BRYDEN HENRY ANDERSON

TALES OF SOUTH AFRICA

Henry Bryden
Tales of South Africa

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=24171924
Tales of South Africa:

Содержание

H.A. Bryden
Tales of South Africa

Chapter One.
The Secret of Verloren Vlei

It was not until my second season's hunting with Koenraad du Plessis that I heard of Verloren Vlei, a place I am never likely to forget. Du Plessis was a Transvaal Boer, descended, as his name implies, from that good Huguenot stock which, after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, made its way to the Cape to replenish the Dutch settlers. The French language quickly died out in South Africa, mainly from a stern repression; yet here and there, all over that vast land, you may see at this day, in the strong and stubborn Boer breed, plain traces of the French admixture. Du Plessis bore about him very certain indications of his ancestry. He was shortish for a Boer, very dark of complexion, keen-eyed, merry, alert, vigorous and active as a cat.

Nineteen years ago, the north and east of the Transvaal, and the countries just across the border, were wild and little-known lands, still teeming with game. I was wandering through this region, hunting and exploring. The gold-fever had recently

broken out, and as I understood something of mining and geology, I put in a good deal of prospecting as well. It was a vagrant, delightful existence, and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Du Plessis and I met first in the north of Waterberg. I found him an excellent good fellow; he took to me; and we quickly became great friends. We trekked along the Crocodile River together, crossed it before it takes its southerly bend, and, for the whole of the dry winter season, hunted in a glorious veldt abounding in game. So excellent a comrade had I found the Boer, and so well had we enjoyed one another's company, that we engaged to meet again the following season. Thus, at the end of July, 1876, we were once more hunting together in that wild and distant region north-east of the Crocodile.

One evening – I remember it well – we were outspanned in a delightful valley between low hills, through which a pleasant stream ran – a rare thing in the prevailing drought. We had had a good hunt that day, and the flesh of a fat buffalo cow filled our stew-pot. Our oxen lay peacefully in a strong thorn kraal close at hand – for there were lions about – and our horses were tied up to the wagon-wheels; the fires blazed ruddily against the outer darkness. At one of these fires were gathered our native boys, feasting and chattering, and laughing in high good humour; at the other, Du Plessis and I sat in our wagon-chairs. We had finished our meal, and were smoking our fragrant Rustenburg tobacco and drinking our coffee; for the day had been hot, and our hunt a long and exciting one, and our thirst was still unassuaged. We

were talking about gold and prospecting. The Dutchman was not over-keen about it, but he was anxious to help me.

"There's a kloof somewhere about here, Fairmount," (that's my name), he said, "in which I shot a white rhinoceros five years ago. I should like you to see it; I remember some natives brought me a quill of gold which they had collected up there. I think you would find it worth looking at; but this country is so broken, that I can't for the life of me make out the exact spot. We shall hit it off presently, no doubt; but just now it's almost as hard to find as poor Tobias Steenkamp's 'Verloren Vlei.'"

"Verloren Vlei," I replied in Cape Dutch, in which we habitually spoke. "I never heard of the place. Where's that?"

"Allemaghte! that's a very queer story," answered Du Plessis. "Tobias Steenkamp was a cousin of mine. One day four years ago he came to our farm and outspanned. He had had a hard trek, and lost some oxen, and was himself smitten with fever. He stayed a week, and he was for ever talking of a wonderful *vlei* (Pronounced *flay*, A vlei is the Dutch name for a shallow lake.) he had discovered somewhere in an inaccessible mountain range in this direction, on the shores of which he had found much gold. He showed us some fine nuggets; and, indeed, he excited my brother Hans and myself so much, that we half promised to go back with him and have a look at the place.

"Well, Tobias got over his fever, obtained fresh oxen, refitted his wagon, and started off again for his wonderful vlei. Hans and I could not get away at that moment; but we meant to hunt in that

direction, and we promised to follow him up in a little time. He left a boy with us to show us the road. In two months' time we had trekked up to the neighbourhood of Tobias's great discovery, and then we received a shock. We met his driver and servants returning with the wagon, and no master. They told us that they had outspanned near the vlei – which they themselves had never seen; that their master had started off alone up the mountain next morning – he would never permit any of his boys to go with him; and that he had never returned. They had waited and waited, and had then searched for him in every direction without result. For a fortnight this had gone on; and now they had given up the search, and believed their master dead. Well, Hans and I took the men back with us to the mountain again, and made a thorough search, and sent out parties in every direction into the country round. We might as well have looked for the Fiend himself; we never again found a trace of Tobias Steenkamp. He is dead, undoubtedly, and his fate is wrapped in black mystery. How he disappeared, where he went, I cannot say. We did find *spoor* of a man and donkey to the north-east. The man had disappeared, and the donkey had been eaten by a lion. What *their* mystery was, I know not either. We found no trace of a passage up the grim mountain-walls where poor Tobias had vanished; and as for the vlei itself, well, Hans and I could make nothing of it. We never set eyes on it, and half doubted its existence. We have always called it since 'Verloren Vlei,' and by that name we and our friends still know it. And yet Tobias was no fool; he described the vlei very plainly

to us more than once; and he firmly believed in it. Allemaghte! yes, of that I am quite certain; and what's more, he showed me the gold he had found there. It's incomprehensible."

"That's a queer story of yours, Koenraad," said I. "I wonder I never heard you mention it before. How far away is this place you speak of?"

"About six days' journey from here, I suppose," replied Du Plessis; "and it's a rough trek."

"Has any one else ever tried to discover this secret?" I went on.

"Two or three people only," rejoined the Dutchman. "Tobias's brother and three other Boers who knew him went on two different occasions; but they came away no wiser than ourselves. Neither Tobias nor his bones have ever come to light."

We went on chatting by the fire that night, and presently turned into our wagons.

I am bound to confess that the Dutchman's grim story grew upon and fascinated me. Mystery has always a curious attraction. Here was hidden away some dark episode, in which this simple, unfortunate Boer had lost his life. I determined to try to unravel the clew; and the gold, too, lent an additional motive to the search.

I had small difficulty in persuading Koenraad du Plessis next morning to lead me to the place of misfortune. We settled to trek thither, hunting on our way; and in six days' time we found ourselves outspanned for the night beneath the loom of the great rock fortress which held so securely the Dutchman's secret. It

was the hour of sunset as we neared the mountain range, which lay between us and the north-west. The sky was a sheet of red and gold, against which the rugged mass stood out in a wonderful relief. Up above the mountain tops, long skeins of great birds, all following one another slowly and majestically in an endless maze of evolutions, were silhouetted black against the flaming heavens. We were a good mile away from the nearest string, but there was a wonderful stillness of the atmosphere; all nature seemed hushed, except for the birds – and the faint notes of their peculiar plaintive whistle told me instantly what they were.

"Why, Koenraad," I said, "those are pelicans, and they're just going down to water somewhere in the mountains! See, there they go!"

As I spoke the lower skein sank gently into the mountains, and presently chain after chain of the singular evolutionaries disappeared softly within the range, until the last bird had vanished, and the now fading sky lay clear and unflecked.

"Allemaghte!" ejaculated Du Plessis in his deepest tones; "those are pelicans surely, and they have gone down to water. Strange that I have never seen them there before. There is the vlei, sure enough! We will never rest now till we find it."

We were up at dawn next morning, and as we breakfasted we saw with intense interest the pelicans rise from the heart of the mountain, slowly circle about the sky, and then stretch their flight, in their leisurely and majestic fashion, in our direction. As they quitted the mountain, they sank lower towards the flat

country, and some of them were evidently about to pass right overhead.

"They'll come over the wagons," said Du Plessis; "they're off for that big salt pan we passed yesterday morning."

I dived into my wagon, and took down my rifle. An idea had struck me. I pushed a cartridge into the breech, and, as the great birds passed slowly a hundred yards overhead, took aim at one and fired. The target was a big and an easy one: the stricken bird toppled downwards, turning over and over in its fall, and presently hit the earth with a tremendous thud. One of the boys ran and brought it to me. I opened its bill. The pouch contained seven fresh fish – six smallish and carp-like, well-known to the Boers as *karpers*, the seventh a "yellow fish," a barbel-like fish of a pound and a half.

"Here, Koenraad," I said to my companion, "is proof positive that your mysterious vlei lies in the mountain and holds water. These fish are fresh – they were caught early this morning; and the birds are away to the salt pan for the day to eat and digest them."

We finished breakfast hastily, and sallied forth on our search. First, we followed the tiny stream near which we were camped. This led us to the westerly side of the mountain, and manifestly took its rise in some marshy ground immediately beneath the rock walls. A careful examination convinced me that the marsh itself owed its origin to some subterraneous escape – very probably from the vlei itself – from within the mountains. But

there was no hope of ingress in that direction. Pursuing our investigations, we rode carefully round the whole western and southern face of the mountain-wall, scanning closely every yard of its surface. This mountain-wall ran in a great semicircle; its dark-red, rampart-like cliffs were sheer, and wonderfully free from projections and undergrowth. We spent the whole day searching for any trace of path or ingress, and retired to our wagons for the evening completely discomfited. There was not foothold for the hardiest cliff climber that ever risked his life in search of wildfowl eggs.

Next morning, we followed this cliff face along the southerly aspect. Here, after a little way, it was met by another mass of mountains, into which it ran, terminating in a chimney-like *cul-de-sac* at the end of a short narrow gorge. Here, too, apparently, there was no possible approach upward or inward.

"It was here," said Du Plessis, "that the spoor of my cousin was last seen. His servants tracked him to this spot, and from there no trace of him could be found. It's a mystery I cannot fathom. He could not possibly have climbed this way."

We looked up at the dark grim rock walls above us, narrowing so that a foot or two of pale blue sky could alone be seen, and the thing seemed an impossibility. No living man could have made his way up that terrible chimney.

Retracing our steps from this dark ravine, we tried in another direction. All the remainder of that day, and for four long days thereafter, we explored with infinite care and toil the

mass of mountain on the south-east, east, and northern side of the place where, from the movements of the pelicans, the lost vlei apparently lay. We had to leave our horses behind on these expeditions; we toiled, climbed, descended, struggled, and fell, often at the risk of our necks and limbs, but were met everywhere by precipices and ravines which absolutely barred us in these directions. The mass of mountain, which trended away to the north-east for some miles, was, although much broken up, accessible with great labour, until we had approached within less than half a mile, as we reckoned, of the mysterious place we sought. Here, sheer and perfectly hopeless precipices shut us out, exactly as had been the case on the open part of the mountain we had first examined. It seemed clear that Verloren Vlei lay within a ring-fence of utterly inaccessible cliff wall.

On the fifth evening after our arrival, we lay wrapped in our sheepskin karosses by the fire, stiffened, sore, and thoroughly disheartened; and yet, evening after evening, just at the glorious time of sunset, the pelicans had come swinging over in their majestic hundreds from the south-east, had skeined and circled in the glowing sky, and had sunk into the heart of the mountain, and at dawn of day as regularly had they departed. The vlei *must* be there; it was heart-breaking to be baffled in this way.

I lay long that night in my wagon, thinking out some solution of the puzzle, until sleep at last overcame me. While I lay asleep, I had a very singular dream. I dreamed that I sat upon a high cliff of rock, looking down upon a fair lake of water, which lay girt in

part by a sandy shore, and surrounded by a ring of mountains. It was sunset, and one end of this lake was white with pelicans. At other parts were gathered flocks of wild-duck, and round about flew bands of the swift desert sand-grouse – Namaqua partridge, as the colonists call them. And occasionally the flights of sand-grouse stooped in their pretty way and drank at the margin of the water. But I saw yet another sight in that singular valley. I saw a tall figure walking by the edge of the lake. Its back was towards me, and, for the life of me, I could not see its face. I gazed and gazed; but the face never turned; and then suddenly the scene vanished, and my dream was over. Again I dreamed, and again I saw the spreading water beneath me, and the wildfowl; but there were no pelicans and no sand-grouse. I saw, too, a figure walking along the shore. This time the figure was different. It was shorter, and the walk was brisker; but again the man's back was towards me, and his face was hidden. And then, again, the dream faded, and I saw no more.

Next morning, Du Plessis and I sat at breakfast, still stiff and sore, yet in better heart. Our night's sleep had restored our flagging spirits. We had agreed to rest after our five days of hard work, and have a quiet day at our camp. We were later this morning, and the last of the pelicans were vanishing for their day's excursion as we sat down to breakfast I was surprised, therefore, as I looked towards the mountain, to see a string of wildfowl – evidently duck – circle a few times in the clear morning sky, and then drop down into the mountains again,

exactly from where the pelicans sank and rose. I nudged Du Plessis, whose nose was in his coffee, and pointed. "Wild-duck!" he ejaculated – "the first time we have seen them, too. There is the vlei, truly enough."

Half an hour later, about nine o'clock, flights of sand-grouse came overhead, and made straight for the heart of the mountain. More and more followed; there must have been many scores of them. They were the first we had seen at this camp.

My dream instantly came into my mind. I attached little importance to such things, yet the coincidence of the wildfowl and the sand-grouse was remarkable, and I told Du Plessis what I had dreamed. Quite in a chaffing way, I said: "We're going to discover your vlei and its secret after all, Koenraad. Dreams do sometimes come true. I wonder, though, what on earth the two men's figures could mean?"

Du Plessis was much more serious, and said with a solemn face: "It is not right to laugh at dreams, my friend; the Heer God sends them for some good reason, undoubtedly. I had nearly given this search up as hopeless. We must; yes, allemaghte! we must try again."

We strolled after breakfast, taking our pipes with us, to the chimney-like *cul-de-sac* where Tobias Steenkamp's footprints had been last seen, four years before. The place looked more than ever dark, narrow, and forbidding; and as we stood upon the sandy floor of the ravine and gazed upward to the faint patch of sky showing between the cliffs, two hundred feet above, the

sharp contrast made it yet more awesome. For half an hour we looked about us, examining carefully every cranny and projection within our vision. Suddenly a boyish expedient of mine flashed into my mind. I had in my young days in Derbyshire ascended a steep and very narrow fissure in a cliff among my native dales, by copying faithfully the example of a sweep's boy, whom I had watched climbing the great kitchen chimney. Why not make the attempt here? It looked a tremendous risk, but still it might be accomplished up in the far corner where the cliff-walls ran but a foot or two apart. I had hazarded my limbs many a time as a boy in search of birds' nests: why not here in pursuit of this mystery which so strangely baffled us? I told my plan to Du Plessis; he evidently thought very little of it. However, as we strolled back to camp, I thought out and discussed my scheme, and, so far as I could, prepared for it in the afternoon. We had at the wagons a long coil of stout rope some one hundred and fifty feet in length. It seemed too short for my purpose, and I fastened to it, therefore, with the greatest care, another seventy feet of strong ox *riems*– halters of raw hide – carefully lashed one to the other. I thus had over two hundred feet of rope.

Next morning, after a long night's rest, Du Plessis and I set off for the ravine, taking with us our most useful native servant, Andries, one of the drivers. I carried about my person some *billtong* (dried meat), matches, a revolver, hunting-knife, and a flask of brandy. Du Plessis was equipped (save for the revolver) in the same manner. Arrived at the extremity of the ravine, we

threw down the rope, one end of which I attached to my waist I wore, as usual, only my flannel shirt and a pair of moleskin trousers, and upon my feet I had a pair of *velschoens*– Boer field-shoes, made of strong yet soft leather of home-tanned hide. These shoes were close-fitting, light, and pliable, and exactly suited my purpose.

I now made my way back to where a sort of ledge ran sloping upwards a little way towards the narrowest part of the ravine – at the end. I carefully climbed this, and found myself, as I had expected, some thirty feet on my way up, and now right in the narrowest extremity of the narrow gorge. At my back was the cliff wall; in front of me was the opposing wall, less than two feet away; on my right was the mass of rock ending the gorge, sometimes uneven and projecting a little, sometimes almost smooth; on my left hand was open space, where the gorge slowly widened out I looked upward in doubt, almost in dismay; I looked down upon Du Plessis' serious face: it was no use waiting; I took one long breath and began the task. My plan was this: pressing my feet against the wall of rock in front, and planting my back hard against the cliff behind me, I gradually levered my way upwards. I made use of every inequality and jutting rock that could aid me, and occasionally obtained an excellent rest from bits of rock on my right, upon which I could lean, and thus relieve the tension. I worked my way as rapidly as possible, knowing how the strain must tell upon my legs, and, as far as half-way, or a little beyond, progressed better and more speedily than I could

have hoped. Now, the labour began to tell more hardly as every ten seconds passed. I was in good sound fettle; I had always been a "stayer"; and my wind was in capital order; but my breath now began to come with difficulty, the sweat was pouring from me, my shirt was ripping off my back, and, worst of all, my legs were failing me. At three-fourths of the distance – about one hundred and fifty feet up – I noticed a projecting rock on the right. I worked up to this with infinite difficulty, and then, leaning my right arm and as much of my body over as possible, I rested for full three minutes. I was now, as I well recognised, in a very serious plight. There were yet fifty more feet of cliff to climb. I had already undergone what seemed superhuman labour, and my muscles were relaxing, my strength and wind were ebbing. To return was as perilous as to go on; to fall meant a shocking death I took out my brandy flask, drained it to the last drop, uttered within myself a half-prayer to a God I had long neglected, hitched up my belt and trousers, and struggled on. If I live to a hundred, I never can forget the terrible nightmare of that last fifty feet. But for the brandy, that put new if fleeting energy into me – it was Three Star, luckily, and I believe it saved my life – I should never have succeeded. I most heartily wished I had never seen Du Plessis, never started on this accursed trip, never offered to risk my life. I struggled on, growing weaker and slower. Once I slipped three or four good feet, and only saved myself by some miraculous luck! The sharp wall behind me laid a deep furrow into my back as I did so, and I felt the warm blood issuing forth

and mingling with the sweat that ran from me.

Once more I set my teeth for the last twenty feet. I recovered my ground, and foot by foot fought my way on. The muscles of my legs quivered like aspen leaves; I feared they would give way each moment. At last – I hardly know how – I found my face above the cliff; the sweet outer air met me; I gave a last struggle, got foothold on the right, flung myself forward, and lay upon the cliff top with my feet still projecting over the edge. I remember hearing a faint shout from far beneath me, and then all swam.

When I came to, I suppose I had lain senseless for a quarter of an hour. I was in sorry plight indeed. I was stiff, sore, bleeding from my back, and the poor remnant of my shirt hung in front of me. I staggered to my feet and looked about me. A glance showed me that there were yet difficulties to be overcome before we could descend to the vlei, yet they were not insuperable. The chiefest of them lay in a sharp saddle-back of rock, sheer on either side, which had to be crossed somehow before the main mass of the inner ring of mountain could be attained. But my strength was coming back to me; a sense of triumph and elation over the dreadful task I had conquered rose in my breast; and my determination to pierce the secret of the valley was stronger than ever.

Here and there upon the cliff top grew some wild olive trees, stunted and dwarfed, but strong. To one of these I fastened the end of the rope I had brought up with me. I now approached the edge, lay down, and looked over. Du Plessis was there, gazing

anxiously upward. I shook the rope and shouted to him to come up. We had agreed upon this plan, if I succeeded; and he now fastened the lower end of the rope round his waist and began his climb. With the help of the rope it was comparatively easy work. The Dutchman was strong in the arms and active, and came steadily on. Occasionally he unbound the rope, and refastened it at a higher point to his waist, as an insurance against falls. In fifteen minutes he was up beside me. Even his journey had been no light one. He, too, streamed with perspiration; his limbs trembled, and he flung himself to the ground to gather breath and rest.

"Maghte! Fairmount," he gasped as soon as he had recovered a little breath, "you must have got up by a miracle. Even with that rope, I don't think I would care to climb the cliff again. 'Tis a job only fit for a klipspringer (a small and very active mountain antelope), not a man!"

We rested full twenty minutes, smoked a pipe of tobacco, and then set about completing the rest of our task. The sharp saddle-back, a bridge of rock which crossed another deep ravine between us and the inner mountain, looked excessively nasty. In some places it was as much as four feet wide; in others it narrowed to as little as two. There were about forty yards of it; and in portions the surface was rugged and sharp.

"Come along, Du Plessis," I said; "the sooner we're over the better. The rest seems easy enough."

The broader part of the bridge came first, and admitted of

walking for ten yards. Then it narrowed. I went down upon all-fours, and crawled. It was nerve-shaking work; for the bridge fell away sheer on either side, and the drop of nearly two hundred feet meant a horrible death. In the middle of the bridge the space was too narrow even for crawling; it was necessary to sit astride, and so fudge one's way along for ten or twelve yards. At last the broader part came again, and in five yards more the solid mountain top and safety were achieved. Du Plessis had followed close behind, imitating carefully my tactics. As we stood up upon safe ground again, I noticed that he was deadly pale. He shook his head, as he looked at me ruefully, and wrung the sweat from his brow. "Man!" he said, "if I had not been *shamed* into following you, I never would have come across that place, no, not for a thousand Verloren Vleis. You are unmarried and a little foolhardy. I am married, and have a wife and six children pulling at my jacket. I didn't bargain for these adventures; they are only fit for baboons."

"Come on, Koenraad," I replied, laughing. "It's a nasty crossing, I own; but it's all plain sailing now, apparently."

We went on over the mountain for twenty minutes; then came a shallow kloof, thickly bushed at bottom; then another ascent, a rough walk of another half-hour; and then, clearing some more bush and low scrub that grew here upon the mountain top, we came suddenly upon an enchanting scene. "The vlei!" we exclaimed in a burst together, then stood and gasped in very pleasure and bewilderment.

Right below us, ringed in by a perfect amphitheatre of mountain, lay an oval sheet of water, its smooth surface, unruffled by a flaw of wind, shining beneath the ardent sunlight like the mirror of a giantess. This vlei – the long-lost vlei, undoubtedly – was about half a mile long by three hundred yards in breadth. Here and there upon the placid water floated troops of wildfowl; and high in the air hung a fishing-eagle or two, keenly intent upon sport beneath. Immediately below us, the lake seemed deep; but towards the far end, it evidently shallowed, and upon one side of that end grew dense masses of reeds. The shores, save where the reed-beds grew, were in places sandy; elsewhere, of rock. Between the water and the mountain sides, which sloped easily downward, and were well bushed, was an outer ring of reddish soil, masked by a park-like growth of scattered acacia thorns. It was now the month of August, and getting towards African spring-time, and, favoured doubtless by the neighbourhood of the vlei, the acacias were already putting forth a pleasant bravery of green leafage. Birds – many of them of brilliant plumage – were in plenty about this gem-like spot. It seemed that here in this secret place Nature had done her utmost to atone for much of the drought and hardship that at this season lay in the wilderness outside.

For five minutes we stood gazing with a sense of rapture at this goodly scene. We looked keenly hither and thither, but could discern no trace of human existence. Then we descended. We reached the water without great difficulty; upon its margin

we lay down and drank long and eagerly. Having thus refreshed ourselves, and eaten some of the little store of food we had brought with us, we set out to explore the vlei thoroughly. The chief thing in our minds was to ascertain the fate of Tobias Steenkamp, whether living or dead. And first we settled to search systematically the side upon which we stood. We looked carefully for traces of spoor, yard by yard along the sand fringing the water. Not a footprint could we discover. Once or twice we came across the tracks of klipspringers and leopards, but no sign of human life was there. We turned back, and searched among the groves of thorny acacia, now fragrant with the strong scent of the rich sweet blossoms, but with the same ill success. It was now late in the afternoon; we passed round the end of the vlei, skirted the reed-bed, and then came upon more rocky formation. It was here that I first convinced myself of the gold-bearing richness of the valley. In a crevice of rock, time-worn by long ages of water-wear and decay, I picked up three smallish nuggets. I am afraid this success rather threw us off the search for Tobias Steenkamp, of which we had already begun to despair. Several times during the day we had raised our voices and hallooed loudly, in faint hopes of an answer. The cliffs eagerly returned us echo after echo, but there was nought else. For the rest of the short afternoon time we scrambled about the rocks, peering into crannies and basins. We had fair success, and by evening had between us gathered some fourteen ounces of gold, all in nuggets.

It was now sundown; already the pelicans had arrived, and

were sailing about the sky in marvellous intricacies; the light was going fast, and we must prepare to camp for the night. We had told our men at the wagons not to expect us till next day; they would be therefore under no anxiety. We picked a place not far from the water, where the view was open, and danger from the approach of night *ferae* minimised. We chose a smooth sandy spot under a wall of rock. In front we made two good fires, and then, having eaten a scant supper, we sat smoking and talking beneath the warm starlight. It was about nine o'clock; we were both becoming drowsy, when Du Plessis suddenly sat bolt upright and listened breathlessly. "Did you hear that?" he whispered in a low, intense voice. "No," I said, sinking my voice too, for the man's strange demeanour rather awed me.

"I heard a man groan – or a *spook*," he said.

Now, I am not a believer in spooks at any time; yet it was a wild, eerie place, and the senses of these Boer hunters are so preternaturally quickened by long acquaintance with savage life, that I knew Koenraad must have heard something.

I listened intently, and again we both heard a faint groan, as of a man in pain.

"Allemaghte!" whispered Du Plessis, "what, in the name of the Heer God, can it be?" A moment later he clutched me by the arm, and pointing with his right hand, whispered fiercely: "Look! look!"

The moon was now up and shining brightly, and the valley had passed from the dimness of the starlight. I looked where the

Boer was pointing, and saw something that sent a shiver down my back. Certainly there *was* a shapeless *something* crawling slowly towards the water on our left front, one hundred and fifty yards away. Again came the faint groan we had heard.

"This is bosh," I said. "It's a man, undoubtedly, and he's in pain. It may be your cousin. Come and look." I sprang to my feet, picked up my revolver, and started off. Du Plessis pulled himself together – he had need, for he was a firm believer in spooks – and followed closely. We approached the creeping thing – it looked more like a man. I hailed it, and again a low groan came. We reached the dark object. It was a man, or the remains of one, emaciated, half-clad in tattered rags; and it crawled upon all-fours, dragging one leg. It was not a Boer – not Tobias Steenkamp. In a flash it came into my mind that here was the second figure, of my strange dream.

"Who are you?" I said.

"Water, for God's sake!" was all the poor wretch could utter. I ran to the water, filled the top of my felt hat, and came back. The tattered figure drank eagerly.

"Come, Du Plessis," I said; "let's carry him up to the camp-fire."

We picked the poor framework up, and carried it to the fire; it weighed, I suppose, about five stone. Then we got out Du Plessis' flask, poured out some brandy, mashed up some biscuit and water with it, and administered the mess out of the flask cup. The brandy seemed to revive the poor creature. We gave him a

piece of *billtong* to suck, and at last he spoke.

"I know your face," he said, looking at me; "don't you remember Spanish Jack?"

Of course I remembered Spanish Jack, a well-known prospector in the Eastern Transvaal some few years before. Three parts English, one part Spanish, he was one of those restless pioneers who move, Uhlan-like, before the main body of the gold-diggers, always on the hunt for new finds. Looking at the poor death's-head before me, I could only recognise, in the dark, cavernous eyes and the mass of tangled black hair, the faintest traces of the strong, restless, dare-devil prospector known as Spanish Jack.

"How did you come here?" I queried, and in the same instant, "What's become of Tobias Steenkamp?" asked Du Plessis in Dutch.

"Give me a drop more brandy," answered the man in a hoarse whisper, "and I'll tell you."

We gave him part of our small remaining stock, with some water, and he went on, speaking, however, with great difficulty.

"I was up in these parts with a donkey and a bit of an outfit four years ago, and I heard from a nigger that a Dutchman had got into this place; and, after a lot of trouble, I found my way in too, from another direction, nor'-east there. I had some grub, and I meant to camp for a week, as alluvial gold was wonderfully plentiful. On the fifth day after I got here, Tobias Steenkamp turned up. It was the second and last trip he made. He was mad

to find me here, and told me it was his place, and I was to clear. We quarrelled; he struck me, and in my rage I out with my knife and stabbed him in the chest. He died within an hour. You will find his bones along there under a bit of a cairn near the water. Well, after that I only wanted to get out of the place. I took what gold I had picked up, and started up the mountain again. In my hurry I was careless; I fell, broke my right thigh, and here I have been ever since. My leg healed in a rough sort of way; but there's a false joint; the bone kept coming away, and I could never walk properly again. I managed to pick up food by snaring fowl and catching fish; but latterly I've been too weak to do that. For the last month I've been slowly starving. Lizards and roots are what I've lived on – that's God's truth. My leg's been getting worse, and I've had to crawl, mostly, these last three months. I never expected to reach the water again after to-night, and then I think I should have pinched out. Time enough, too. This place has been worse than hell itself."

There was a hunted terror in the man's eye that implied more than his words. I doubted somehow whether I had heard the plain truth. The poor wretch was by this time exhausted, and could say no more. I gave him, at his request, a piece of tobacco; he clapped it into his cheek, and thought he could doze a bit.

I turned to Du Plessis, who had meanwhile, with very grim looks, edged away from the man who, he understood from me (I had translated the gist of the prospector's story), had slain his cousin. His feeling of vengeance was strong – remember, he was

but a primitive Transvaal Boer; but what could even he say, as we looked at this poor travesty of a man, this living skeleton, with its broken, deformed leg, that now slept, huddled up to the fire as closely as the starved Bushman of the Kalahari?

It was now late, and Du Plessis and I, too, lay down and slept; the day had been long and hard, and we were dog-tired. The dawn was cold; and coatless, almost shirtless, as I was, I awoke early, very stiff and sore. Du Plessis had a cord coat on; he yet slept soundly, and even snored. But the figure across the fire seemed very still. I moved quietly to it, touched it gently. It was stiff and cold. Spanish Jack's troubles and agonies were over; his prospecting was done; and for the blood upon his hands he would never answer upon this earth. Whether he died from the excitement of the meeting; whether that last agonising journey to the water had spent the remaining flicker of strength left within him; whether the story he had told us of Tobias Steenkamp's death was the true one, I cannot tell.

I roused Du Plessis. Together we went down towards the vlei and found the pile of stones, where, surely enough, the bones of a tall man – undoubtedly Tobias Steenkamp – lay. These we carefully replaced; then, exploring up-hill from where we had come upon the prospector, we found a cave or hollow in which the poor wretch had evidently made a home. Here were Steenkamp's hat and hunting-knife, among other remnants; and here, too, a pile of nuggets, no doubt collected by Spanish Jack. These nuggets, with a small skin bag partly full of gold-dust,

washed, no doubt, from the sands of the vlei – a small tin digger's pan of Spanish Jack's showed us that – we took with us. After that, we buried the dead prospector as well as we could, piled big stones above his rude grave, and quitted the place.

We had no wish to tarry there, fair as was the spot. Rather the grim associations of the vlei, the deed of blood enacted there, and the melancholy death we had been witnesses of, impelled us away from it.

After much toil, we safely reached our wagons late that afternoon, worn and famished. We had, somehow, no wish to bequeath to others the secret of the vlei. Having safely descended by the rope, therefore, we set about destroying our traces. Two of our boys were waiting for us at the bottom of the ravine. With these we took a united haul at the rope. The strain was great; the rope parted, as we had expected, far up the cliff, where the hide riems joined the rope itself, and no vestige of our means of descent remained to searchers from below. Next day we trekked from the neighbourhood. The gold we had found realised, some months later, seven hundred pounds, which Du Plessis and I divided between us.

Verloren Vlei, with its smiling face, its dark history, and its wealth of gold – for gold must be there in abundance – lies, I believe, to this day still a secret and an unknown place. No doubt the pelicans and the sand-grouse that first revealed its mysteries to Tobias Steenkamp and ourselves, still visit it in time of drought – towards the driest period of African winter. Some

day, I suppose, its recesses will be made accessible and its wealth laid bare. For others that day may come; but for ourselves, neither Koenraad du Plessis nor I have any wish – having prospered in other directions – to tempt fortune there again.

Chapter Two.
A Bushwoman's Romance

Nakeesa, the Bushwoman, awoke just as dawn crept upon the silent veldt. She belonged to that strange houseless race of wild hunters who roam the waterless, illimitable deserts of the North Kalahari, subsisting sometimes on game, at other times upon roots, reptiles, and berries.

It is needless to say that Nakeesa lay roofless. A little screen of branches, interwoven with a friendly bush, sheltered her and her sleeping husband and her child from the chill south wind that just now began to move through the desert. It was June – midwinter – and the night had been keen even to frostiness – so cold that Nakeesa had lain almost *in* the fire through the long hours. Her short hartebeest-skin cloak, and the tiny skin petticoat about her loins, only half protected her gaunt, three-quarter starved frame. The baby had nestled in the warmest corner of her cloak, as near to the fire as might be without burning. So close had Nakeesa lain to the pleasant warmth, that the shins of her poor bony legs were burnt raw, as they had been for weeks past. Her man, Sinikwe, lay scorched in exactly the same way.

You may never, indeed, see a Masarwa Bushman or woman who does not show marks of fire-burn upon the nether limbs. Among the old people, if you look close enough, you may see

that their wrinkled breasts and bellies are scorched and raw also.

Nakeesa sat up, pushed a half-burned stick or two into the smouldering fire, and looked about her. Sinikwe lay still asleep. There was no need to wake him, and, indeed, he would resent such interference. She looked about her in a dull, rather hopeless way. There was no food in the camp – if camp it could be called. Sinikwe had shot or snared no meat of late. Drought lay upon the desert, and game was scarce. In a little while she must be digging for roots in the hard sunbaked soil, and her babe would be crying at her lean, starved breast. All day yesterday had she been sucking water from a moist hole in the ground, and discharging it from her mouth into ostrich shells and a calabash – a sufficiently fatiguing operation in thirsty soil. But these things alone hardly troubled Nakeesa. They were natural incidents of Bushman life, and scarce needed regrets. Something deeper and more bitter lay within her soul – something that even her cowed, submissive nature constantly rebelled against.

Twelve months since, Nakeesa's father had handed her over to Sinikwe, who, for the consideration of two solid brass cartridge cases (articles much prized by Masarwas as snuff-boxes) and the half of a slain eland, had bought her as wife. Now Nakeesa had no great admiration for Sinikwe. He was a good hunter, it was true; all Masarwas are. But he was lazy, and not very amiable; he was ugly even for a Bushman; and she had had another youth in her eye. Kwaneet – the pleasant, merry Kwaneet – who had shown her several little kindnesses at Makwa Pool, and had presented

her with many titbits of flesh, while their respective families squatted near that water, was the man of her secret choice.

Kwaneet, too, knew this, and was anxious to link his fortunes with Nakeesa's; but, most unfortunately, Sinikwe had acquired the coveted cartridge cases from an English hunter, and had secured his wife. Kwaneet, it is true, could easily have slain an eland, and had offered to do so; but though, like Sinikwe, he carried at his neck – as every decent Masarwa should – his own well-polished brass cartridge case, as snuff-box, he had not two spare ones to offer Nakeesa's father; and so he had lost Nakeesa, and Sinikwe had taken her.

Nakeesa's eyes, as she squatted over the fire this morning, ranged over typical Kalahari scenery. In front of her lay an open grassy clearing, yellow with sun-parched winter grass. This and other glades in the vicinity Sinikwe meant to set fire to in a day or two, in order to renew the vegetation, as the first rains came on, and so attract the game. Beyond the clearing, and upon the left hand and right, stretched the pleasant open forest of the desert – groves of giraffe-acacia (*kameel doorn*), through which still wander freely in these pathless, waterless solitudes the tall giraffe, the portly eland, the brilliant red hartebeest, and the noble gemsbok (prototype of the fabled unicorn).

This Kalahari forest scenery, flat though it is, is very beautiful, resembling closely some English deer park, or the natural woodland of some wild Surrey common.

The deep red glow of sunrise was now apparent through the

trees to the eastward, long streamers of rose-pink flew upwards in the pale sky; a roller or two, brilliant in gorgeous colouring of metallic mauves and violets, purples, blues, and greens, began to cry amid the forest, and to flash hither and thither across the clearing. Dainty steinboks and timid duykers (small antelopes, quite independent of water, to be found all over the desert) rose stiff from their cold night couches, shook themselves, and began to feed.

Suddenly a movement to the right attracts Nakeesa's attention. She looks again, and an involuntary click of surprise and pleasure rises to her tongue. She touches her man lightly. Sinikwe is awake and upon his haunches in an instant; his narrow, bleared eyes seek what Nakeesa has seen, and they watch together in a motionless silence.

From behind a spreading acacia tree, from which it has been plucking the green leafage, strides into a little glade of the grove a great cow giraffe. She is fat and fresh, her dappled, orange-tawny hide gleams under the now risen sun with high condition, her great, melting, dark eye is placid and free from fear. Timid creature though she is, in these wilds she feels secure enough. She halts for a minute in the glade, lazily champing at a bit of acacia leafage which projects from her lips, and, raising her immense neck yet higher, and in the same motion swinging her head easily round, looks behind for her fellows. That giraffe cow, so plump, so well coloured, upon which Sinikwe's eye is now fiercely rivetted, is young, but full grown. She measures

seventeen good feet from the base of her hoofs to the tip of her false horns, as she stands there, and you may search all Africa – ay, all the world – for a more wonderful, more beautiful picture of feral life in its most primaeval form.

There is no air of wind blowing from the Masarwas towards the giraffe; the breeze trends rather the other way, and they are safe from betrayal by that foe. They are concealed from sight by the screen of bush beneath which they crouch, and a few handfuls of sand, cast by Sinikwe upon the smouldering fire, silently destroys that evidence of human life.

In another minute the great creature swings her head round, satisfied that her fellows are near, and stalks slowly on. She is but sixty yards away now, and, passing another group of trees and some bush, emerges upon the open glade. Before she has reached the further side, the rest of the troop are to be seen following in her wake. There are six of them in all: a mighty dark chestnut bull, nineteen feet tall, three more cows, and two calves. The beautiful giants stride like strange automatons across the clearing, with that gliding, deceptive walking pace of theirs, and join the leader at a great spreading acacia, from which they all begin to pluck, with upstretched necks and prehensile tongues, the dark-green foliage.

Sinikwe's eyes had greedily followed the great cow in all her movements. That is the quarry he means to strike for. Luckily he had smeared his tiny bone-tipped reed arrows with fresh poison taken from the entrails of the N'gwa caterpillar only

yesterday. He now picks up his bow and quiver, slings the latter across his back, and steals away by a circuitous route to intercept the troop. It is three hours before he gets his shot. At length, after infinite patience and manoeuvring, he has wormed himself into a patch of thick bush, by which, as he had reckoned, the great cow would pass. Stooping on one knee, he harbours there, motionless as some bizarre figure of bronze; the cow glides past, like some great desert ghost; Sinikwe lets fly his arrow deep into the thinnest part of her tough hide, under the hinder part of the belly; the startled creature flies crashing through the forest, and the Masarwa knows that with her death is now only a question of hours. It may be a day, or two days, or even three, but the poison already at work is fresh and at its deadliest; the arrowhead went well home, and the cow is his.

He returns to Nakeesa, gives her the news, and sends her into the grass veldt to dig up roots, while he himself prepares to make snuff. Taking her babe on her back, neatly slung in her skin cloak, Nakeesa hies her to a likely spot. She takes also with her an empty tortoiseshell in which to bring home the bulbs, and a sharp-pointed stick garnished at top with a circular piece of soft stone. With this last implement she can the more easily crow up their dinner.

Out there in the hot sun Nakeesa patiently digs and digs, slowly accumulating the dish of roots. The red sandy soil is now burning hot to the touch; there is no inch of shade from the scorching sun, and she has not tasted food or water for twenty hours. These

things trouble the Bushwoman not at all; they have always been a part of her existence, and she cannot imagine a world without toil and heat, hunger and thirst. Just now, too, she is somewhat comforted at the thought of a mighty feast of meat in the not distant future. Sinikwe is lazy, and time after time neglects to hunt game when Kwaneet – Kwaneet is often in her mind – would have brought in good store of flesh. But Sinikwe, to give him his due, is as good a hunter and spoorer as any in the wide Kalahari, if the game is nigh and not far to seek. She knows that the giraffe is as good as dead, that soon, for a few brief days, she may revel in a gross plenty, and that her babe will be less petulant again. In two hours Nakeesa has filled the tortoiseshell and returns to her man.

Sinikwe, meanwhile, has been having an easy time, preparing a fresh supply of snuff against his coming spooring operations and the feast that is to follow. Out of the dead fire he has extracted some ash from a particular sort of bush which he put in last night. This he works down to the finest possible consistency. Taking from a leather pouch a tiny piece of tobacco – the precious gift of a Lake trader – he cuts off a piece, and in turn reduces that to fine dust by means of flat stones. Then carefully mingling the ashes and the tobacco dust, and again grinding them down together, his snuff is made. With this prized commodity he can refresh his jaded senses upon a difficult spoor, titillate his nerves after a big gorge of flesh, and purchase the pleased glances of his wife when in his bounty he shall deign

to bestow a pinch or two upon her. Besides his snuff-making, an operation demanding the gravest care, Sinikwe has sharpened up the blade of his only spear, at once his weapon of defence, carver and skinning-knife, to the haft of which he has fastened his skin cloak and a small calabash of water in preparation for the journey before him. He has sharpened, too, his primitive hatchet, used for chopping bones and extracting marrow. That hatchet – the head of iron, the haft of rhinoceros horn – is Sinikwe's most treasured possession. His father acquired it long since, at infinite cost of feathers and ivory from the Bechuana who fashioned it.

Presently Nakeesa comes in, and the roots – curious little smooth bulbs, sweet and nutty to the taste – are divided, three-fourths to Sinikwe, one-fourth to Nakeesa. These bulbs are bestowed in thin transparent crops taken from dead guinea-fowls, which are now softened in water for the purpose. A skewer of wood is run throughout several; in half an hour the sun has again dried these curious receptacles, and the Bushman's bread supply is complete. Taking his lion's share of the food, and munching a few bulbs before he departs, Sinikwe now exchanges with his wife a few sentences in that curious, whining, inarticulate form of speech peculiar to the Bushman, every passage of it as full of clicks as tongue, throat, teeth, and palate can make it; shoulders his belongings, and sets off briskly upon the spoor of the wounded giraffe.

Nakeesa is to follow him at leisure; she will, you may swear, be up at the carcase long before Sinikwe has made much havoc with

it. But she has to carry more water and the child, and will take her own time. She devours a few bulbs and then goes to the water-pit. At present there is no water there, only some moist sand in a deep hollow. But Nakeesa knows what she is about. To the end of a hollow reed she has fastened a tuft of grass. This she inserts into the damp hole which she scoops from the sand. Then she kneads sand round the base of her rude pump and over the tuft of grass and sucks. Little by little the water thus collected reaches and fills her mouth, from which it is discharged, by means of a thick stalk of desert grass, into an ostrich shell. It is hard work and slow, but in two hours Nakeesa has filled her three remaining ostrich shells. These and some others, the holes of which are all carefully sealed with grass, she bestows in a rude net of fibre.

With this load, together with a calabash of water, her babe, her larder and household gear (the bulbs, a steinbok skin, and the tortoiseshell), she sets off on her way towards that banquet of giraffe flesh for which her soul now pines. It is a long, long journey, but she has no trouble whatever in following Sinikwe's spoor. She traces it to the spot where the Masarwa set off upon the tracks of the wounded cow, and then, mile after mile through the desert, she deciphers easily the familiar tale that slowly the earth unfolds to her. The giraffe is strong and lusty, and the poison takes long to do its work upon so huge a frame.

Nakeesa toils on doggedly with her load. She sleeps the first night (she started in the afternoon) in a belt of Mopani forest. At earliest dawn, as soon as she can see spoor, she is away again

steadily trudging. It is weary work. The white glare of the sun upon the light calcareous sand, through which she ploughs all morning, is trying enough; yet infinitely more distressing is it when she crosses the four miles of a vast salt pan. The blinding glare thrown up from the flat white surface of the pan makes even the seasoned eyes of a Bushwoman throb and smart, and the heat is terrible.

There is a gleam of satisfaction even upon the salt pan, however. Nakeesa sees plainly enough by the spoor that the giraffe cow is in sore trouble. Here she has reeled, there spurned the smooth white sand as she starts off again at speed, galled into frenzy by the poison that now runs riot through her veins. And ever, like bloodhound upon a trail, run the footprints of Sinikwe side by side with the giraffe spoor. Nakeesa sees that he has put on his hide sandals, so burning is the glittering white sand. So plain is the tale to her eyes that Nakeesa knows now surely enough that to-morrow by noon she will rest by the dead carcase.

In the hottest hour of afternoon, as she mounts with a sense of relief the further edge of the great salt pan, Nakeesa sees a figure coming towards her. Who can it be? Not Sinikwe, certainly. In five minutes her old lover, Kwaneet, stands before her. They squat them down beneath a solitary Mopani tree, whose bifid, butterfly-like leaves (now parched and shrivelled), turned ever edgewise to the sun, afford them the scantiest shade, and exchange greeting. Kwaneet takes a little – a very little – of the precious snuff from the cartridge case at his neck, and offers

his friend a pinch from the palm of his hand. With a gratitude almost too great for words Nakeesa takes and enjoys the precious stuff. What a relief! No dainty cup of afternoon tea was ever so grateful to fashionable dame as that pinch of snuff to the weary Masarwa woman. Her eyes sparkle a little, she plucks up energy again.

"So, Kwaneet!" she says. "Have you had water? Whence come you?"

"There is no water," replies the Masarwa. "I am eaten up by the sun. Two mornings agone I drank a little. I go to Makwa, where there may be yet a little. And I shall there hunt for hartebeest-skins against the coming of Khama's headmen. What news have you, Nakeesa? I saw the print of Sinikwe's sandal yonder, following the Ng'habe," (giraffe), "and so came on this way, knowing I should meet you. How goes life with you?"

"There is no news," returned Nakeesa. "I heard some lies only from the Bakalahari at Bachukuru fountain. Khama's men are hunting in Mababi. As for me and my babe, we starve. Sinikwe has done no hunting till yesterday for moons past. Better had it been if thou hadst been my man, Kwaneet!"

"Come with me now, Nakeesa," replied Kwaneet. "I will find thee meat. We will go far," (pointing north) "and defy Sinikwe."

"Nay, I dare not," answered Nakeesa. "Sinikwe would follow and slay us in our sleep. I dare not. Be patient. Something may happen. Our life is short, and has many dangers."

During this interview Nakeesa had been turning over

something in her mind. The snuff and its pleasures quite decided her. She took an ostrich eggshell from her burden, cleared the orifice of grass, and offered water to Kwaneet. The Masarwa drank half the contents of the shell, then returned it to Nakeesa.

"Thanks for the drink; the water is good. But what will Sinikwe say?"

"Oh, that is nothing," returned the woman. "I spilled the water, did I not? and Sinikwe must do his worst. If he returns this way he will know who had it. I cannot help it. You are my friend – and far more."

Nakeesa knew there would be trouble about the water. She herself had had but one sip since she started. She dared to take no more. But she knew her risk, and cheerfully accepted it – for Kwaneet's sake. In ten minutes they parted and went their ways. Bushmen are not a demonstrative folk, and there was little fuss on leave-taking.

Not a little cheered by the meeting with Kwaneet, Nakeesa held steadily on her course till sundown, and for the second night slept upon the spoor of her husband and the now dying giraffe. Again with the earliest streaks of light she rose and pursued her journey. Her babe was very fretful. She herself yearned for the end of the travel; even for a Bushwoman ground nuts are but poor sustenance for a three days' foot journey, under a heavy load, and smitten by a parching sun. Only the immense vitality and the silent capacity for endurance characteristic of these desert-bred Masarwas sustained her. In the early cool of this fair African

morning Nakeesa passed through tracts of leguminous bush, decked in a bravery of lilac-coloured blossom. As she emerged upon a broad opening, a troop of noble gemsbok stood at gaze at fifty paces, then cantered leisurely away, their long, spear-like horns glinting to the sunlight. But neither the splendour of the dawn, nor the pleasant flowers, scarcely even the great antelopes, had any attraction for Nakeesa's eyes.

At last, just upon hot noon, Nakeesa looked skywards, and saw against the hard, torrid glare bands of vultures wheeling and circling high above the earth. There, at last, was her goal. Below the foul birds the giraffe undoubtedly lay dead. Sinikwe's presence alone kept them aloof. In half an hour Nakeesa stood by the carcase and greeted her husband. Sinikwe paused in his operations – he was chopping ribs from the huge frame, and from head to foot was smeared and stained with blood. For once he was in a good humour; blood and meat had rendered him mellow, as with wine. The day passed in butchering and drying meat, in a continual round of feasting. At night, by the fire, Sinikwe, utterly gorged and drunk with flesh, lay down to sleep. Nakeesa had had enough, but she had not eaten in so gross a manner as her lord. Even to the woman of the desert there seem intuitively to come restraints and limits, which to the man are unknown.

The stars came sparkling forth in their hosts, the deep indigo hollow of space intensifying their marvellous brightness. Amid that galaxy of diamonds, the Southern Cross, Orion's Belt, the Great Dog, Centaurus, Cetus, and many another constellation,

stood majestic.

Presently the weird, shrill wail of the jackal and the hideous cry of hyaenas told that even in these dry wastes the night creatures were wandering in search of food. These sounds disturbed not Nakeesa, though she heard them; she knew that the fire and the presence of human life would sufficiently protect the giraffe's carcase. There were no lions so far from water. Towards midnight the risen moon, now nearly at her full, shone broad upon the veldt. Her intense brightness made clear all things upon the desert, and paled the stars. The night grew very chill as the hours crept by. Unconsciously, Nakeesa and her man lay yet closer to the fire. It was an hour past midnight when Nakeesa suddenly awoke. Neither the strong moonlight nor the fretful cries of the jackals had roused her, but an almost imperceptible vibration of the sand somewhere near. What danger was it? Very softly she raised her head and peered from beneath her cloak. Yes, she was right; there, ten yards away, something crawled over the dry red sand. Under the amazing brilliancy of the moon it was quite clear to Nakeesa what the thing was. It was a great puff-adder; and the gentle vibration of the reptile's scales against the sand, as it slowly crawled, had aroused her.

The moon shone bright against one side of the loathsome creature, making clear beneath its searching rays the flat venomous head, the vile, wicked eye, nay, even the very scales of the swollen serpent. Upon the other side, as Nakeesa saw, a narrow band of ink-black shadow moved with the slow motion

of the reptile. All this Nakeesa noted instantly. What enthralled her attention yet more was the direction in which the puff-adder headed. It made directly for Sinikwe, attracted instinctively by the promise of warmth. At any other time, probably, the Bushman would have awakened – his instincts would have warned him; but now, overcome by the debauch of flesh, he slept on.

Meanwhile, as the snake slowly approached her man, something like a struggle arose in Nakeesa's breast. Conscience goes for little in the wilds, yet something like conscience told her that if the puff-adder reached Sinikwe and caused his death, hers was the blame. But, she argued, he is a desert man and can surely protect himself. She ignored wilfully his gorged, helpless slumber; she thought only of Kwaneet, of her own wrongs. After all, human life is of small account with the Bushman; he must take his risks. She had seen her own mother's corpse half devoured by a lion; her brother had died disembowelled by a buffalo's horn. What is death in the desert? Here was fate in the form of a puff-adder. Why should she interfere with it? So reasoned Nakeesa as the moments fled. The serpent reached Sinikwe; it crawled slowly, slowly beneath a corner of his skin cloak, close to his breast and arm, and lay still.

For two hours Nakeesa lay watching in a frozen silence the end of this terrible business. At last Sinikwe stirred. The weight of his body shifted heavily on to the snake; there was a struggle beneath the cloak, a dreadful cry arose from the Bushman, and

then, like a mad thing, Sinikwe leapt to his feet. The hideous reptile, its long curved fangs still fixed deep in the man's breast, hung on, as these snakes will do. Sinikwe took the vile creature by the neck, tore it from its hold, and flung it to earth. Nakeesa meanwhile had sprung up, as if from sleep, and snatched up the assegai. With a blow she broke the serpent's back, and then with the sharp blade cut off its head.

But for Sinikwe life was now as good as ended. Despite his Bushman remedies, the poison quickly overpowered him. After an hour and a half of dreadful pain, gallantly borne, he fell into a torpor. As the sun rose he lay upon the sand there dead.

An hour after sunrise Nakeesa quitted the spot. She left the body to the vultures and jackals and hyaenas. A Bushman needs no burial. Taking as much meat as she could carry, the unfinished water, and her child, she set off to join Kwaneet. It was a long two days' journey, this time cheerfully endured. Before sunset of the second day, she squatted herself down by the side of the man of her choice, at the water of Makwa.

"I am here, Kwaneet," she said. "Sinikwe is dead. A snake slew him at night by the giraffe. Take me, I am thine."

So Kwaneet, not displeased, took Nakeesa to wife, and for a year or more they wandered about the desert, hunting, drinking at this pit and that; sometimes, when the drought gripped that thirsty land, devouring the bitter water-melons in place of drink, as they roamed the great deserts and followed the game. Those were the pleasantest days of Nakeesa's hard life. She had never

known flesh so abundant; they wandered far afield into the most secluded haunts of the game, and Kwaneet had never been so successful in his hunting. Moreover, Kwaneet was neither a difficult man to live with, nor a hard master, and Nakeesa, by nature, like many Masarwa women, a great conversationalist, soon found herself acquiring a strong influence over the simple, easily managed hunter. Yet she had a great affection for Kwaneet, and tempered her sway with many little amenities.

In their second winter together the drought had been intense; not a pit or sucking-hole held water in the desert, there were no melons, and the game had nearly all trekked for the rivers. And so Kwaneet and Nakeesa, too, had quitted the open veldt and the waterless forest, and lived temporarily on the banks of the upper Tamalakan, north-east of Lake Ngami.

One morning Kwaneet came back to their camping-place with a piece of welcome news. Half a mile away he had found the carcase of a fat zebra, killed by a lion quite recently, and only a quarter devoured. Here was a ready-made feast, without the trouble of hunting. Nakeesa had two children now; her elder, a boy, by Sinikwe, a precocious little Bushman imp, could toddle alone; her younger, Kwaneet's son, she still carried. They set off together along the river, which was now swarming with bird life. Roseate flamingoes and ibises, lovely egrets, storks and cranes and herons, were to be seen decking the shallows. Charming jacanas with chestnut plumage, white and golden gorgets, long legs, and the slenderest spidery feet, ran in little troops upon the

thinnest film of floating vegetation. Great spur-heeled Senegal cuckoos flapped heavily from one reed-bed to another. Duck, geese, widgeon, and teal thronged the spreading waters, and clamoured incessantly. A hippopotamus or two blew in the distance; sluggish crocodiles floated, log-like yet watchful, in middle stream. For the Masarwas, who love the dry deserts, and shun the haunts even of black mankind, all this wealth of river-life seemed a very welcome and a very novel change. But then there was a kraal of Makobas within five miles, which was a drawback.

It was not long before they came to the dead zebra, which lay in a little opening from the river, surrounded by dense bush. Kwaneet went first. He walked up to the carcase and stooped to examine it. As he did so there was a fierce, guttural growl from the bush nearest to him, a lightning-like flash of a yellow body, and in an instant he lay there beside the zebra, a great yellow-maned lion standing over him. The brute stood with bared teeth, snarling in fiercest wrath. Kwaneet had driven him from his prey that morning, it is true, but he had bided his time, and now his revenge had come. For once the Masarwa had made a miscalculation. As a rule the lion, driven from its prey in daylight will steal away without showing fight. This particular lion happened to be very hungry and very daring; there were not many hunters in that country, and so Kwaneet had suffered.

But in the instant that the lion made his rush and stood over the Masarwa, many things thronged into Nakeesa's brain. Her

man there, from whom she had received so many kindnesses, and with whom she had lived so happily – nay, for a Bushwoman, so merrily – lay there in dire peril. Surely his life was better than hers. Surely she could strike a blow for him? Her babes, herself, all other things, were forgotten; she must save Kwaneet, the best, and kindliest, and bravest hunter of all that wilderness. She had Kwaneet's assegai upon her shoulder. With this she ran in upon the lion, and with all her force drove home the blade deep into its ribs.

The wound was not a mortal one – at the moment – and the enraged brute turned instantly at Nakeesa, struck her to earth, and then fastened his teeth, with a hideous, crunching sound, deep in the bones of her neck. For a good half minute it continued this deadly work, then, noticing the year-old child, crying in the back of the woman's cloak, it gripped that also between its teeth, and put an end to it. Meanwhile Kwaneet, almost uninjured by the lion's first rush, had crawled away unnoticed, and, with Nakeesa's elder lad, regained a place of safety.

So Nakeesa lay there dead by the river, her days of toil and of pleasure all ended. She had shown two great extremes of evil and good in her nineteen years of existence. She had refused to save the life of Sinikwe (the man who treated her ill, and whom she loathed) from the puff-adder – an act as good as murder, most men will say. And for Kwaneet, who had treated her with some kindliness, and whom she loved with as much love as a Masarwa

is capable of, she had given her whole being – life itself. She could do no more.

As for Kwaneet, having satisfied himself, without much emotion, at a later period of the day, of the death of his wife and child, and having taken as much zebra meat as the lion had left, he went his way. Nakeesa's elder child – now three years old – was, of course, a perfectly useless encumbrance to him. He therefore sold the boy to some Batauana people for a new assegai, and soon after returned to his desert life.

Nakeesa's bones are long since scattered, broken, and devoured by the beasts of the desert; but her skull, a little, round, smooth skull, lies there, yellow and discoloured, in the far swamps of the Tamalakan river. Her poor, squalid, desert love-story can scarcely be said to point a moral, or even adorn a tale. It merely affords one more instance of the complex nature of the human heart – of human emotions – even in the crudest and most savage aspect of African life.

Chapter Three.
A Desert Mystery

One of the cheeriest of Christmas Days was that spent on the pleasant banks of the Limpopo River, not many years since. Two hunting friends were trekking through Bechuanaland towards the Zambesi, and it happened by great good fortune that, just at the junction of the Notwani and Limpopo Rivers, they found outspanned the wagons of two hunters and traders southward bound from the far interior. These men were travelling down-country with heavy loads of ivory, ostrich feathers, skins, and other produce, and they had with them a big troop of cattle obtained in barter. In these fitful encounters in the African wilderness men are always well met, and it needed no pressing from the new-found acquaintances to induce them to outspan together, and combine forces for Christmas cheer and Christmas chatter. A brief council of war soon settled the all-important question of commissariat. Smallfield, the younger of the traders, had shot a good rooibok the evening before, which furnished venison for all, and they had already baked a store of bread from fresh Boer meal. The new-comers, on their side, freshly equipped from Kimberley, could provide tinned plum-puddings, tinned tomatoes, peas, jams, and other luxuries, including dried onions, most precious of vegetables in the veldt; and they had

further some excellent Scotch whisky. They had, besides, half a dozen brace of guinea-fowl and pheasants, shot during the day in the jungles bordering the river, so that all the concomitants of a capital African banquet were ready to hand.

Just at sundown the preparations were complete, and no merrier party, you may swear, ever sat down to their Christmas meal. They supped by the light of a roaring camp-fire, eked out by a lantern or two placed on the cases that served for tables. The servants were enjoying themselves at another fire at a little distance; the oxen lay peacefully at their yokes; the wagons loomed large alongside, their white tents reflecting cheerfully the ruddy blaze of the fire; the night was perfect, still and warm, and the stars, like a million diamond sparks, scintillated in the intense darkness of the dome above. What wonder, then, that all felt happy and contented?

Supper at length over, the coffee-kettle was banished to obscurity and the whisky produced. The travellers lit their pipes and toasted their absent friends and each other, and then ensued a long and delightful evening.

The traders were two capital, manly fellows, well versed in the sports and toils and pleasures of the far interior; the new-comers themselves had been in the hunting veldt before, and they had all, therefore, many things in common. Many and many a yarn of the chase and adventure they exchanged; many a head of gallant game they slew again by the cheerful blaze. The up-country trekkers mentioned that they thought of trying a new bit

of veldt, rather away from the beaten track, if but they could find water in the desert, and good guides and spoorers – they were bent on entering the wild and little-known tract of country north of the road to the Mababi veldt. "Well," said the elder of the traders – Kenstone was his name – "you'll find game there after the rains – giraffe, gemsbok, hartebeest, eland, koodoo, roan antelope, and perhaps a few elephant, or a rhinoceros or two. But it's a wild, barren veldt; the country as you go north is a good deal broken, and, unless the rains have been good, water is terribly scarce there. As for myself," (gazing rather moodily at the camp-fire, and stroking his thick, brown beard), "I once went into that veldt, and never wish to see it again. I had a most uncanny adventure there – an experience I never again wish to repeat if I live to a hundred. In all the years (and they are close on five-and-twenty now) I have been in the hunting veldt, I never spent so incomprehensible and horrible a time as the few days I am thinking of. Ugh!" and the big man shivered as he spoke.

Naturally the curiosity of his audience was at once excited. The younger trader, Smallfield, spoke first.

"Why, George," he said, "I never heard you speak of that country. I never even knew you had been in it. What's the yarn? It must be something out of the common if it gives *you* the blues. You're not sentimental, as far as I remember."

"No, Jim," returned Kenstone, "I never mentioned the thing to you or to any one else, bar, perhaps, two or three folks. It's eleven years gone since it all happened. My old partner, Angus

(he's down in the Colony now), who was with me at the time, knows all about it, and I reported some of the circumstances to a Transvaal Landdrost when we got back. Otherwise I have never talked about the matter – I should only be chaffed, and it's not a pleasant topic at the best of times. It gave me a very nasty *schrijk* (Fright) at the time, I remember. However, it's all far enough away now; if you and these gentlemen would like to hear the yarn, as it's Christmas-time, and we're so well met, why, I'll break my rule and tell you all about it. And mind, what I tell you are solid facts. You know I don't 'blow,' Jim, or spout tall yarns for the benefit of down-country folks or bar-loafers at Kimberley. What I saw I saw, and, please God, hope never to see again."

All were as keen as mustard for the story, and Kenstone went on.

"Well, let me fill my pipe, and give me another *soupje* of whisky, and," (nodding a health to his hearers over his glass) "here goes: —

"It was in '74 that Angus and I were making our third trip to the Lake N'gami country. This time we had got leave from Khama to trade and hunt in Mababi and the Chobé River country; and we meant to push even beyond, to the region between the Sunta and the Okavango, if the fever would let us. We made a good trek of it across the 'thirst' – there had been very late rains that year – and even after crossing the Lake River we made good travelling well on towards the Mababi flat. We heard from the Makobas and Masarwas along the river that there

was still some water standing in the bush on our right hand, that there were elephant in there, and that other game was abundant. It is not often that this veldt is accessible – from scarcity of water – and it seemed good enough to quit the wagon road for a time, and try the bush for ivory. Before reaching Scio Pans, therefore, we turned right-handed, and struck into the bush with one wagon – the other, in charge of our head driver, being sent on to the water, there to await our coming.

"We had some Masarwa bushmen with us, and they were as keen as hawks at the prospect of showing us heavy game, and getting a liberal supply of flesh. Northward we trekked steadily through wild desolate country for the best part of one day, and outspanned by a desert pool for the night. Here we were greatly disappointed to find no spoor of elephant, although giraffe, ostrich, gemsbok, and hartebeest were fairly plentiful. Next day at dawn we again pushed doggedly on, Angus and I taking different directions, and riding some miles ahead of the wagon on the look-out for elephant-spoor. I rode behind a Masarwa at a steady pace all morning without finding the least sign of the game we wanted, and, after an off-saddle at midday, once more pushed on in a north-westerly direction.

"Rather suddenly we came upon a *klompje* of giraffe, and as the elephants seemed very much in the air and we wanted meat, I rammed the spurs in and galloped headlong for the *kameels* (Camels. The Boer term for giraffe). It was desperately hot, and we were shut up in thick thorny bush in which not a breath of

wind stirred, and I consequently had not got my coat on. The beast I rode for, a fat, fresh young cow, led me a pretty dance of two miles, hell for leather, at a terrific pace through the very thorniest jungle she could pick; and although I presently ranged close up to her rump, and with my third bullet (firing from my horse) brought her down with a crash, she had taken pretty heavy toll of me. My flannel shirt was torn to ribbons, and my chest and shoulders were rarely gashed about. Never hunt 'camel', gentlemen, in thick bush, without a stout coat on; that's the advice of an old veldt-man, and it's worth remembering. I ought to have known better that day, but I was not prepared for game at that particular moment.

"Well, I stuck my knife into the cow's back and found her well covered with fat, and the Masarwa coming up soon after, we set to work to skin and cut her up. Presently, having fastened about twenty pounds of meat to my saddle, and carrying the long, prehensile tongue dangling far below my belt, I saddled up, leaving the Masarwa, who had a calabash of water, to finish the job and wait for the wagon to pick him up next morning.

"I myself took a sweep north-north-east, with the intention of working round to the wagon before sundown.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.