

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.

The Englishman laughed—there was something very jolly in that laugh of his, and it won him friends wherever he roamed, since men of every nation love a genial nature.

"Look again—what manner of men would you take them to be, my Rex?"

Hastings observed a couple of the riders who chanced to be close enough to receive some benefit from the professor's fire.

"Well," he said, slowly, "if we were over in the States instead of thousands of miles away from America, I should have no hesitation in pronouncing them genuine cowboys, such as our western plains produce."

"Straight to the bull's-eye, that shot. They are cowboys, and two have even taken part in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Exhibition when he showed at Earl's Court in London. They naturally drifted to South Africa as the latest field for adventure. They are now under contract with me. You see I'm about to inaugurate a little Wild West of my own, and show these black fellows a trick or two that will open their eyes."

"Seriously speaking, Rex, they are in my employ. You know my penchant of old. I am an artist above everything. England is at present all agog over the state of affairs in Africa—an advance up the Nile has been ordered. I would like to have been with Tommy Atkins in that adventure, but the expedition is well supplied with artists and correspondents, even including our friend Conan Doyle. It is not so here. Ever since Jameson's raid, the eyes of the world have been upon the land of Paul Kruger, and now that the Matabele are upon the warpath the situation has become more intense than ever."

"I have resolved to learn certain facts with relation to the country and the people in this region, so that the English public may be better informed as to what a gigantic task lies before the success of their arms."

"And you take your life in your hands to invade this dangerous territory in order to dash off sketches of Matabele kraals, of the savage impi engaged in the horrible war dance, togged out in all their fantastic finery, and perhaps you even hope to draw a picture of their bloody war god, the terrible M'imo, the Great One, Galf of the Black Bull, the Black Elephant, who shakes the earth with his stamping, the Founder of Nations, as they call him."

Lord Bruno's cheery face assumed an eager expression, but with a mournful sigh he shook his head in the negative.

"Oh, I fear that would be too overpowering for a chap of my size. Besides, unless I am mistaken, another has undertaken the task of ridding the earth of that vile monster. I shall hear more about Frederick Burnham and his mission later. As to the rest I must plead guilty. I have sketched the Matabele under every condition, and even if I do say it myself, there are picturesque points about the rascal that please an artist's eye. The sight of a group of them decked in all their panoply of tiger skins and gaudy feathers, dancing in a circle in the most grotesque manner, and to the hollow beating of those monotonous tom-toms is a spectacle once seen never forgotten—a sight to conjure with. But you are wounded, my dear fellow," he said, suddenly.

"Not seriously, I believe."

"Nevertheless you need attention. I have a man here who is a master hand at that sort of thing—a man whom nature made a physician, but whom a restless desire for the freedom of the prairies with a blue canopy overhead caused to become a cowboy."

With that Lord Bruno raised his voice and called:

"I say, doctor, will you come here, please?"

One of the two men on horseback leaped to the ground and approached. He was decked in the full regalia of a "cow puncher," and even had the peculiar swagger so natural to the daring spirits who spend half of their lives in mad chases across country after stampeding cattle, or rounding up stray "mavericks" that await a brand.

Hastings fancied him on sight and

the introduction was marked by a hearty hand-shake, for after discovering what execution the men at bay had accomplished among the assegai throwers, the doctor felt an uncommon interest in the hero who could toss lead with such glorious results; nor was his admiration any the less keen when he discovered that an old time friendship had existed between Rex and his employer.

He agreed with Hastings after a superficial examination, that the wounds which the professor and himself had received were none of them at all serious, and marvelled greatly that they had come out almost unscathed from the shower of missiles rained upon the spot by the advancing circle of blacks.

The others now drew near, and Lord Bruno signalled them to approach.

Hastings was delighted to meet them. It seemed like a great treat to look into their faces, and hear English spoken again, even if it was in some sense murdered by western idioms, for except the dulcet notes of the professor, he had not heard a voice speak in the mother tongue for over three months.

The first to come was Jim Bludsoe, the leader of the little band, a wiry, bronzed man with the eye of a hawk, and a manner that told of a long life spent upon the border. He was almost a counterpart of Cody himself, and Hastings felt that such a daring spirit must necessarily leave his mark upon the land wherein he roved.

Next came a rough and ready genius, whose impetuous manner might be expected to get him into many a scrape. His tresses were inclined to be a dark auburn, so that the origin of "Red" Eric was readily discerned.

The last of the lot—probably interested Rex in a peculiar manner, since he did not appear to be more than a boy. Little Phil then called him. When introduced he seemed uneasy and let his eyes fall to the ground—glorious black eyes they were too. Rex could not but notice them, and the slight figure of the lad.

"I think he is rather delicate for such work as this," he said aside to the Briton; after the four had retired some little distance.

"I had the same impression, but having given my word to—er—a member of my family, I could not back out. And Little Phil has ascribed us all with his endurance and grit. Nothing daunts him. He is ever eager to serve me, and often anticipates my wishes. I have already grown to think much of the boy. Taken collectively I have about the sturdiest little band of rangers ever let loose upon the Matabele. But let us leave this place. It would hardly do for a camp or laager, with all these ghastly evidences of warfare. I believe Bludsoe has an ideal spot. In his mind, which we were about to settle upon when we heard the rattle of your hot fire and the war whoops of the blacks."

"Is it very far—because we have no horses, you know, our expedition having been on foot?"

"The luckiest thing in the world—thanks to Red Eric's suggestion—we have a couple of extra animals. Why, things just seem to dovetail together, as it were. Wait until I get them here, and you shall no longer be without a mount. In this open country horses are of some use, whereas up in the tangle through which you blazed a path the beasts could never get on."

This was speedily arranged, and Professor Jules saw with no little pleasure every one of his thirteen packages strapped on the back of his steed ere he consented to clamber up among them.

As the little cavalcade moved away, with Bludsoe the scout in the advance, and Red Eric ranging on one quarter while the doctor looked after the other, the professor found himself alongside Little Phil, whom he drew into a desultory conversation.

Lord Bruno and Rex brought up the rear, and each again expressed his delight at this remarkable meeting under such extraordinary conditions.

"It is certainly something beyond the realms of chance that brought it about," declared the artist with positive determination in his voice.

"Who knows?" responded his companion, as he thought of the fabulous treasure of the extinct volcano, and his recent desire to find a comrade who would join him in a second attempt to wrest it from the secret cache where it had lain useless for ages.

"You have come down through a country I have longed to see, a country that for many moons has held a charm for me such as no other portion of Africa possesses," continued Lord Bruno, who evidently had something on his mind.

"Indeed, you surprise me. Any information I can give you I shall be most happy to supply. Truth to tell, ever since you dawned upon my vision I have been hugging myself with the hope that I might influence you to go back with me and secure that which slipped my fingers by the closest of margins."

"Count it done even before you tell me the nature of your secret mission. I am like a wandering Knight, seeking adventure, only I work in the interest of art, and not to gain the favor of a lady love. Bend your head a little this way, Hastings. I told you I was scouring the country to sketch the wild Matabele, and his allies, the savage Makalaka, on the warpath, in their kraals, at the feast, in the council, anywhere and under the oddest conditions. My dear fellow, all that is really true, but it

is only a blind to cover my real purpose, which is to penetrate the interior, trace certain rumors to their source and discover some one who has set eyes upon the fair white god of the Zambodi."

Hastings uttered an involuntary cry. "Good heavens! how remarkable!" he muttered.

"Why do you say that?" demanded his companion looking at him with a sudden eager anticipation.

"Because your wish, dear Bruno, is already granted, since these eyes have rested on the beautiful face of the Light of Africa—yes, I myself have seen this white idol."

CHAPTER IV.

THREE MONTHS IN TANGLE AND DESERT.

Lord Bruno appeared to be strangely affected upon hearing this startling announcement from his companion.

His face lighted up with an eager expression that naturally enough aroused the curiosity of Hastings; nor were the words he let fall calculated to lessen this feeling.

"Something told me there was more than mere accident in this meeting, Rex; and already I can see the hand of destiny guiding us. Yes, I imagine we shall get on famously together. Of that, more anon."

They had left behind them the scene of the desperate encounter, with all its hideous accompaniments, which would doubtless haunt Rex for many a day; although by this time he was growing accustomed to pictures of violence, since their long trail through the depth of African forest and desert had been marked in many places by sanguinary conflicts, where the ugly nature of the native tribes refused friendly overtures, and forced a meeting that resulted in pitched battle.

In many cases these blacks were so ugly in appearance, and with such barbarian manners and customs that one could hardly believe them human beings at all; indeed, the travelers were more apt to liken them to some family of monster apes, for like the gorilla they lived in the tree tops.

Familiarity usually breeds contempt, and in this case the continued fighting that fell to their share made soldiers out of an erstwhile art student and scientist.

Heavier grew the shadows, as night closed her sable mantle over the forest. Bludsoe evidently knew just where he was heading, for he possessed the remarkable acumen for which American frontiersmen have always been noted. The signs of forest and stream were as familiar to him as the mariner's compass and plain the voices of nature whispered their eternal secrets in his ear. It was useless to ask him why certain things were so—he could only tell you that he was as sure of it as that he lived.

There was no encounter with the enemy, no warning shot from either vanguard or those upon the flanks. Evidently the Makalaka had been utterly demoralized by the sudden swoop of Bruno and his cowboy band, and believed the forces of the feared wizard of South Africa, Cecil Rhodes, had been turned loose upon them.

As the country was swarming with hostiles it would be poor policy to remain long in one spot.

Even Lord Bruno knew this, and Jim Bludsoe would surely advise against it, though there was really nothing to prevent their stopping a few hours in order to cook supper and recuperate.

The twilight had rendered objects very uncertain by the time a whistle from the leader warned them he had arrived close to the spot which would serve them as a temporary laager, or camp.

Here the offshoots of the hills, known as kopjes, dwindled down to a rough country, in which it were an easy task to find some basin where a small fire might be lighted with but a trifling chance of discovery.

Bludsoe's unerring judgment had marked out such a place; and straight as the crow flies he led them to it.

Presently a cheery scene was presented in a little "dip" back of the first roll, where a camp fire burned, horses were staked out as on the plains, to nibble at the grass, and the doctor busied himself in preparing supper, for besides being able to minister to the wants of tortured flesh, this remarkable man was a chef of no mean calibre, and could tickle the palates of his fellows with savory dishes, which, if they lacked the elegance of a Belmondo concoction, were certainly unrivaled in the estimation of those who partook.

Bludsoe was looking after the horses, and doing numerous chores about the camp. The other two members of Lord Bruno's little band appeared to have vanished into thin air.

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Mr. Hastings had only to glance in the direction of a tree that marked the rise in front, to catch a glimpse of a small fiery spot which he knew was the end of a cigar Red Eric smoked while standing on guard. Little Phil occupied another cleft of advantage near by. Evidently Bludsoe was not the man to be caught napping.

"Come," said the artist, as he threw himself at full length upon a blanket at some little distance from the fire, "suppose you occupy that place, Rex. We have some twenty minutes to spare before supper will be ready. Your friend is busy with his specimens, packing them up more securely for some purpose or other. I confess that I am frightfully eager to hear this amazing yarn of yours. Will you relieve my curiosity, my dear fellow?"

Hastings laughed as he accepted the seat, and hugged his knees.

"Twenty minutes would hardly be enough in which to tell you a tenth of the whole story, so I shall only relate the part beginning with my leaving Zanzibar and striking into the wilderness."

"Good!" said the Briton, nodding eagerly.

"I must in a measure explain the motive that influenced my action. It was no desire to emulate Stanley or even my friend Chandler—I did not seek to undertake these frightful dangers in the interest of art, such as might influence an enthusiast like yourself, nor did the eager desire of the professor to discover new wonders in the field of science that might cause untold millions unborn to rise up in awe to come and call him blessed, have any particular weight with me."

"Plainly, then, my dear Bruno, I am a rude, uncouth treasure seeker—a Cortez or Pizarro transferred to this heart of the Dark Continent. I sought a fortune, a will-o'-the-wisp that had eluded many an eager hand before. I have been so close to it that here is one of the gems which await the bold adventurer daring enough to invade the spirit-guarded temple in the hollow of the extinct volcano, called by the native Krokoko."

He held out his hand and deposited something in the palm of the artist—something that glowed in the gloved in the sparkling firelight like a gleaming drop of liquid fire, or a crystal of blood.

No wonder Lord Bruno uttered an exclamation as his eyes rested upon this priceless rarity. He had never seen its peer, rudely cut though it was by some native lapidary of a past age.

"Jove! if that be a sample of the treasure trove I don't wonder you are ready to undertake unlimited dangers in order to secure it. Really, I shall take some stock in King Solomon's Mines after this. The manner had a foundation for his wonderful tale. That stone is worth a snug sum of guinea gold, I tell you. But pray proceed."

"At some other time I will tell you how and when and where I learned about this wonder treasure that has lain buried in the depths for ages. You remember the story of Edmond Dantes in Monte Cristo, and under what peculiar conditions he learned of the hiding place of the vast wealth accumulated on the island in the Mediterranean—well, I believe that in one sense my experience was almost as singular as his. But you shall judge yourself at some future time."

"Our journey was anything but peaceful. It started under favorable auspices, but ere a week had passed we found ourselves in hot water. I believe a wave of fanaticism has swept over Africa from the region of the Nile and the Kingdom of Dahomey down to the very borders of Matabele land."

"At any rate we found the blacks aggressive all through our trip. At times I actually had reason to suspect that these tribes of interior Africa were really united in some ancient league, and recognized in the white man the coming doom of their race, for at some future date, as surely as the world continues to exist, that restless, colonizing Anglo-Saxon race is bound to dominate Africa even as it does North America, Australia and many other quarters of the globe."

"Well, we were in a position to offer either the olive branch or war to the knife, and when the aggressive tactics of the blacks forced us to the latter condition, you can believe we hit hard."

"Still, the continual dripping of water will wear away a stone, and this constant system of warfare began to tell upon our organization."

"We lost some men in battle, others deserted, stealing what they could, and by degrees, our condition grew desperate."

"I am not a

ing my plans, for the idea of possessing this argosy had become the one scheme of my life—you know a man may find himself so wrapped up in a certain matter that he fairly dreams of it."

"Time will not allow me to tell you what we experienced—how many dangers we escaped, and how bravely my men stood up against the flight of poisoned arrows sent among us by a tribe of such demon-like blacks that I called them the Jabberwocks."

"Reduced to half a dozen we came at length to the country of my dream—my yearning inspiration. It had been so impressed on my mind that I seemed to recognize every feature of the landscape, and I assure you this fact gave me a peculiar sensation, since it seemed to add a positive assurance with respect to the existence of the fabulous mine."

"It was not my intention to take a single member of the expedition into my confidence, outside the professor."

"Our carriers and guards had no idea but that Monsieur Jules was the real head of the traveling show, and that I had accompanied him in a spirit of pure adventure, coupled with a desire to shoot a big game."

"Hence, I did not find it difficult to steal away from our camp one night, gun in hand, and head for the quarter where I believed the secret cache might be found."

"I found it, you see, and came within an ace of leaving my bones in the depths of that strange ruin, the remnant of what must have been a temple ages ago, dedicated to the sun, possibly, since I have found evidence that there were fire worshippers in the heart of Africa, as well as among the ancient Peruvians and the Aztecs of Mexico; but wait until you see that remarkable crater temple yourself."

"When I fled from the scene after a desperate encounter with some gigantic blacks who appeared to guard the sacred valley, my intention was to get away as speedily as possible, dispose of this jewel in Johannesburg or Cape Town, and organize a new expedition prepared to cope with the tremendous difficulties which I had found must be surmounted if success were ever to perch upon my flag."

"Our proper course should have been to have immediately left that dangerous region; but the professor had conceived an idea, and being as stubborn as a mule, he was bound to have his way, danger or not."

"In brief, he had discovered a large kraal against the side of the mountain, a town that seemed to be many times larger than anything he had as yet run across, besides presenting possibilities that were especially alluring to such a devoted son of science."

"To make a long story short, then, I reluctantly agreed to accompany him, knowing by experience that this was the quickest method of inducing him to leave the hostile region, for it had by this time become a question as to whether we would ever live to reach civilization again, so numerous were the difficulties that beset us."

"We started out immediately, having cautioned our few remaining men to remain in hiding. I may as well mention just here that when we reached our rendezvous again all of them had decamped with the plunder, save faithfully Friday; but since his specimens remained safe, Monsieur Jules never worried."

"I knew from the lay of the land that it was our policy to ascend the hill, since, by taking a circuitous course we could reach a point where our whole great village of conical huts would be spread before us in the moonlight."

"This we managed to accomplish, and upon crawling around the loose rocks found that my shrewd supposition was very accurate, since we overlooked the entire kraal."

"We were immediately startled by the fact that a tremendous commotion seemed to have swept over the place. From our elevated position we could see a dense mass of kneeling blacks in the open space at the foot of the cliff, and the low murmur of a chant which had struck our ears upon rounding the side of the hill, now burst into a most amazing chorus, that rose and fell like the waves of the ocean."

"I was at first alarmed, believing that our presence had become known, and had something to do with this terrible spectacle; but the professor assured me it was only some part of their fetish worship, and begged me not to think of leaving, since he was bound to see it through, come what would."

"So we crouched there, and peeped through crevices in the rocks at the multitude of devout worshippers below."

"I tell you, Bruno, I never experienced anything equal to it—that chant so weird, so uncanny in its sudden outbursts, coming from the throats of hundreds of the most densely ignorant negroes in all Africa—the expectancy with which they crouched there and looked upward, all these things gave me an eerie sensation I do not ever remember experiencing before in all my life."

"Then I began to wonder what they could be looking for up on the face of that cliff—surely they awaited no dawning of the sun—could it be they worshipped the quarter whence he had vanished that evening in a golden splendor I have never seen equaled outside of Venice and in Florida? It would only be carrying out the same idea as the true Musliman who says his prayers five times a day with his face always turned toward the sacred city of Mecca."

"Then I conceived another notion—possibly in some niche along the face of the cliff the hideous voodoo idol they worshipped had a resting place."

"Eagerly I sought to discover it, but although my eyes alighted upon a little platform or ledge half-way up, where the silvery moonbeams played in undisturbed calm, I could not see it."

"A fearful suspicion flashed into my head that he had discovered us—that presently they must be swarming around the side of the hill bent upon cutting off our escape; and the very thought of falling into the hands of these black fiends was enough to send a shudder through the stoutest heart."

"Hardly had I conceived this startling idea, than I noticed with increasing amazement that to a man the impi had again cast themselves upon their faces as if in reverential awe."

"At the same instant the professor plucked my arm, and made a motion for me to look up, which I of course immediately did."

"The little moon-bathed ledge was the spot toward which my attention was attracted as if by some instinct. 'It was no longer vacant.'"

"I held my breath for very awe—at that moment, so great was my stupefaction that I could not have moved hand or foot even though the choice of life and death hung upon such action on my part; for as I looked, my eyes beheld what appeared to be a beautiful angel in white, standing on the edge of the platform with hand upraised—and then and there I knew the vague travelers' stories I had heard about the fair white god of the Zambodi were true."

CHAPTER V.

THE SONG OF THE SERPENT.

Lord Bruno had hung upon the words of his companion with the most intense interest, and at this crisis in the narrative he too came to a sitting posture, and breathlessly awaited the finish.

"To describe her would be a task beyond my power. All I can declare in my feeble way is that she burst upon my vision, bathed in a halo of moonlight, she was a glorious object for an artist's dream. You—and I have painted such subjects as angels, my dear fellow—we have seen such faces in visions, but rarely, if ever, elsewhere."

"The magnetic influence of the scene was upon me—I felt enthralled, as though under a spell. There was a subtle witchery in the very atmosphere, that seemed to blind my senses, and all I could do was to crouch there and worship that beautiful being very much as the ignorant Africans were doing in their own savage manner."

Lord Bruno nodded his head again. "I understand it all, and sympathize with you. But tell me, Rex, did this white goddess have golden hair or raven locks—I am not asking for simple curiosity—it is a matter of the deepest importance to me!"

"Her hair fell over her shoulders in a mass like spun gold—that was what gave her appearance such a startling effect, and I have no doubt has much to do with the fact of her being worshipped there as an idol."

"Tell me truly, my friend, was she anything like the face in this lock-off?" asked the English artist, with trembling voice.

Rex began to realize that the motive of his companion was a serious one. He had hardly let his eyes rest upon the features painted with the skill of a genius upon the ivory tablet than he gave utterance to an exclamation. Lord Bruno caught his arm.

"For God's sake tell me quickly," he breathed.

"It is very, very similar, and brings back vividly to my mind the picture that chained my attention there among the African hills. Yes, I would even dare venture to say this is the portrait of the fair being whom those black warriors sought favor from ere starting upon the warpath—yet that is incredible—impossible, since I have seen you wear this lock-off for years."

He looked at the Englishman in a thoughtful way, as though endeavoring to solve the riddle which had presented itself.

Lord Bruno again fastened it to his chain.

"You will be surprised my boy, when I tell you this miniature is a portrait of one who was very dear to me—of my sainted mother, taken when she was a charming girl, the fairest in all the country. Yes, there is a sad story back of it all. You shall hear it in good time, but this is no place to uncover the family skeleton. At least you know why I am determined to see her face to face and set at rest certain suspicions that have arisen of late to disturb my mind. It is not a story one loves to dwell upon. Rex, but you are my friend, my brother I had almost said, and in good time you shall hear all. Until then withhold your judgment I beg. Now finish telling me what occurred on the night you saw the white god appear to the Zambodi."

TO BE CONTINUED.

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