

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.

When all had gathered in a great semi-circle, with the fire in the midst, still keeping up a monotonous chant 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 assassin 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 figure advanced 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 sound 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 as league with the great god M'imo. 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 worshippers. Every deed of blood that marked 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 simple, 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 barked 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 gruesome 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 argonauts 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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To venture into the enemy's country where the foot of a white man had seldom if ever pressed, and invade the sacred crater of old Krokato in search of a treasure that had lain there for ages—one would be apt to believe this a dream conjured up in the mind of a madman; and yet here was a little company of free lances pledged to carry the wonderful scheme to a successful termination or leave their bones among the kopjes.

Then there was the mission of Lord Bruno, with regard to the mysterious white god whom the impis worshipped—he was grimly determined to have an interview with her ere quitting the enchanted realm, and it could be readily understood that such a project must bring them face to face with new and startling perils.

Having seen the last of the weird dance of the black braves, and been duly impressed by the grotesque appearance of the medicine man, they proceeded to leave the shelf in the same manner they had reached it.

The council fire was burning low, and the monotonous ton-ten of the war drum had finally ceased, for which they were sincerely thankful as it had tortured their ears while in blast.

Again they crept along that narrow ledge and lost sight of the kraal with its hundreds of pointed lodges, teeming with black life.

The soul of the artist had been deeply stirred by the picture upon which his eyes had just rested, and he had been so impressed upon his mind that he would be able to reproduce it at any moment, with all its hideous accompaniments.

The Englishman had looked upon many remarkable things in his day, for he had spent years in restless wandering in strange lands where scenes bordering on the fantastic and the bizarre could be found, to illustrate the pages of his magazine and interest an eager public; but he stood ready to confess that he had never run across a more fascinating theme for brush and pencil than the gathering of the black clans around the witch-doctor's green council fire, together with their fetish dance.

Fortune came near playing them a sorry trick on the way, and it was Red Eric who had the harrowing experience.

Perhaps a stone rolled under him or his hand slipped just when it should have been steadiest. At any rate, while upon the narrowest part of the ledge he was heard to scramble, and Hastings, who was just ahead, upon twisting his head to discover what had gone amiss, was just in time to see the cowboy slip over the edge. The sight gave him a severe shock, and he strained his ears in the endeavor to hear when the poor devil struck far below, little doubting but that he would have his brains dashed out by the fall.

No such sound reached him, and filled with a curiosity he could not explain, Hastings, having communicated the dim intelligence to the man ahead, craned his neck to look over the ledge.

The moon still remained hidden by that dense veil of clouds that had drifted up from the north, but it was far from dark. Even the lodges in the kraal could have been seen by careful scrutiny.

Thus Hastings was quick to discover an object that dangled some seven feet or more down the face of the cliff, and which upon closer scrutiny he was constrained to believe must be the body of a desperate man.

Red Eric clutched some projecting root or rock, to which he was clinging with a grip like that of death.

To climb the face of that blank wall was an utter impossibility, while if he released his hold, the only result must be a mangled mass of humanity on the rocks below.

Rex felt powerless to lend assistance to the imperiled cowboy, ready though he was to tax his strength or his agility in any effort that might suggest itself.

But there were others. Jim Bludsoe chanced to be the man ahead of Rex, and he understood the situation instantly. When he had hustled his way back to a point that was just above his comrade, he took a hitch over a spur of rock with his lariet, and dropped the loop with unerring precision upon the man who hung suspended below.

How Red Eric ever got it, under his arms was a puzzle, but he managed it, and while the others laid hold to steady the rope, the reckless fellow came up hand over hand after the manner of a Jack Tar.

Though panting heavily from exertions he seemed to be rather tickled over his narrow "squid," as he termed it, than anything else. It too, who yearned for adventure with all the eagerness shown by a Don Quixote.

When the hedge was left behind there had always been a relief, for any of them might take a chance that plunge, and he hardly dared hope that in case it fell to him to lose his life as Eric had quite as fortunately.

Still higher they mounted, climbing over the rough elevations and pushing them. Hastings kept his wits about him, and he was entrusted with the task of serving as guide to the expedition, and the success or failure of their movements would de-

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 to 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 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' lasso 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 ago.

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 a signal which would bring enemies 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 in centuries ago to marshal themselves in serried 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 lent the presence of a carnival of 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 Phoebe 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 DUTIES 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. Hastings 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 temple.

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 devilry 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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