

Gods of Africa

A Story of the Golden Fleece.

BY ST. GEORGE RATHBORNE

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

When all had gathered in a great semi-circle, with the fire in the midst, still keeping up a monotonous chant that would ring forever and a day in the ears of those who eagerly looked on, a tall buck suddenly sprang into the open where all eyes could behold his sinuous twists and curves, and began a pantomime to illustrate what a terror to the foe he would be in the day of battle.

He leaped high into the air with a venomous thrust of his assagai that would have driven the terrible weapons through an ox. Next he would crouch as though creeping upon an enemy, to suddenly bound erect, strike with his weapon, and finish with a whirl that would have done credit to a dervish.

A second joined him in the ring, to be followed by a third, and presently there were a dozen leaping and jabbering and spitting imaginary foes upon their keen-pointed assegais.

Those who observed this remarkable scene could not withdraw their eyes, such was the horrible fascination that appeared to chain them. Gradually the ring cleared, as the eccentric dancers wearied of their fantastic quick step movement.

But the end was not yet. A single figure advanced with the oddest side leaps or springs imaginable. Bludsoe whispered in Lord Bruno's ears that this was the witch-doctor or high priest, a crafty schemer whose power over the people was even greater than that exercised by the war chiefs themselves.

By means of these eccentric bounds this high priest, black and horrid, made the round of the fire, singing the most terrifying chant that ever racked mortal ears.

He was partially covered with green-groes, or charms, consisting of human bones, small gourds containing pebbles of gold, and balls of human hair and bird feathers. Taken in all he looked like a worthy satellite of the Old Nick, running loose on earth in a search for souls, and this was doubtless the very idea he meant to convey, since his prime object in life was to terrify those who believed him in league with the great god M'limo. In his bony hand this demon-like dancer held a small wooden idol which he waves in the air from time to time as though invoking the good will of the oracle.

Hastings could not tear his eyes away from this grisly figure, which seemed an epitome of all that was horrible in the land of the fetish worshipper. Every deed of blood that marks the dark pages in the history of South African colonization may be laid at the door of these wizard priests whose sole business it is to incite by every devilish means in their power, the evil passions of the impis, and send them forth burning with the desire to do murder, to burn and destroy, so that the whites may be utterly wiped from the face of the earth.

Long the war council kept up, until the dancers were exhausted, and the orators hoarse with wild haranguing. Then the great fire was allowed to burn down, after the high priest had cast some witch powder into the flames that turned everything green and ghastly, and had a grewsome effect upon the superstitious blacks, though simple enough to those who watched from above. Gradually the assemblage dispersed. Hastings had many times looked eagerly in the direction of the ledge where on his previous visit the fair goddess had appeared to ravish his senses, but alas, she came not.

As the fierce warriors trooped back through the wooden gates of the kraal, the hand of his hearty English friend fell on his shoulder. "Come," said Lord Bruno, "now to the great work we have cut out for ourselves."

CHAPTER IX.

HOW THEY WENT DOWN INTO KROKATO.

Indeed, the task which these bold champions of the South African wilderness had set for themselves, was a stupendous achievement, that might well stagger the most adventurous of men, and none but those of Anglo-Saxon blood would have dared undertake it.

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pend a great deal on how well he remembered his bearings.

Considering the fact that he had only been in this vicinity once before, and then while the night held sway, he was really doing remarkably well.

So they scrambled and worked their way up the side of the extinct volcano, until the edge of the crater had been gained. Once upon a time ages ago, a magnificent cone must have towered above this vast cavity, which had been gradually undermined by the fierce fires below, and finally, during some ancient eruption, more violent than its predecessors, this crown had been blown off, leaving the awful gulf of boiling lava, which as centuries rolled on, cooled, became covered with soil, and finally possessed a growth of rank vegetation.

The crater was now a valley, surrounded on all sides by walls of dark stone—a valley where in years long, long ago, some people who inhabited the land had built a temple, which in turn mouldered in the grasp of remorseless time, and became a vast ruin, almost hidden from view by bushes and vines.

To descend into this dark abyss was a difficult task, and one that might have brought the cowboys' lassoes into play, only that Hastings' memory failed him not, and he took them unerringly to the path which ran along the face of the rocky wall.

Lord Bruno noted with considerable curiosity that this trail had been cut out from the solid rock, and by mortal hands, but in ages long since past. Thousands of feet had swept up and down this path. What a strange and interesting story it could tell if gifted with the power of speech.

They moved down into what seemed the bowels of the earth—silent as spectres, each man keenly on the alert for danger, and making both hands and feet do service in guarding against such a mishap as fell to Red Eric's share.

All seemed peaceful about them—from the crater came only the sound of some night bird's song, and the whirr of wings close to their ears was occasioned by the flitting of some bat, disturbed in his crevice by their passing.

Once Lord Bruno knew that his leader had passed, but what the cause of it might be Jim Bludsoe said not.

Hastings too had caught what seemed to be a single flash of light in the valley, and was mystified to guess its meaning. Could it be possible some vagrant flame from the fires far below had found an outlet—such a thing was really beyond the bounds of reason. He was more inclined to lay it to human agency than to believe it a will-o'-the-wisp haunting the ruined temple which perhaps also served as a sepulchre in ages gone.

At any rate, remembering his own experience with the guards who watched the remains of the temple, he was a little worried by the flashing of that light, fearing that it might prove to be a signal which would bring enemies down upon them with the same eagerness that wolves and hyenas display when running their quarry to earth.

All drew a breath of relief when finally they ceased to longer descend. A stream gurgled at their feet, and several stooped to drink. Hastings looked keenly around in order to get his bearings, while Lord Bruno and the cowboy chief kept very close in order that if necessary they might confer.

There seemed to be something uncanny in the singular condition of the valley—one was bound to be impressed with its remarkable history of the past, and in fancy might expect the spirit of those who had worshipped at this shrine centuries ago to marshal themselves in tiered ranks when the desecration of their heathen temple by godless hands was threatened.

Truth to tell, however, these very practical invaders who had come in search of the Golden Fleece, were more worried about the resistance they might meet with from the human sources than that proceeding from spirits of the departed.

Hastings had figured upon the matter since his last visit to this mysterious region, and was firmly convinced that there must be some connecting link between the wizard valley of the temple and that ledge where the white god had shown herself—some passage underground, constructed by artful priests for a purpose of their own, and utilized under the present regime.

As they once more set themselves in motion, every one of the little company felt his nerves tingling with intense eagerness. The spirit of adventure was upon them, and those advocates who worship at this shrine scent the presence of a carnival of riotous action just as readily as the war horse discovers the odor of burnt powder drifting from the battlefield.

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It spurred them on as with a goad. They yearned for excitement, and had come a long distance to find it. No danger then, of any weakening among these hardy fellows should the worst happen. Secretly, perhaps, they were in great hopes of a battle with the black hosts before quitting the neighborhood. If this were so, the most zealous among them could find no occasion to complain in the treatment accorded by a benign fortune, for they were certainly destined to see much of action ere old Phoebus again gilded the tips of the cliffs that guarded the crater.

In and out, under the matted foliage, and between black rocks that remained to tell of the infernal fires that had once tossed their red arms above this mouth of Hades, they moved, in a sinuous array, now starting a bird from its roost, and anon hearing the hissing of a serpent as it glided away from their line of march, until at length Hastings slackened his pace and finally came to a halt.

Then they knew they were close to the secret entrance of the crater temple.

CHAPTER X.

THE GUARDIAN DIRTIES OF THE TEMPLE.

Rex had not forgotten. He had taken his bearings as well as the circumstances permitted, for the tops of the cliffs being outlined against the heavens, certain trees were marked in silhouette which on the occasion of his former visit he had especially noted.

Here he had throttled a fierce black who had hurled himself upon the intruder with a recklessness that could only spring from the abandon of a fanatic, set to guard a sacred shrine.

Having made sure of his position, Rex suddenly dropped on hands and knees and began crawling along the ground. The others, realizing that this was a genuine game of "follow my leader" did not hesitate an instant about doing the same, and considerable dexterity was shown in the endeavor to accomplish the task.

As yet there had been no signs of the guards whom Rex had found in the valley, mutes selected for this especial purpose by the great medicine-man whose word was law throughout the land of the Zambodi.

Nevertheless, it would not do to grow careless. Perhaps the former invasion of the whites had aroused the guardians of the treasure, and they had set a trap so arranged that it would insure the capture or destruction of these daring adventurers, intent upon robbing the ancient temple of its relics.

Ah! Rex no longer continued to creep along under the bushes. He had come to a halt and appeared to be intently examining the ground. That this meant something they readily guessed, and the whisper he started back along the line confirmed the suspicion.

Closing up around him they found that he gazed upon a pile of rocks, some large, others small, the whole appearing like a cairn some five feet in height.

Just such a monument might the old worthies of Abraham's time have made in order to commemorate certain events; and Lord Bruno had more than once in his strange wanderings seen a similar heap of stones mark a grave.

"Here is where the entrance lies. I know it from many things; yes, I could swear to it. But the pile of rocks is new. You can see yourselves no moss has grown over them. They have filled the opening up, taking warning from my other visit. Well, here goes to remove the debris."

As he thus whispered Rex set to work, and raising one of the pieces of rock carried it away as silently as he could.

The others waited for no other invitation, but started in at once, working like beavers to accomplish the task. To have dropped upon them without warning must have given one the impression that the gnomes or Brownies were at work, for not a word was spoken, though the pile of rocks diminished in size with incredible rapidity.

Nor was Hastings' prediction at all wrong, as they discovered when the last of the stones had been removed, for there was revealed a cavity that yawned before them, above which the builders had raised the cairn after the fashion of an arch.

The entrance to the ruins was displayed. Bludsoe whispered a caution. He was in the humor to believe these black idol worshippers would be equal to any deviltry in order to trap them.

Rex, however, was filled with eagerness to advance, remembering how near he had been to this rich haul on the former occasion.

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