

A Goddess of Africa

A Story of the Golden Fleece.

BY ST. GEORGE RATHBORNE

Author of "MISS CAPRICE," "DR. JACK'S WIFE,"
"DR. JACK," ETC., ETC.

Again he was on his knees beside that most wonderful pile, which had lain here as if slumbering through the ages—again his eager hand chased the glowing balls of color as they rolled among the baser images, as though playing a game of hide and seek.

In the hunt these golden vessels were tossed aside as though representing little value, which was possibly the truth when a comparison was made with those gems of Ophir, such as the Queen of Sheba might have brought as presents to Solomon when she came with such pomp to test his wonderful wisdom.

At last every fugitive jewel had been successfully cornered and carefully captured. There were two small bags of them, bags that bulged with riches as their like had certainly never done before, for seldom in the history of Mother Earth could so much wealth have been compressed into so small a compass.

Deliberately Rex took some cord and proceeded to tie up the mouth of each diminutive sack, and when this had been completed, he slipped them into the side pockets of his stout coat.

Sometimes it is but a step between absolute poverty and the wealth of a Croesus—this is a strange world in which we live, and singular adventures befall the chosen few. At least it falls to the lot of a select number to pick up a fortune ready made, and slip jewels worth perhaps a cool million into his pockets. Perhaps Hastings was born under a lucky star.

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE ROAD TO HADES.

When he had thus made sure of the quart or so of glistening gems that may have once bedecked the form of the ugliest of idols, Rex found that he could descend to smaller things.

The queer images and vessels fashioned out of pure gold claimed his attention. Their intrinsic value must be quite a snug dot, if one could but convey them to the busy marts of men, where such things were scrambled for with the most feverish eagerness.

Really, he was surprised to see how calmly he could view such a collection of the most precious of metals; but then when one has already dined upon the most exquisite of viands, he is able to look upon an ordinary feast without emotion, though at another time the sight of the same spread might set his mouth to watering.

Picking up a couple of the least cumbersome of the images, he juggled them out of the receptacle and planted them at the feet of the working artist, who halted in his labor long enough to vouchsafe the antiquities a scrutinizing glance and then say:

"Found 'em all right, eh—well, they are daisies, now, I'll admit. Get Jim and the rest to assist, old boy. I'm too much engaged. You see—really, wouldn't put a stop to my sketch for all the gold in Africa, Haggard and his King Solomon's mine to the contrary," and he scratched away for dear life.

Bludsoe was quite ready to help, and the others also came quickly to the front, so that in an exceedingly brief space of time the little pile of golden relics had been switched from the interior of the old barbarian god to a spot in the middle of the chamber.

Lord Bruno had finished his sketch of the remarkable three-headed deity and condescended to inspect the collection with the eye of one who might be called a connoisseur.

And forsooth, it was a sight well worthy the attention of prince or peasant, a brave accumulation of quaint vessels that bore such mute though eloquent testimony regarding the cunning and skill of ancient gold-beaters in the days when the Pharaohs reigned over Egypt.

The professor actually went down on his knees before the treasure, as did the reprobate children of Israel before the golden calf. To him the intrinsic part was as tinkling brass when placed in comparison with their amazing historical value.

Even the cowboys were quite tak-

on with the oddity of some among the images, and Rex burst into a loud laugh as he snatched up one that appeared to be half way between a gorilla and a man, with a certain suspicious leaning toward the Egyptian style of sculpture as witnessed in the temple of Luxor.

That laugh, how weird it sounded—a dozen tongues seemed to take it up—from one end of the chamber to another it was echoed, and hustled back and forth with the rapidity of a tennis ball in a hard fought championship game.

It was as if the grave assemblage of hideous old gods had been given the breath of life, and were mocking the merry cow-puncher, whose merriment came to a speedy end.

At the same moment, as though there might be some connection between the mad, rebounding echo, and the spirits that haunted the ruined temple of Azor, the brilliant light which had served them so well all this while, suddenly went out, not even deigning a parting flicker in farewell.

Exclamations arose, for the first thought that flashed over them was that there might be something supernatural about it all—they had heard of a curse being left with a hidden treasure, a poisonous vapor perhaps, fastened in a Pandora box, that would immediately finish any one who dared open it.

All of them were plain, practical men of good common sense, and when the first shock had departed, they found themselves ready to laugh at the thrill which had involuntarily swept over their frames under the impulse of that queer coincidence.

"The powder has given out," spoke up the Englishman in a voice that showed no trace of a tremor—"be patient a moment, my hearties. I've another package handy, and we'll soon have plenty of light."

Then a match crackled—putt the darkness was shattered, and in its stead came that same dazzling light which had before permeated almost every crack and cranny in the great low ceiling chamber.

Hastings uttered an exclamation. "What now?" demanded the Briton, recognizing in this cry a note of alarm, and perhaps believing Rex had been shaken by a sudden winnowing of wings overhead, as some gigantic bat beat the air, frightened at the new flood of light.

"Yonder—I could swear I saw a crouching figure, a giant black, suddenly spring out of sight behind that leaning god."

All eyes were instantly glued upon the spot he indicated, but no sign remained of the phantom figure Rex believed he had seen.

"Possibly a delusion," said Lord Bruno, as he bent over the treasure-trove and examined some of the queer conceits that were fac similes of the barbaric gods with which they were even then surrounded.

Rex had some good stubborn Scotch blood in his disposition, and having taken hold it was hard for him to let go. He shook his head in a negative way, saying:

"Of course that would be a possibility, but I am far from willing to admit that my eyes deceived me. Here is Bludsoe—perhaps he too saw it vanish like the smoke on a windy day—how is it, Jim?"

The cowboy confessed that he had been looking in another quarter when the light resumed sway, and therefore failed to see what Rex mentioned, as no sign of its presence hovered about the spot when he did fasten his eyes upon the angle.

"Still, it's an easy thing to make a dead certainty of it. Come with me, Mr. Hastings, and unless the wings of evil possessed the wings of a bat we'll be sure to discover some sign of his presence, I swear."

Rex instantly understood what he meant to imply. The dust that lay so promiscuously around would betray the fact whether a human being had entered the chamber in that quarter or not.

Jim Bludsoe, ere trusting himself in such a subterranean trap as the black temple of Azor, had prepared for an emergency by securing several billets of wood to serve as torches should the occasion warrant.

Possibly they were not equal to the lighted flambeaux he might have secured had he been given a better opportunity, but they promised to answer the purpose.

One of these he now dipped in the glowing furnace on the pan. It immediately took fire, and while its puny flame held no comparison with the intense glow of the flash-light, still he was satisfied.

Rex followed at his heels, leaving the others busily engaged in stowing the golden images that were worth five times their weight in sovereigns, into a couple of leather saddle bags, fetched for the purpose.

Straight over to the spot designated by the adventurer Jim Bludsoe stalked, holding the blazing torch above his head.

Rex, even while quivering from excitement, could not but remark what a wonderfully fine picture the athletic cowboy made as he moved on, for you see Rex had been somewhat of an artist in days gone by, and once that spirit finds lodgment in a man it never leaves him.

A dozen strides and Bludsoe was at the spot—he swept his torch in advance as he bent low. Almost immediately Rex heard him give an exclamation, and from his exultant ring he knew in advance that his suspicions were confirmed.

That flying glimpse of a disappearing object was not the stretch of imagination.

"What have you found?" he asked, coming alongside the plainman, and also riveting his gaze upon the ground.

"Footprints, and not made by an angel, either, you bet," returned blunt Jim, pointing to where the dust had been disturbed, and there Rex discerned a giant imprint.

It meant much to them—discovery—an alarm, the assembling of the black hosts, the destruction of their only path out of the deep crater, a siege, and ultimate destruction. No wonder then, with these possibilities staring them in the face both Rex and the cowboy were anxious to know whether the black spy had shown.

Besides, Bludsoe was at once overwhelmed by a feverish desire to follow, that being a part and parcel of his religion.

He flashed the light over the trail, and Rex did not say nay—indeed, he was in quite the mood to accompany Bludsoe down through the infernal regions if so be there was an object in visiting that abode of the dark shades.

As he went on Jim kept up a running commentary upon the situation, and in that way gave vent to his feelings, while at the same time imparting a certain amount of information; for Rex had never had much practice as a trailer, and might be looked upon as something of a "tenderfoot" in cowboy parlance.

"See, here's where he made that flying leap when you had a glimpse of him, and I just reckon as how the critter must have been scared right to death when the fire flashed up so sudden like. He landed yonder—you can see how he slipped as he came down, but recovered and ran like a scared deer."

"Here's the wall of the place, but just in this spot you see it's riven, and through that opening our chap went lickety split."

"Now, if you asked my advice, sir, I'd surely say we'd be foolish not to go a little way into that crevice and see if we can't run across this cursed spy, because if he once gets clear, we'll have to pay the piper. Is it a go, Mr. Rex?"

His tone and manner were persuasive, and Rex, falling in with the spirit of adventure, as he recognized the value of keeping this scout from giving the wild alarm, immediately acquiesced.

So they plunged into the black crevice, which looked more like some freak of nature, resulting from a convulsion of the mountain in the days when Krokato was violent, than any possible passage constructed by man's ingenuity.

It was astonishing how rapidly the experienced Bludsoe pushed on. He seemed to keep one eye on the ground so as to follow the trail, while with the other he endeavored to pierce the darkness that lay like a pall just beyond the line marking the limit of their feeble torch's power.

Nothing could not but experience a sensation of thrilling interest as he kept at the other's heels.

They had quickly passed around several angles, so that a backward glance which Rex shot over his shoulder failed to reveal the first sign of light from the rear. On either side were the roughened, black walls, which looked very much as though they had been burned by the fire of ages, while under their feet the base of the crevice was threatening to trip them up with every move.

To add to the interest of the affair, both of them began to sniff suspiciously of the atmosphere, as though it aroused unbidden fears, for it became strongly impregnated with sulphur or brimstone, as though they approached the bottomless pit.

And as they thus rushed on Rex was surprised to have the flambeau thrust into his hand, while his companion shouted over his shoulder:

"We're closing on him fast, sir!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SNAP OF A ROPE.

It was easy to see that the cowboy had some plan of action in his mind—that even as he ran he had arranged a scheme by means of which he hoped and expected to accomplish the downfall of the black spy, who scurried on before, and of whom they had occasional glimpses as he bounded from pillar to post in a sullen, unwilling way, as though he liked not the idea of being thus chased so heartily into the bowels of the earth.

Rex entered into the spirit of the game with a zest known only to the hunter—an eagerness that is seldom reciprocated by the fugitive, be it man or beast, straining every muscle and nerve to escape.

He kept close at Bludsoe's heels, and waved the torch above his head so that with the draught caused by the double movement, the flame his-

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ed and roared, and ate deeper into the wood of which the flambeau was composed.

The air grew even more suggestive of the infernal regions—it was fetid and strongly impregnated with that sulphurous odor which they had noticed ever since plunging into the crack in the black rocks.

Still Jim Bludsoe ran on, and Rex would not allow any man to outdo him in an affair of this kind, no matter where it led. That was the Scotch blood of his way-back ancestors again—he owed much that was wholesome in his disposition to those sturdy men of brake and fen from whom he was descended.

As his eye rested momentarily on his companion he discovered that Jim had made his lasso ready—that weapon which is more than knife or revolver in the hands of one to the manner born, and with which an adept can perform feats that might stamp him a wizard in the eyes of a tenderfoot.

He coiled it as he ran and woe betide the black fugitive once the rope was launched forth by that practiced arm.

All the while they gained, possibly because the man who fled before them experienced an unwillingness to explore the mysteries of the subterranean passage, and also on account of their avoiding obstacles he stumbled over, thanks to the light.

Now he could be seen very plainly—Rex even caught the look of deadly fear upon his dark face as he twisted his head around in the endeavor to discover whether they were still gaining.

He really felt sorry for the wretch, and yet, knowing what it meant for them should the Zambodi warrior escape to sound the alarm, and arouse the black imps within ten leagues of the sacred crater, he was just as determined as Jim to continue the mad race until it came to its legitimate conclusion.

Twice he shouted to the fellow to stop and surrender, but his voice which sounded like a trumpet blast in that narrow, ragged cleft, and appeared to only inspire additional terror in the fugitive, judging from the fresh spurt he took, fear lending him wings.

Bludsoe was almost ready to hurl his rope—he had begun to swing it around his head as if to give swing to Rex that he might keep his distance.

The black runner no longer scrambled over the rocks like a frightened chamois—he had come to a full stop, and his attitude was that of a man who finds himself between the devil and the deep sea—behind him were those white, adventurous spirits from whose touch he had fled in such haste like one possessed, while before him yawned an abyss whence arose a weird vapor that looked like a phantom smoke, together with a dull glare as of some fiery furnace far down in the bosom of the earth.

Rex saw and his heart was chilled with horror at the terrible choice thrust upon the fugitive.

To make the leap meant but one chance in ten of his reaching the opposite side, such was the width of the awful chasm from which these sulphurous fumes drifted, and should failure be his portion his flight to the gates of Hades must be rapid indeed.

As the black athlete stood there, with every muscle strained in anticipation of the fearful task before him, and with one foot drawn back to give impetus to his leap, he presented a picture young Hastings could never forget to his dying day—a picture that has since graced the walls of a salon and aroused the most intense admiration for the marvellous look of fear and resolution combined upon the black face of the sinewy Zambodi warrior.

Bludsoe was swinging his lariat with increasing power, as though it were his intention to wrap the rockless spy in its coils ere he had a chance to launch himself forth upon such a haphazard mission.

He was too late to prevent it.

The black athlete suddenly leaped through space, his form describing a parabola as it rose and fell again. Bravo! he struck the other side, clearing a greater space than the highest record of a standing jump ever reached, for the dread of death gave the amazing power of steel springs to his muscles.

"Great Scott! what a magnificent leap, and he made it—he has landed on the other side—a tiger could have done no better. Not yet—not yet—he staggers wildly on the brink—his footing is insecure and he failed to throw his weight forward. Poor devil—he is lost after all—my God! what a fate for a brave man."

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