that he wasn't a manual worker – along the edges of the journal which he was half hiding behind and half reading. The magazine had pictures of airplanes on its cover.

Next to the young man sat a rather dispirited looking couple. The man was perhaps four or five years older than Jack and was wearing an old army greatcoat and an old army face, with the ugly scar of a shrapnel wound down one side of it. He was sitting totally motionless and from the look on his face Jack had the impression that his mind was focussed unwillingly on memories he would much rather forget. Alongside the ex-soldier was his wife, who looked to be about six months gone. She, like the young man, was fidgeting nervously. She wore a worried look in the same way that many people would wear an old familiar scarf to protect them from a cold wind. Jack guessed that she was about twenty-two but the frown made her look much older. It was easy to see that when she'd been a bit younger and less worried she had been really pretty.

The couple's brown paper parcel luggage, down-at-heel shoes, worn-out clothes and worn-out faces told all there was to tell of the poverty and hard times that they were enduring. '*It definitely hasn't turned out to be a land fit for bloody heroes,*' thought Jack as they all sat in silence – the silence of travellers. He couldn't help but contrast the appearance of the couple with that of the young man

with his too neatly pressed trousers, carefully folded raincoat and neatly tied tie, and the obviously new shoes.

Shortly after boarding the train Jack had opened the window of the door to look out. He didn't know why; there certainly wasn't anyone to see him off and he no longer felt any real attachment for Sheffield – in fact he was quite glad to see the back of the place. Before sitting down he'd closed the window, but had inadvertently left a small gap at the top. Soon after they were underway the train entered a long tunnel and the compartment filled with a dirty yellow, sulphurous smoke. Jack leapt to his feet, grabbed the large leather strap and pulled it down so sharply that the window shot to the top with such a force that it nearly smashed the glass.

'Bloody hell!' he exclaimed. 'Sorry about that – it nearly gassed us all.'

'Don't worry, mate. No damage done and that's nothing like gas,' said the ex-soldier. 'I could tell you a thing or two about gas, it's...' The sentence died as the haunted look once again took charge of his face.

'No, everything is alright,' added the young man. The worried wife said nothing, but an attempt at a small smile signalled that she agreed. The ice and the silence had been broken – conversation started and began to feed upon itself, eagerly gathering in strength.

'Where you off to then, mate?' 'Greatcoat' asked Jack.

'Well I've had an almighty row with me Old Man. I've been on the trawlers out of Grimsby for a while – up in the Arctic – but I've had enough of that, so I'm off to London to see if I can make a go of it down there.'

'What about the steel works – couldn't you get a job there?' asked Greatcoat.

'I did two years there after I left school. That was what the row was about – he wanted me to go back and I didn't want to.'

'We're off to Canterbury, but I've heard Welwyn Garden City is very nice,' chipped in Mrs Greatcoat, suddenly eager not to be left out of the conversation.

The surprised look on the young man's face when Jack was talking about the row with his Old Man was apparent. Jack thought the lad probably came from the kind of house where he wasn't allowed even to mildly disagree with his father, let alone have a row with him.

'What's your name then, young 'un?' said Greatcoat to the lad. 'Where are you off to?'

The lad started.

'Sorry, I was miles away. I'm David White and I'm going to London to join the RAF. It was my father's idea.'

Then eagerly he began to relate some of the stories that his father had told him. All the conversation that had been bottled-up inside suddenly was set free, and it became clear that he was good with words. He held them captivated for quite some time.

A little later, Mr and Mrs Greatcoat – now revealed to be called George and Esme – insisted on sharing their sandwiches with Jack and David. They were just finishing them as the train pulled into Nottingham station. Before the train had completely stopped Jack opened the door and jumped on to the platform.

'Shan't be a minute – keep my seat,' he called out. With that, he headed off in the direction of the waiting room. The door had been slammed shut and the rear guard had just blown his whistle when Jack appeared outside the carriage door, gesturing with his head for them to open the door. David nervously obliged and Jack jumped into the compartment carrying four mugs of tea. George slammed the door shut just as the train jerked into motion.

'We were sure that you'd missed it,' said Esme, looking more worried than ever.

'How did you manage to do that without spilling it all?' asked David, suitably impressed.

'Oh, you soon learn that trick at sea,' said Jack, smiling and passing round the LNER cups, pleased to be able to repay his companions' kindness. The tea went down very well.

As they put down their empty cups, the corridor door was abruptly pushed open by the rear guard, a tallish man with an officious bearing, a thin pencil moustache and a thin pencil face.

‘Who opened that door after I had blown my whistle?’

David looked pale and frightened, but before he could say anything Jack was on his feet.

‘I opened it, guard. There was a crowd at the buffet so it took me longer than I expected. Sorry – I didn’t mean to cause any problems for you.’

The guard put on a self-satisfied sneer. ‘Don’t you realise, you young whippersnapper, that you were breaking railway regulations? This is a very serious breach of the rules and these cups here...’

Jack interrupted him. ‘I did say sorry, guard.’

‘Well for your information, sorry is not good enough.’ He prepared to start once again. Jack, now flushed with anger, brushed past him into the corridor, turned and snapped:

‘Thee get tha sen out here!’ in his anger momentarily reverting to the dialect that he’d grown up with. Jack abruptly slammed the door shut behind the guard, who turned to glower at him. When he caught Jack’s eye, he received a very nasty shock – a terrifying metamorphosis had taken place. This was very different to the young man that he’d been ticking off in the compartment. Those penetrating blue eyes were as cold as the ice in the Arctic where Jack had spent so much time during his formative years. Although the guard stood head and shoulders above him, it was as though their roles had been reversed. The guard turned quite pale. From the impressive width of Jack’s shoulders it was easy to visualise the powerful arms and torso beneath the dark blue seaman’s jumper that he was wearing – he’d been described by some of his shipmates as being ‘built like a small brick shithouse.’

Now it was Jack’s turn. In his time at sea he’d learnt quite a few choice variations of the English language – he’d been taught by well-practised experts.

‘Now listen here, you pig-shit of an excuse for a man,’ Jack began, his voice with the cutting edge of a polar wind. ‘I left the train to

get cups of tea for my friends in there. In case you haven't noticed, one of them's a woman who's in the family way and her husband is an ex-soldier – unlike yourself – who's spent years of his bloody life fighting and getting wounded for the effing likes of you. They don't need any jumped-up buggers trying to throw his weight around upsetting them and making an almighty bloody fuss over a pissing little thing like opening a door.'

Jack continued uninterrupted and uninterruptable for several minutes, his language becoming progressively more Anglo-Saxon.

The guard's thin lips became tight and white at the edges, his jaw muscles making small convulsing bulges near his ears and his cheeks taking on a purple tinge. Nobody talked to him like this. He would not have it – but he did and he kept silent. For the first time in his life he was completely intimidated – even the Head Stationmaster didn't frighten him this much. It was the eyes of the young man, his voice and the way that he held himself, the very essence of fearless and aggressive strength... but most of all it was the eyes.

In a moment of courage the guard started to say, in a conciliatory tone: 'Well sir, I had waved my flag and...' He was cut short by a look from Jack that sent a chill through him, making him wish that he'd kept quiet.

'You can take your flag and stick it up your arse for all I care, so piss off and crawl back into your hole.' With that Jack turned and re-entered the compartment. The guard didn't follow, but returned to the rear guard's van, to brood and think of all the quick answers that he should have made – but in his heart of hearts he knew that he would not have dared.

For a while after the confrontation in the corridor, the atmosphere in the compartment was very strained and subdued but before the train was halfway to London they were busily chatting once again. '*And what's tha going to do now?*' His Old Man's words met, mingled and merged with a chance remark of David's and sowed the seeds of an idea in Jack's mind and the seed of his future with it.

How many lives at some time or another have been changed by a chance remark, or just a single word? Probably most – the capricious nature of fate cannot be denied and so it was for Jack. Although when he looked back he could not be sure which of David's comments it had been that formed the pivotal point in his life, Jack was fairly certain that it must have been something that David had said about working in hot places. That, without doubt, had more appeal than the thought of spending more time in those bitterly cold Arctic waters. Four years of sailing to the fishing grounds had been hard, very hard, and he'd definitely had enough, even if the chance of finding another berth occurred. He'd become a first-rate seaman – a leading hand – and maybe he might have made skipper in ten years, that is if he lived that long. Every winter some poor sods didn't return from the 'fishing grounds', and Jack had no intention of joining the numbers of those lost at sea.

'It sounds as if joining the RAF might suit me.' This remark of Jack's was the only stimulus that David needed – certainly no recruiting Sergeant could have extolled the virtues of a life in the RAF more eloquently or persuasively. During one of David's more dramatic accounts of a desert battle involving the air-force, George chipped in with an urgent note of caution.

'Easy on, young 'un – fighting ain't fun at all, not when all them bullets and shells is whizzing round and you're not sure if the next one's got your name on it. All of them who tells you how good it is ain't never seen what it's really like. Maybe up in them airplanes it's alright, but on the ground it's bloody awful. Oh! Sorry, Es,' he added quickly, turning to his wife. 'She don't like me talking about the war, and she don't like me swearing. I gets to dreaming about it – well it's more like nightmares to tell the truth.'

'I hope she didn't hear me in the corridor,' thought Jack. She had, but she was secretly glad that someone had stood up for her and George. It was a long time since she had felt that anyone was on their side.

David continued, using less lurid descriptions. He was telling them about some of the attacks on the Mad Mullah's bands

in Somaliland by a Wing Commander Bowhill, when Esme interrupted him.

‘Sounds like the adventures of Lawrence of Arabia,’ she said. ‘Was it in the same place?’ David was visibly disappointed that his own tale was not captivating enough, but he diplomatically told her that it was somewhere near there. She could see that he’d missed the point of her asking the question, so she quickly said: ‘Oh! Don’t think that your story ain’t exciting enough – it is, but we used to hear so much about Lawrence.’

He seemed mollified and continued. In fact he continued enthusiastically for quite some time, but clearly felt that he was then hogging the conversation, so politely stopped to let others have their say. Jack got the impression that David had many more tales about the RAF still to tell.

George started to tell them about what had been happening to himself and Esme: ‘Of course it was ‘good old George’ when I got back from the war, but not good enough for me to get me old job back. I managed to get a few odd jobs here and there, but not the work that I used to do, and the money’s been very poor – things have been pretty tough.’

‘I know what you mean, George,’ said Jack, remembering the difficulties that his family were enduring. George was anxious to continue his story and Jack could see this...

‘So you were saying, George?’

‘Oh yes, well, Es and me got engaged before I went off to join Kitchener’s Army, but we waited until after the war before we got married. With so little money coming in we haven’t been able to set up our own home yet, and have a real married life, if you know what I mean.’ David clearly didn’t, but of course Jack did.

‘You see, we’ve been living with Es’s mum and dad, and although they’ve been very good to us it’s not the same as having your own place. Anyhow, things are on the up-and-up now.’ His face brightened as he went on to tell of their recent chance of a change in their fortunes. ‘I’ve managed to get this job on a farm near

Blean, not far from Canterbury, as a stockman. You see, that's the work I'm used to.'

'And a cottage goes with the job,' added Esme, her smiling face indicated how important this was to her.

'Only just in time, love. I expect you've noticed that me missus is expecting.' He smiled and Esme blushed a little, and for a short while, her face lost some of its worried look. She took George's comments as a cue for her to take up the story.

'It's due in just under three months.'

There was a lull in the conversation.

'You must come and see us, if you can, after the baby's born. We would like that, we would be ever so pleased to see you, wouldn't we, George?'

He smiled and nodded his agreement.

'Here, George!' said Esme, taking a used envelope from a Lipton's brown paper carrier bag by her feet. 'Put our new address on that for Jack and David.'

George rummaged in the pocket of his greatcoat and eventually produced the stub of an indelible pencil. Wetting the tip, he printed with painstaking care, sticking his purple-tipped tongue out of the corner of his mouth as he wrote, in a rather childlike hand, the address to which they were heading.

David took the envelope from George.

'We would like very much to come and see you and the baby if we get the chance. Wouldn't we, Jack?'

It was Jack's turn to nod an agreement, but it had not escaped his notice that David was assuming that the two of them would be together at this future date. Had his face given away what he'd been thinking? A bit unlikely, thought Jack, as he recalled one of his earlier nicknames – 'old poker face'.

By the time they'd reached London, Jack had agreed to go to Burlington Gardens with David so that he could find out a bit more about the RAF. Jack was no wide-eyed youngster easily persuaded by romantic tales, but he did realise that when all the layers of excited description were peeled from what David had

said, at the heart there appeared to be a pretty good prospect of a satisfying job, and he certainly liked the sound of it. Nevertheless he would need more information before he made up his mind. One impulsive decision was enough for one day.

George suggested to Jack that he should think about it very carefully.

'You want to go easy, Jack. Service life ain't all fun and games,' he said.

David looked quite downcast at this comment but didn't say anything. Shortly after this the train pulled into Kings Cross station and they all hastily gathered-up their luggage and disembarked. Jack and David said cheerio to George and Esme and promised to try to visit them after their baby was born. The two pairs waved to each other as they set off on their separate ways, George and Esme to the farm near Canterbury, Jack and David into the unknown.

Chapter Two

'Well! Tell me about this Queen of Sheba and her country,' Solomon demanded of the envoy who had just returned from the South. Akil proceeded to give Solomon a detailed description of what he had seen in Sheba. As usual it was difficult to follow a line of thought when giving a report to the King because he constantly interrupted. Akil was well aware that he owed his status in the community to the patronage of the King, so he suffered it silently. Not only that, he was also aware that it was not a good idea to upset Solomon because he was not averse to 'dispose' of those who questioned the way that he did things.

Akil continued to describe what he had seen – a land rich in spices and where gold and precious stones were mined.

'The Queen also rules over a land across the sea in the east called Ophir, from where they get a great deal of gold,' he said. That made Solomon's eyes light up.

'Is she old?'

'No, your majesty, she would be about twenty-five summers.' The envoy once again saw the King's eyes light-up, and then a frown.

'Is she ugly?'

'On the contrary my lord, by many she is thought to be one of the most beautiful women in creation'. Akil could almost feel the reward he would receive jingling in his pocket. The King had a thought, and the frown reappeared.

'Is there a King of Sheba?'

'No my lord,' said Akil, thinking 'This is going to be my most successful trip.'

As he left the palace Akil was in a state of delirious euphoria; the reward had been well beyond his wildest expectations. 'I'm a rich man,' he thought. He was, but there was to be a price to pay.

The next day he received a summons to attend the King. No sooner was he in the King's presence than he was told to proceed immediately

to Sheba and take a 'Royal Invitation' for the Queen to visit King Solomon in Jerusalem.

'And if you fail, you will be no friend of mine,' added the King.

The veiled threat was not lost on the envoy. The euphoria of the previous day was seriously dampened as he left the palace to make the preparations for the journey south again. He had been home for just two days. Before going to the market to arrange a small caravan for the journey he carefully hid most of the reward inside his house. Together with a retinue of half-a-dozen men, he left just before dawn the next day.

On the journey south, which took just under three moons, Akil spent much of the time pondering on how he would manage to ensure that the Queen of Sheba accepted King Solomon's invitation. Eventually he decided that he would adopt two approaches. The first would be to tell the Queen that King Solomon, because of his renowned wisdom, would be able to answer any question that she might wish to ask him, no matter how difficult. Akil was fairly confident that Solomon's fame would have travelled as far as Sheba. The next approach would be to stress that in Jerusalem, with the help of King Solomon, a means of trading the produce of Sheba with the rest of the world could be established, and this would be of great advantage to Sheba.

Afterwards, Akil could only guess which of his arguments had held sway. But the Queen had accepted the invitation and he travelled back to Jerusalem with a much lighter heart than on his outward journey.

It was only a tiny noise – virtually inaudible. But it was the wrong noise, at the wrong time, in the wrong place, and Kariz was instantly awake. He had been part of the Queen of Sheba's retinue for eleven summers and had risen to be the chief bodyguard by virtue of his extreme loyalty, heightened sensory awareness and impressive fighting skills, which over the years had become legendary.

The caravan was only ten days out of Marib on its long journey north to Jerusalem where the Queen was to meet King Solomon. Just one moon earlier she had sent word accepting the invitation. In the tent next to the one where Kariz was sleeping was the chest that contained jewels worth a queen's ransom and which were to be a gift to King Solomon. In the treasure tent were two soldiers who had been assigned to sleep alongside the chest.

Kariz was quickly on his feet and at the entrance flap of his tent with no more noise than a shadow flitting across the sand. First he looked towards the Queen's tent: the two bodyguards outside were standing up and not squatting down, so they had heard the noise. Of course they would not leave their posts. A glance at the 'treasure tent' a few paces away to the right showed that all was not well. Its entrance flap was not secured as he had set it earlier.

One of the many camels which were bedded-down to the left of the camp grunted in its sleep, and then there was another noise, from within the treasure tent – a muffled gurgling gasping sound, just like the one that had awakened him. Within the space of two heartbeats, and with less noise than a single heartbeat, he was inside the tent.

Many believed that Kariz could see in the dark, and that was not far from the truth. What he saw were the bodies of two dead soldiers with their throats cut. He also saw, in the near total darkness, the outline of two people who should not have been there – the assassins. Neither of these intruders was aware of anyone else within the confines of the tent before it was far too late for them to make their peace with their maker. Neither of them saw or heard the avenger of evil that despatched them from this life.

As soon as Kariz was sure that there were no more intruders in the immediate area and that the Queen's tent was safe, he went to where the rest of the bodyguards were sleeping and quietly awoke four of them. Two were sent to stand guard outside the treasure tent while Kariz and the other two made their way in a well-practised manner, silently and stealthily, unseen and unheard through the camp, then a hundred paces north from the edge of the camped caravan. Kariz then indicated to them that they should circle to the right while he

set off to circle the camp in the opposite direction. When the two bodyguards were almost due east of the camp they came across two brigands hiding among some rocks with four tethered camels. These two were much younger, neither of them had seen fifteen summers, and neither of them saw another dawn. They were barely aware that they had been discovered and had not even drawn their daggers before they were despatched.

‘Is this all of them?’ whispered Kariz.

‘Yes, leader. We’ve checked the area within hundred paces.’

Satisfied that there were no more brigands in the area, they returned to the camp. Kariz told them that they could return to their tent. Although the bodyguards were far too fired-up to sleep, that was not the case with Kariz. After he had arranged for the removal of the bodies of the two murdered soldiers he went to his own tent and was asleep within the time taken by twenty heartbeats, or more accurately he fell into a state of suspended animation from which he could emerge in an instant.

The sky was just becoming light enough to draw the outline of the distant mountains. Kariz had mustered his twelve bodyguards close to the Queen’s tent ready to form a protective presence around her when she made her usual appearance before her subjects at dawn. The bodies of the two dead soldiers had been wrapped in cloths and laid with their heads pointing towards where the Sun God would make his appearance. Ordek, commander of the soldiers – now reduced to fifty-eight – who were accompanying the caravan, stood ten paces further from the royal tent, slightly to the left of Kariz, with the soldiers arranged in four ranks. The remaining fifty or so people who made up the rest of the caravan were assembled in front of the soldiers.

One of the Queen’s attendants rattled a tambourine, everyone became silent, and as the Queen came out from her tent, the whole assembly turned to face her, knelt and bowed their heads. The tambourine was slapped. This was the signal for all to stand and face to the East. Then at the first glimpse of the dazzling orb as it burst through the distant horizon the tambourine was slapped for a second

time and everyone fell prostrate before its presence, and remained there until the orb in all its majesty was visible, which was signalled by a third slap of the tambourine. The spirits of the dead soldiers were offered to the Sun God and then their bodies were placed on a funeral pyre, which had been prepared earlier by their former comrades. The bodies of the brigands, including the two outside the camp's perimeter, were gathered up and thrown among the rocks for the wild animals and carrion to dispose of.

Once the funeral pyre had burnt down, the long hard journey to Jerusalem was resumed. It was to take a further one hundred dusty thirsty days, much of it across a barren waterless land, until they reached the fertile crescent in the land of milk and honey.

The attempted robbery was only the start of their problems.

Ordek, who had been selected for this journey to Jerusalem, had been part of the Queen's retinue for twelve summers. He had been in the employ of her majesty for just over a year before Kariz appeared on the scene.

'Why should he be chosen over me to lead the royal bodyguard and be closer to the Queen?' He had asked this question of all those who had joined the royal household over the past ten years, ever since Kariz had been elevated to his present high position within the court. 'It doesn't seem fair' was the invariable reply. Not because that is what they thought – they were all aware of the reasons Kariz held the position that he did. Those who were asked indulged Ordek and agreed with him because he was known to have a fiery temper and a vicious and malicious streak. They all knew that he could and would make life very unpleasant for them if they showed any kind of support for Kariz.

Kariz was quite puzzled as to how the two brigands had managed to get into the encampment undetected by Ordek's perimeter guards. 'They wouldn't have got past any of my men,' he thought. During the brief skirmish he had immediately assessed – as a matter of instinct – that the intruders were not very competent and should not have got past any sentries. When he mentioned his concern to Ordek the only reply that he received was:

'Are you trying to blame me, so that you don't look so bad in the eyes of the Queen? And why did you wait until sunrise to let me know that two of my men had been killed while they were guarding the treasure? I expect you were just trying to make yourself look good. Don't think that I haven't noticed the way she looks at you.'

Kariz didn't pursue the matter, not because he was afraid of Ordek. He stood a head and shoulders above the commander and had a physique that was a testament to his years of unrelenting training, but he knew from past experience that it would serve no good purpose.