BRYDEN HENRY ANDERSON

FROM VELDT CAMP FIRES

Henry Bryden

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Bryden H.

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Содержание

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Chapter One.
A Secret of the Orange River

Many are the stories told at the outspan fires of the South African transport riders – some weird, some romantic, some of native wars, some of fierce encounters with the wild beasts of the land. Often have we stopped for a chat with the rugged transport riders, and some strange and interesting information is obtained in this way.

The transport rider – the carrier of Africa – with his stout waggon and span of oxen, travels, year after year, over the rough roads of Cape Colony and beyond, in all directions, and is constantly encountering all sorts and conditions of men – white, black and off-coloured; and in his wanderings, or over his evening camp fire, he picks up great store of legend and adventure from the passing hunters, explorers and traders.

One night, after a day's journey through the bush-veldt, we lay at a farmhouse, near which was a public outspan. At this outspan two transport riders were sitting snugly over their evening meal; they seemed a couple of cheery, good fellows – one an English Afrikander, the other an Englishman, an old University man, and well-read, as we afterwards discovered – and nothing would suit them but that we should join them and take pot-luck. Attracted by their hospitable ways and the enticing smell of their game stow, for we were none of us anthobians, we sat us down and ate and drank with vigorous appetites. Their camp-pot contained the best part of a tender steinbok, and a brace or two of pheasants (francolins); and we heartily enjoyed the meal, washed down with the inevitable coffee.

Supper finished, some good old Cango (the best home-manufactured brandy of the Cape, made in the Oudtshoorn district) was produced, pipes were lighted, and then we began to "yarn." For an hour or more we talked upon a variety of topics – old days in England, the voyage to the Cape, the Colony, its prospects and its sport.

From these, our conversation wandered up-country, and we soon found that our acquaintances were old interior traders, who in the days when ivory and feathers were more plentiful and more accessible than now, had over and over again made the journey to 'Mangwato and back. 'Mangwato, it may be explained, is the trader's abbreviation for Bamangwato, Khama's country, the most northerly of the Bechuana States; and of Bamangwato, Shoshong was formerly the capital and seat of trade. Then we wandered in our talk to the Kalahari, that mysterious and little known desert land, and from the Kalahari back to the Orange River again.

"'Tis strange," said one of our number, "how little is known of the Orange River – at all events west of the falls; I don't think I ever met a man who had been down it. One would think the colonists would know something of their northern boundary; as a matter of fact they don't."

"Ah! talking of the Orange River, reminds me," said the younger of the transport riders, the ex-Oxonian, and the more loquacious of the two, "of a most extraordinary yarn I heard from a man I fell in with some years back, stranded in the 'thirstland,' north-west of Shoshong. Poor chap! he was in a sorry plight; he was an English gentleman, who for years had, from sheer love of sport and a wild life, been hunting big game in the interior. That season he had stayed too late on the Chobi River, near where it runs into the Zambesi, and with most of his people had got fever badly. They had had a disastrous trek out, losing most of their oxen and all their horses, and when I came across them they were stuck fast in the doorst-land (thirstland) unable to move forward or back. For two and a half days they had been without water, and from being in bad health to begin with, hadn't half a chance;

and, if I had not stumbled upon them, they must all have been dead within fifteen hours. I had luckily some water in my vatjes, and managed to pull them round, and that night, leaving their waggon in the desert in hopes of being saved subsequently, and taking as much of the ivory and valuables as we could manage and Mowbray's (the Englishman's) guns and ammunition, we made a good trek, and reached water on the afternoon of the next day. I never saw a man so grateful as Mowbray; I believe he would have done anything in the world for me after he had pulled round a bit. Poor chap! during the short time I knew him I found him one of the best fellows and most delightful companions I ever met. Unlike most hunters, he had read much and could talk well upon almost any subject, and his stories of life and adventure in the far interior interested and impressed me wonderfully. But the Zambesi fever had got too strong a hold upon him. I dosed him with quinine and pulled him together till we got to Shoshong, where I wanted him to rest, but he seemed restless and anxious to get out into the open veldt again, and after a few days we started away. Before we had got half-way down to Griqualand, Mowbray grew suddenly worse and died one evening in my waggon just at sunset. We buried him under a kameel doom tree, covering the grave with heavy stones, and fencing it strongly with thorns to keep away the jackals and hyenas.

"Many and many a talk I had with poor Mowbray before he died; sometimes he would brighten up wonderfully and insist on talking to me for hours, as he lay well wrapped up, in the evening, underneath my waggon sail. One evening, in particular, he had seemed so much stronger and better, and, later on, as we sat before the camp fire on the dewless ground, where I had propped him up and made him comfortable, he told me a most strange story, a story so wonderful that most people would scout and laugh at it as wildly improbable; yet, remembering well the narrator and the circumstances under which he told it to me, with the shadow of death creeping over the short remaining vista of his life, I believe most firmly his story to be true as gospel.

"Poor chap! He began in this way: 'Felton, you have been a thundering kind friend to me, kind and tender as any woman (which, by the way, was all nonsense), and I feel I owe you more than I am ever likely to repay; yet, if you want wealth, I believe I can put it in your way. Do you know the northern bank of the Orange River, between the great falls and the sea? No! I don't suppose you do, for very few people have ever trekked down it; still fewer have ever got down to the water from the great walls of desolate and precipitous mountain that environ its course, and, except myself and two others, neither of whom can ever reveal its whereabouts, I believe no mortal soul upon this earth has ever set eyes upon the place I am going to tell you about. Listen!

"In 1871, about the time the diamond fields were discovered, and people began to flock to Griqualand West, I was rather bitten with the mania, and for some months worked like a nigger on the fields; during that time I got to know a good deal about stones. I soon tired of the life, however, and finally sold my claim and what diamonds I had acquired, fitted up a waggon, gathered together some native servants, and trekked again for those glorious hunting grounds of the interior, glad enough to resume my old and ever-charming life. Amongst my servants was a little Bushman, Klaas by name, whom I afterwards found a perfect treasure at spooring and hunting. Like all true Bushmen, he was dauntless as a wounded lion, and determined as a rhinoceros, which is saying a good deal. I suppose Klaas had had more varied experience of South African life than any native I ever met. Originally, he had come as a child from the borders of the Orange River, where he had been taken prisoner in a Boer foray, in which nearly all his relations were shot down. He had then been 'apprenticed' in the family of one of his captors, where he had acquired a certain knowledge of semi-civilised life. From the Boer family of the back-country, he had subsequently drifted farther down into the colony, and thence into an elephant hunter's retinue. He had accompanied expeditions with Griquas, Dutch and Englishmen all over the far interior. The Kalahari desert, Ovampo-land, Lake Ngami, the Mababi veldt, and the Zambesi country, were all well known to him, for in all of them he had traded, hunted and, on occasion, fought. As for the Western Orange River and its mysteries – for it is a mysterious region – he knew it, as I afterwards discovered, better than any man in the world. Well, we trekked

up to Matabeleland and, after some trouble, got permission to hunt there; and a fine time we had, getting a quantity of ivory, and magnificent sport among lions, elephants, buffaloes, rhinoceros, sable and roan antelopes, koodoo, eland, Burchell's zebras, pallah and all manner of smaller game.

"One day, Klaas, who was sometimes a bit too venturesome, got caught in the open by a black rhinoceros, a savage old bull. The old brute charged and slightly tossed him, making a nasty gash in his right thigh, but not fairly getting his horn under him, and was just turning to finish the poor little, beggar, when I luckily nicked in. I had seen the business and had had time to rush out on to the plain, and, just as Borele charged at poor Klaas to finish him off as he lay, I got up within forty yards, let drive, and, as luck would have it, dropped him with a 500 Express bullet behind the shoulder. Even then the fierce brute recovered himself and tried to charge me in turn, but he was now disabled and I soon settled his game. After that episode Klaas proved himself about the only grateful native I ever heard of, and seemed as if he couldn't do enough for me.

"One day, after he had got over his wound, he came to me, and said, 'Sieur! you said one day that you would like to know whether there are diamonds anywhere else than at New Rush (as Kimberley was then called). Well, sieur, I have been working at New Rush and I know what diamonds are like; and I can tell you where you can find as many of them in a week's search as you may like to pick up. Allemaghte! Ja, it is as true, sieur, as a wilde honde on a hartebeest's spoor.'

"'What the devil do you mean, Klaas!' said I, turning sharply round – for I was mending the disselboom (waggon-pole) – to see if the Bushman was joking. But on the contrary, Klaas's little weazened monkey face wore an expression perfectly serious and apparently truthful. The statement seemed strange, for I knew the little beggar was not given to 'blowing,' as so many of the Kaffirs and Totties are.

"'Ja, sieur, it is truth; if ye will so trek with me to the Groote (Orange) River, three or four days beyond the falls, I will show you a place where there are hundreds and hundreds of diamonds, big ones, too, many of them to be found lying about in the gravel. I have played with them and with other "mooi steins" too, often and often as a boy, when I used to poke about here and there, up and down the Groote River. My father and grandfather lived near the place I speak of, and I know the way to the "vallei" where these diamonds are well, though no one but myself knows of them; for I found them by a chance, and, selfish like, never told of my child's secret. I will take you to the place if you like.'

"'Are you really speaking truth, Klaas?' said I severely.

"'Ja! Ja! sieur, I am, I am,' he earnestly and vehemently reiterated, 'you saved my life from the "rhenoster" the other day, and I don't forget it.'

"Again and again I questioned and cross-questioned the little Bushman, and finally convinced myself of his truth; and I had too much respect for his keen intelligence to think he was himself misled or mistaken.

"'Well, Klaas,' said I at last, 'I believe you, and we'll trek down to the Orange River and see this wonderful diamond valley of yours.'

"Shortly after this conversation we came back to Shoshong, where I sold my ivory, and then, with empty waggon and the oxen refreshed by a good rest, set our faces for the river. From Shoshong, in Bamangwato, we trekked straight away across the south-eastern corner of the Kalahari, in an oblique direction, pointing south-west; it was a frightfully waterless and tedious journey, especially after passing the Langeberg, which we kept on our left hand. Towards the end of the journey we found no water at a fountain where we had expected to obtain it, and thereby lost four out of twenty-two oxen (for I had six spare ones), and at last, after trekking over a burning and most broken country, we were beyond measure thankful to strike the river some way below the great falls. Klaas had led us to a most beautiful spot, where the terrain slopes gradually to the river (the only place for perhaps thirty or forty miles where the water, shut in by mighty mountain walls, can be approached), and where we could rest and refresh ourselves and our oxen. Here we stopped four days. It was a lovely spot; down the banks of the river, and following its course, grew charming avenues of willows, kameel dooms

(acacias) and bastard ebony; two or three islands, densely clothed with bush and greenery, dotted the broad and shining bosom of the mighty stream; hippopotami wallowed quietly in the flood, and fish were plentiful. The thorny acacia was now in full bloom, and the sweet fragrance of its yellow flowers everywhere perfumed the air as one strolled by the river's brim. Rare cranes, flamingoes, gorgeous kingfishers and many handsome geese, ducks and other water-fowl, lent life and charm to this sweet and favoured oasis.

"I had some old scraps of fishing tackle with me, and having cut myself a rod from a willow tree, I employed some of my spare time in catching fish, and had, for South Africa – which, as you know, is not a great angling country – capital sport. The fish I captured were a kind of flat-headed barbel, fellows with dark greenish-olive backs and white bellies, and I caught them with scraps of meat, bees, grasshoppers, anything I could get hold of, as fast as I could pull them out, for an hour or two at a time. Once I ran clean out of bait, and was nonplussed; however, I turned over a stone or two, killed a couple of scorpions, carefully cut off their stings, and used them as bait, and the fish came at them absolutely like tigers. I soon caught some thirty pounds weight of fish whenever I went out. The mountains rose here and there around in magnificently serrated peaks, and the whole place, whichever way you looked, was superbly beautiful. There was a fair quantity of game about; Klaas shot some klipspringer antelopes – hereabouts comparatively tame – up in the mountains, and there were koodoos, steinbok and duykers in the bushes and kopjes.

"After the parching and most harassing trek across the desert; our encampment seemed a terrestrial paradise. The guinea-fowls called constantly with pleasant metallic voices from among the trees that margined the river, and furnished capital banquets when required. Many fine francolins abounded, and at evening, Namaqua partridges came to the water to drink in literally astounding numbers. We had to form a strong fence of thorns around us, for leopards were numerous and very daring, and there were still lions about in that country. At night, as I lay in my waggon, contentedly looking into the starry blue, studded with a million points of fire, and mildly admiring the glorious effulgence of the greater constellations, I began to conjure up all sorts of dreams of the future, of which the bases and foundations were piles of diamonds, culled from Klaas's wondrous valley.

"Having recruited from the desert journey, and all, men and beasts, being in good heart and fettle, we presently started away down the river for the valley of diamonds. I had, besides Klaas, four other men as drivers, voerlopers and after-riders, and they naturally enough were extremely curious to know what on earth the 'Baas' could want to trek down the Orange River for – a country where no one came, and of which no one had ever even heard. I had to tell them that I was prospecting for a copper mine, for, as you probably know, there are many places in this region where that metal occurs. After our four days' rest by the noble river we were all greatly refreshed, and quite prepared for the severe travel that lay before us. As we were doubtful whether we should find water at the next fountain that Klaas knew of, owing to the prevalence of drought – and as it was an utter impossibility (so Klaas informed me) to get down to the river on this side for several days, owing to the steep mountain wall that everywhere encompassed it – I filled the water vatjes and every other utensil I could think of, and then, all being ready and the oxen inspanned, we moved briskly forward.

"We had now to make a détour to the right, away from the river, and for great part of a day picked our painful footsteps over a rough and semi-mountainous country. Towards evening, we emerged upon a dreary and interminable waste that lay outstretched before us, its far horizon barred in the dim distance by towering mountains, through which we should presently have to force our passage. That evening we outspanned in a howling wilderness of loose and scorching sand, upon which scarcely a bush or shrub found subsistence. After a night not too comfortable and broken by some hyenas that prowled restlessly about, we were up betimes next morning. As soon as the oxen were inspanned and ready to move forward for the mountains to which Klaas had directed our course, I rode off for a low kopje that rose from the plain away in the distance hoping to see game beyond. I was not disappointed; a small troop of hartebeest was grazing about half a mile off, and by dint of a

little manoeuvring with my Hottentot after-rider, whom I despatched on a détour, I managed to cut across the herd and knocked over a fat cow at forty yards. We soon had her skinned, and taking the best of the meat, rode on for the waggon. Again we had an exhausting trek over a burning sandy plain; the heat of this day was something terrible. I have had some baddish journeys in the doorst-land on the way to the great lake, but this was, if possible, worse. Towards four o'clock the oxen were ready to sink in their yokes, their lowing was most distressing, and as the water was now nearly at an end, and we might not reach a permanent supply for another day, nothing could be done to alleviate their sufferings. At nightfall, more dead than alive, we outspanned beneath the loom of a gigantic mountain range, whose recesses we were to pierce on the following morning. Half a day beyond this barrier lay the valley of diamonds, as Klaas whispered to me after supper that night, with gleaming excited eyes; for, noticing my growing keenness, he, too, was becoming imbued with something of my expectancy.

"That night, as we lay under the mountain, was one of the most stifling I ever endured in South Africa, where, on the high table-lands of the interior, nights are usually cool and refreshing. Even the moist heat of the Zambesi valley was not more trying than this torrid, empty desert. The ovenlike heat, cast up all day from the sandy plain, seemed to be returned at night by these sun-scorched rocks with redoubled intensity. Waterless, we lay sweltering in our misery, with blackened tongues and parched and cracking lips. The oxen seemed almost like dead things. Often have I inwardly thanked Pringle, the poet, of South Africa, for his sweet and touching verse, written with the love of this strange wild land deep in him, for his striking descriptions of its beauties and its fauna. As I lay panting that night, cursing my luck and the folly that brought me thither, I lit a lantern and opened his glowing pages. What were almost the first lines to greet my gaze? These!

"A region of emptiness, howling and drear,
Which man hath abandoned, from famine and fear,
Which the snake and the lizard inhabit alone,
With the twilight bat from the yawning stone;
Where grass nor herb nor shrub takes root,
Save poisonous thorns that pierce the foot;
And here, while the night-winds around me sigh,
And the stars burn bright in the midnight sky,
As I sit apart by the desert stone,
Like Elijah at Horeb's cave alone,
'A still small voice' comes through the wild
(Like a father consoling his fretful child),
Which banishes bitterness, wrath and fear,
Saying, 'Man is distant, but God is near.'

"We hailed, the passage of the mountains next morning with something akin to delight; anything to banish the monotony of these last two days of burning toil. We were up as the morning star flashed above the earth-line. We drank the remaining water, which afforded barely half a pint each to the men, none for the oxen and horses. With difficulty the poor oxen, already, in this short space, gaunt and enfeebled from the heat and for lack of food and drink, were forced up into their yokes. Klaas, as the only one of us who knew the country, directed our movements, and with hoarse shouts, and re-echoing cracks from the mighty waggon-whip, slowly our caravan was set in motion. Our entrance to the mountains was effected through a narrow and extremely difficult poort (pass), strewn with huge boulders and overgrown with brush and underwood that often barred the way and rendered Stoppages frequent. After about a mile, the kloof into which this poort debouched suddenly narrowed and turned left-handed at right angles to our course. Accompanied by Klaas, I walked down it, and was soon convinced by the little Bushman that our passage that way was ended. As Klaas had warned

me, our only way through and out of the mountains now lay in taking, with our waggons, to the steep and broken hill sides, a proceeding not only perilous, but apparently all but impossible. Yet the thing had to be done, and we at once set the spent oxen in motion and faced the ascent obliquely. After consultation with Klaas, I got out some ropes, which I had fastened to the uppermost side of the waggon, while some stout long poles, which I had had previously cut for such an emergency while outspanned at the Orange River, served to prop up our lumbering vehicle from the lower side. Slowly and wearily, and yet, withal, with a sort of dogged stubbornness, the poor oxen toiled on, half-hour after half-hour, urged by our shouts, by the cruel waggon-whip, mercilessly plied, and the terrible after-ox sjambok. Many times it seemed, as our cumbrous desert ship crashed across a boulder or down a stair-like terrace of rock, that it must inevitably topple over and roll crashing to the bottom; but our guy-ropes and the supporting poles saved us again and again.

"I had fastened one of the ropes with a stout band of leather round the chest of my hunting horse; the other two ropes were held by the strongest of my servants and myself, while two other men held the poles against the lower side of the waggon as they stood down hill below it. My old horse, guided by a Bechuana boy, as usual, proved himself as sensible as any Christian, knew exactly what he had to do, and, when we came to crucial points and the waggon shivered as it were upon empty space, he and my Kaffir and I tugged away, while the fellows below shoved with might and main. And so time after time we averted a catastrophe, so dire that I shuddered to think of it; for in some places, if the waggon had gone, the wreck must have been irreparable and the yoked oxen hurled with it in a broken and mangled heap to the bottom far below us. Well, occasionally halting for a blow, long hours of the most distressing labour I ever experienced were at last got through; we had surmounted and left behind the first huge mountain-side, had plunged into a valley, had passed obliquely over the shoulder of another great mountain, and now halted in a deep and hollow kloof lying below a singular flat-topped mountain, conical in shape, that stretched across our onward path. This mountain was flanked on either hand, as we fronted it, by yawning cliffs, and was only approachable from this one aspect. Here we outspanned for a final rest before completing our work, if to complete it were possible. Shading my eyes from the fierce sunlight, I looked upward at the long slope of mountain, broken here and there, and occasionally shaggy with bush; over all the fierce atmosphere quivered, seething and dancing in the sun-blaze. I looked again with doubt and dismay at the gasping oxen, many of them lying foundered and almost dead from thirst and fatigue, and my spirits, usually brisk and unflagging, sank below zero. Klaas had told me previously of a most wonderful pool of water that lay on the crown of a mountain where we should outspan finally before entering upon the portals of the diamond valley. Now he came to me and said, pointing upwards, 'Sieur, de sweet water lies yonder op de berg. It is a beautiful pool, such as ye never saw the like of; if we reach it we are saved and the oxen will soon get round again; ye must get them up somehow, even without the waggon.'

"The tiny yellow blear-eyed Bushman, standing over me as I sat on a rock, pointing with his lean arm skywards, his anxious dirt-grimed face streaming with perspiration, was hardly the figure of an angel of hope; and yet at that moment he was an angel, of the earth, earthy, 'tis true, yet an angel that held before us sure hope of rescue from our valley of despair; for despair, black and grim, now lay upon the faces of my followers and in the eyes of my oxen. Remember, we had tasted no water to speak of for close on three days, and had had besides a frightfully trying trek.

"We lay panting and grilling for an hour or more, and then I told my men that water in any quantity lay at the mountain top and that we must, at all hazards, get the oxen up to it. By dint of severe thrashing with the after-ox sjambok, we at last got the oxen on to their legs – all but two, which could not be made to rise, and then, leaving the waggon, but taking three or four buckets, we moved upwards. Only a mile of ascent, or a little more, lay before us; but so feeble were the oxen that we had the greatest difficulty to drive them to the top, even without the encumbering waggon. At last we reached the krantz, and after a hundred yards' walk upon its flat top, we came almost suddenly upon a most wonderful and, to us, most soul-thrilling sight.

"Dense bushes of acacia thorn, spekboom, euphorbia, Hottentot cherry and other shrubs grew around, here and there relieved by wide patches of open space. The oxen, getting the breeze and scenting water, suddenly began to display a most extraordinary freshness; up went their heads, their dull eyes brightened and they trotted forward to where the brush apparently grew thickest.

"For a time they found no opening, but after following the circling wall of bush, at length a broad avenue was disclosed – an avenue doubtless worn smooth by the passage of elephants, rhinoceroses and other mighty game, in past ages – and then there fell upon our sight the most refreshing prospect that man ever gazed upon. Thirty yards down the opening there lay a great pool of water, about 200 feet across at its narrowest point, and apparently of immense depth; the pool was circular, its sides were of rock and quartz, and completely inaccessible from every approach save that by which we had reached it. It was indeed completely encompassed by precipitous walls about thirty feet in height, which defied the advent of any other living thing than a lizard or a rock-rabbit. Upon these rocky walls grew lichens of various colours – blood-red, yellow and purple, imparting a most wonderful beauty to the place. The avenue to the brink of this delicious water was of smooth rock somewhat sloping, and in the rush to drink we had the greatest difficulty in preventing the half-mad oxen from plunging or being pushed in, in which case we should have had much trouble to rescue them.

"How the poor beasts drank of that cool, pellucid flood, and how we human beings drank, too! I thought we should never have finished. The oxen drank and drank till the water literally ran out of their mouths as they at last turned away. Then I cast off my clothes and plunged into the water; it was icy cold and most invigorating, and I swam and splashed to my heart's content. After my swim and a rest I directed my men to fill the four buckets we had brought, and then, leaving the horses in charge of one of their number, we drove the cattle, loth though they were to leave the pool, back to the waggon, going very carefully so as not to spill the water.

"At length we reached the valley, only to find our two poor foundered bullocks lying nearly dead. The distant lowing of their refreshed comrades had, I think, warned them of good news, and the very smell of the water revived them, and after two buckets apiece of the cold draught had been gulped down their kiln-dried throats, they got up, shook themselves, and rejoined their fellows.

"We rested for a short time and then inspanned and started for the upland pool. The oxen, worn and enfeebled though they were, had such a heart put into them by their drink, and seemed so well to know that their watery salvation lay up there, only a short mile distant, that they one and all bent gallantly to the yokes and dragged their heavy burden to the margin of the bush-girt water. We now outspanned for the night, made strong fires, for the spoor of leopards was abundant, stewed some bustards, ate a good supper, and turned in; when I say turned in, I should be more correct in saying I turned into my waggon, while the men wrapped themselves in their blankets or karosses, lay with their toes almost into the fire and snored in the most varied and inharmonious chorus that ears ever listened to.

"I suppose we had not been asleep two hours when I was awakened by the sharp barks and yelpings of my dogs, the kicks and scrambles of the oxen, and the shouts of the men. Snatching up my rifle and rushing out, I was just in time to see a firebrand hurled at some dark object that sped between the fires.

"'What is it, Klaas?' I shouted.

"'Allemaghte! it is a tiger (leopard), sieur,' cried the Bushman, 'and he has clawed one of the dogs.'

"True enough, on inspecting the yelping sufferer, Rooi-kat, a brindled red dog, and one of the best of my pack, I found the poor wretch at its last gasp, with its throat and neck almost torn to ribbons. Nothing could save the unfortunate animal, the blood streamed from its open throat, and, after a convulsive kick or two, it stretched itself out and lay there dead. Cursing the sneaking, cowardly leopard, I saw that the replenished fires blazed up, and again turned in.

"It must have been about two o'clock in the morning, the coldest, the most silent, and the dreariest of the dark hours – that fatal hour betwixt night and day, when many a flickering life, unloosed by death, slips from its moorings – when I was again startled from slumber by a most blood-curdling yell. Hunters, as you know, sleep light and seem instinctively to be aware of what passes around them, even although apparently wrapped in profoundest sleep. I knew in a moment that that agonised cry came from a human throat, and headlong from my kartel I dashed. God! what a din was there again from dogs, men, and oxen, and above all, those horrid human screams. I had my loaded rifle, and rushing up to a confused crowd struggling near the firelight, I saw in a moment what had happened.

"The youngest of my servants, a mere Bechuana boy, was hard and fast in the grip of an immense leopard, which was tearing with its cruel teeth at his throat, and at the same time kicking murderously with its heavily clawed hind legs at the poor fellow's stomach and thighs. One of the men, Klaas of course, bolder than his fellows, was lunging an assegai into the brute's ribs, seemingly without the smallest effect, others were thrashing it with firebrands, and the dogs were vainly worrying at its head and flanks. All this I saw instantaneously. Thrusting my followers aside, I ran up to the leopard, and, putting my rifle to its ear, fired. The Express bullet did its work at once; the fiercest and most tenacious of the feline race could not refuse to yield its life with its head almost blown to atoms, and loosening its murderous hold, the brute lay dead. But too late! the poor Bechuana boy lay upon the sand wounded to the death. His right shoulder and throat were terribly ripped and mangled by the fore claws and teeth of the deadly cat; but the cruellest wounds lay lower down. The hinder claws of the leopard had absolutely torn the abdomen away; it was a shocking sight. Recovery was hopeless, and indeed, although we did what we could for the poor sufferer, he only lingered an hour insensible, then died. After his death my men told me how the thing had happened. In this solitary region the leopards and other ferae, as I have often heard, never being disturbed by gunners, are extraordinarily fierce and audacious. The leopard, a male, was evidently very hungry, as its empty stomach testified, and after once tasting blood – that of the dog – it soon got over its temporary scare. The young Bechuana lay farthest from the fire, for his elders took up the warmest positions, and the leopard had crept cat-like in upon him and got him by the throat before he knew where he was. Then came the awful shrieks I had heard, and then began the tussle for life; alas! an altogether one-sided one. My men, in the scramble, and scared, too, no doubt, forgot the guns which were in the waggon, and only Klaas had thought of his assegai. So bloodthirsty was the brute, that nothing, except my rifle, could make it relax its hold, even although it was manifestly unable to get away with its victim. After these horrors sleep was banished, and as the grey light came up we prepared for day.

"The morning broke at length in ruddiest splendour, and as the terrain was slowly unfolded before my gaze, I realised the desolate magnificence of the country. Mountains, mountains, mountains of grim sublimity rolled everywhere around. Far away below, as I looked westward, a thin silvery line, only visible for a little space, told of the great river flowing to the sea, inexorably shut in by precipitous mountain walls that guaranteed for ever its awful solitude.

"Klaas stood near, and as I gazed, he whispered, for my men were not far away: 'Sieur, yonder, straight in front of you, five miles away, lie the diamonds. If we start directly after breakfast we shall have four hours' hard climbing and walking to reach the valley.'

"All right, Klaas," said I, "breakfast is nearly ready and we'll start as soon as we have fed." A good fire was going, the pot was already steaming, the oxen had been watered, and I myself, stripping off my clothes on the brink of that delicious pool, dived deeply into its unknown depths. After a magnificent swim in the cold and bracing water I felt transformed and ready for breakfast; but although the bathe had to some extent revived my spirits, I could not forget the sad beginning of our search – the death of poor Amazi, now, poor fellow, lying buried beneath a cairn of stones just away beyond the camp.

"Well, breakfast was soon over, and then I spoke to my men. I told them that I intended to stay at this pool for a few days, and that in the meantime I was going prospecting in the mountains bordering the river. I despatched two of them to go and hunt for mountain buck in the direction we had come from, where we had noticed plenty of rhebok, duyker and klipspringer, the others were to see that the oxen fed round about the water, where pasture was good and plentiful, and generally to look after the camp. For Klaas and myself, we should be away till dusk, perhaps even all night; but we did not wish to be followed or disturbed, and unless those at the camp heard my signal of four consecutive rifle shots they were on no account to attempt to follow up our spoor. My men by this time knew me and my ways well, and I was convinced that we should not be followed by prying eyes; indeed, the lazy Africans were only too glad of an easy day in camp after their hard journey.

"Taking some biltong (dried flesh), biscuits and a bottle of water each, and each shouldering a rifle, Klaas and I started away at seven o'clock. The little beggar, who, I suppose, in his Bushman youth had wandered baboon-like all over this wild country, till he knew it by heart, showed no sign of hesitation, but walked rapidly down hill into a deep gorge at the foot, which led half a mile or so into a huge mass of mountain that formed the north wall of the Orange River. This kloof must at some time or another have served as a conduit for mighty floods of water, for its bottom was everywhere strewn with boulders of titanic size and shape, torn from the cliff walls above. It took us a long hour of the most laborious effort to surmount these impediments, and then with torn hands and aching legs we went straight up a mountain, whose roof-like sides consisted of masses of loose shale and shingle, over which we slipped and floundered slowly and with difficulty. I say we, but I am bound to admit that the Bushman made much lighter of his task than I, his ape-like form seeming indeed much more fitted for such a slippery breakneck pastime.

"At length we reached the crest, and then, after passing through a fringe of bush and scrub, we scrambled down the thither descent, a descent of no little danger. The slipping shales that gave way at every step, often threatened, indeed, to hurl us headlong to the bottom, which we should most certainly have reached mere pulpy masses of humanity. At last this stage was ended, and we found ourselves in a very valley of desolation. Now we were almost completely entombed by narrowing mountain walls, whose dark red sides frowned upon us everywhere in horrid and overpowering silence. The sun was up, and the heat, shut in as we were, overpowering. Moreover, to make things more lively, I noticed that snakes were hereabouts more than ordinarily plentiful; the bloated puff-adder, the yellow cobra, and the dangerous little night adder several times only just getting out of our path.

"The awful silence of this sepulchral place was presently, as we rested for ten minutes, broken by a posse of baboons, who, having espied us from their krantzes above, came shoggling down to see what we were.

"They were huge brutes and savage, and quah-quahed at us threateningly till Klaas sent a bullet into them, when they retreated pell-mell. We soon started again, and pressed rapidly along a narrow gorge some fifty feet wide with perfectly level precipitous walls, apparently worn smooth at their bases by the action of terrific torrents, probably an early development of the Orange River when anciently it made its way through these grim defiles. The ground we walked upon was, I noticed, composed of sand and rounded pebbles, evidently water-worn and of various kinds. Some of them were round masses of the most beautiful transparent crystal-spar, often as large as a man's head.

"Presently the causeway narrowed still more, and then, turning a sharp corner, we suddenly came upon a pair of leopards sauntering coolly towards us. I didn't like the look of things at all, for a leopard at the best of times is an ugly customer, even when he knows and dreads firearms, and here, probably, the animals had never even heard the report of a gun.

"The brutes showed no intention of bolting, but stood with their backs up, their tails waving ominously and their gleaming teeth bared in fierce defiance. There was nothing for it, either we or they must retreat, and having come all this frightful trek for the diamonds I felt in no mood to back down, even to *Felis pardus* in his very nastiest mood. Looking to our rifles, we moved very

quietly forward, until within thirty-five yards of the grim cats. They were male and female, and two as magnificent specimens of their kind as sun ever shone upon. The male had now crouched flat for his charge and not an instant was to be lost; the female stood apparently irresolute. Noticing this, and not having time to speak, we both let drive at the charging male; both shots struck, but neither stopped him. The lady, hearing the report, and apparently not liking the look of affairs, incontinently fled. With a hoarse, throaty grunt the male leopard flew across the sand, coming straight at me, and then launched himself into the air. I fired too hurriedly my second barrel, and, for a wonder, clean missed, for in those days I seldom failed in stopping dangerous game; but these beggars are like lightning once they are charging. In a moment the yellow form was flying through space, straight at my head; I sprang to one side, and Klaas, firing again, sent the leopard struggling to earth, battling frantically for life, amid sand and shingle, with a broken back. Lucky was the shot, and bravely fired, or I had probably been as good as a dead man ere this. Another cartridge soon finished off the fierce brute. We noticed on inspection that one of our first two bullets had ploughed up the leopard's nose and glanced off the forehead; the other had entered the chest and passed almost from end to end of the body, while the third had broken the spine. Klaas soon whipped the skin off the dead leopard and hid it under some stones, and we then proceeded, the whole affair having occupied but twenty minutes.

"Another mile of this canal-like kloof brought us to an opening, and here a most singular sight lay before my vision. Hitherto we had been so shut in that the sun failed to penetrate between the narrowing cliffs, except, probably, for a short while as it passed immediately above them.

"Suddenly, as the gorge widened on either hand, a blaze of sunlight glowed and glistened on the upright walls to the left hand of us. As I looked thither, one of the most marvellous sights in nature was, in an instant, laid bare; a sight that few mortals, even in aeons upon aeons of the past, have ever gazed upon in these remote and most inaccessible regions of the Orange River. The wall of mountain on our left stood up straight before the hot sunlight a dark reddish-brown mass of rock, I suppose some five hundred feet in height, and then sloped away more smoothly to its summit, which overlooked the river, as I should judge, about a mile distant. As we came out into the sunshine, Klaas, pointing to the cliff, ejaculated, in quite an excited way, 'De paarl! de paarl! kek, sieur, kek!' (The pearl! the pearl! look, sir, look!) Looking upwards at the pile of rock, my eye was suddenly arrested by a gleaming mass that protruded from the dead wall of mountain. Half-dazzled, I shaded my eyes with my hand and looked again. It was a most strange and beautiful thing that I beheld, a freak of nature the most curious that I had ever set eyes on. The glittering mass was a huge egg-shaped ball of quartz, of a semi-transparent, milky hue, flashing and gleaming in the radiant sunshine, with the glorious prismatic colours that flash from the unlucky opal. But yet more strange, above the 'paarl,' as Klaas quaintly called it, and overhanging it, was a kind of canopy of stalactite of the same brilliant opalescent colours. It was wonderful! Klaas here began to caper and dance in the most fantastic fashion, and then, suddenly ceasing, he said, 'Now, sieur, I will soon show you the diamonds; they are there,' pointing to a dark corner of the glen, 'right through the rock.'

"'What made you call that shining stone up there "de paarl"?' said I, as I gazed in admiration at the beautiful ball of crystal.

"'Well, sieur, I was once with a wine Boer at the Paarl, down in the Old Colony, and a man told me why they called the mountain there "De Paarl," and he told me, too, what the pretty gems were that I saw in the young vrouw's best ring when she wore it; and I then knew what a paarl was and that it came from a fish that grows in the sea. And I remembered then the great shining stone that I found up here, when I was a boy, on the Groote River, and I thought to myself, "Ah! Klaas, that was the finest paarl ye ever saw, that near where the pretty white stones lay." I mean the diamonds yonder, sieur.'

"At last, then, we were within grasp of the famous stones, concerning whose reality I had even to the last had secret misgivings. It was a startling thought. Just beyond there, somewhere through the rock-walls, whose secret approach at present Klaas only knew, lay 'Sindbad's Valley.' Could it be

true? Could I actually be within touch of riches unspeakable; riches, in comparison with which the wealth of Croesus seemed but a beggar's hoard?

"I sat down on a rock and lit a pipe, just to think it over and settle my rather highly-strung nerves. The Paarl, as I could now see, was an unique formation of crystal-spar, singularly rounded upon its face. It and the glorious canopy of hanging stalactite above it must have been reft bare by some mighty convulsion that had anciently torn asunder these mountains, leaving the ravine in which we stood.

"As we drank from our water-bottles and ate some of the dried flesh and biscuits we had brought with us, I noticed Klaas's keen little eyes wandering inquiringly round the base of the precipice in our front. He seemed puzzled, and as we finished our repast and lit our pipes again, he said, 'The hole in the rock that leads from this kloof to the diamonds should be over there,' pointing before him. 'But I can't quite make out the spot, the bushes have altered and grown so since I was here as a boy, years and years ago.'

"We got up and walked straight for the point he had indicated and reached the foot of the precipice. All along here, where the sand and soil had been swept in bygone floods, or had formed from the slow disintegration of fallen rock from above, cactus, euphorbia, aloe and brush grew thickly, and in particular the curious Euphorbia Candelabrum, with its many-branching arms, stood prominent. The Bushman hunted hither and thither in the prickly jungle with the fierce rapidity of a tiger-cat after a running guinea-fowl; but, inasmuch as he was sometimes prevented from immediately approaching the rock-wall, he appeared unable to hit off the tunnel that led, as he had formerly told me, to the valley beyond. Suddenly, after he had again disappeared, he gave a low whistle, a signal to approach to which I quickly responded. Quietly pushing my way towards him, I was astonished to see within a small clearing a thick and high thorn fence, outside of which Klaas stood. Inside this circular kraal was a low round hut, formed of boughs and branches strongly and closely interlaced Klaas was standing watching intently the interior of the hut, which seemed to be barred at its tiny entrance by a pile of thorns lying close against it.

"What could it mean, this strange dwelling, inaccessible as it seemed to human life? Klaas soon found a weak spot in the kraal-fence, and, pulling down some thorns, we stepped inside and approached the hut. Here, too, Klaas pulled away the dry acacia thorns from the entrance and was at once confronted by a tiny bow and arrow and behind that by a fierce little weazened face. Instantly, my Bushman poured forth a torrent of his own language, redundant beyond expression with those extraordinary clicks of which the Bushman tongue seems mainly to consist.

"Even as he spoke, the bow and arrow were lowered, the little head appeared through the entrance, and the tiniest, quaintest, most ancient figure of a man I had ever beheld stood before us. Ancient, did I say? Ancient is hardly a meet description of his aspect. As he stood there, blinking like an owl in the fierce sunlight, his only covering a little skin kaross of the red-rhebok, fastened over his shoulders, standing not more than three feet eight or ten inches in height, he looked indeed coeval with the rocks around him. I never saw anything like it. Poor little oddity! Dim though his eyes were waxing, feeble though his shrivelled arms, dulled though his formerly acute senses, he had, with all the desperate pluck of his race, been prepared to do battle for his hearth and home.

"In his own tongue, Klaas interrogated this antediluvian Bushman, and then, suddenly, as he was answered by the word 'Ariseep' a light flashed across his countenance. Seizing his aged countryman by the shoulders, he turned him round and carefully examined his back. Lifting the skin kaross and rubbing away the coating of grease and dirt that covered the right shoulder, Klaas pointed to two round white scars just below the blade-bone, several inches apart; then he gave a leap into the air, seized the old fossil by the neck and shrieked into his ears the most wonderful torrent of Bushman language I have ever heard. In his turn the old man started back, scanned Klaas intently from head to foot, and in a thin pipe, jabbered at him almost as volubly.

"Finally, Klaas enlightened me as to this comical interlude. It seemed incredible; this old man, Ariseep by name, was his grandfather, whom he had not set eyes on since, long years before, the Boer commando had broken into his tribal fastness, slain his father, mother and other relatives and carried himself off captive. The old man before us had somehow escaped in the fight, had crept away, and, after years of solitary hiding in the mountains around, had finally penetrated to this grim and desolate valley, where he had subsisted on Bushman fare. Snakes, lizards, roots, gum, bulbs, fruit and an occasional snared buck or rock-rabbit; these, and a little rill of water that gushed from the mountain-side hard by, supplied him with existence. Here he had lingered for many years, alone and isolated. His only fear had been, as he grew older and feebler, the leopards infesting the neighbouring mountain. Against their attacks had he built the strong thorned fence, carefully closed at night, and the door of thorns which he wedged tightly into the entrance way.

"A strange meeting indeed it was, but after all not stranger than many things that happen in the busy world. So far as I could learn from Klaas, who himself was between forty and fifty, the ancient figure before us was laden with the burden of more than ninety years. Think of it! ninety summers of parched Bushmanland, of burning Orange River mountains; ninety seasons of hunger and thirst and dire privations; great part of the earlier period varied by raids on the flocks of the Boers and battles for existence with the wild beasts of the land!

"After nearly an hour's incessant chatter, during which I believe Klaas had laid before his monkeylike ancestor an epitomised history of his life, he told the old man we wished to get through the mountain and that he had lost the tunnel of which he had known as a boy.

"Ariseep, who it seems, in the years he had been there, had explored every nook and cranny of the valley, knew at once what he meant, and quickly pointed out to us, not a hundred paces away, a dense and prickly mass of cactus and euphorbia bush; here, after half an hour's hewing and slashing with our hunting knives, we managed to open a pathway, and at last a cave-like opening in the mountain, about seven feet in diameter, lay before us. Grandfather Ariseep, questioned as to the tunnel, said that, upon first discovering it, which he had done quite by accident while hunting rock-rabbits, he had once been through, years before, but, as he had found the passage long and dangerous, and the valley beyond appeared to him less interesting than his present abiding place, he had never repeated the journey. However, he gave us warning that snakes abounded and might not impossibly be encountered in the twenty minutes' crawl, which, as Klaas had told me, it would take to get through.

"This opinion, translated by Klaas, was not of a nature to fortify me in the undertaking, yet, rather than leave the diamonds unexplored, I felt prepared to brave the terrors of this uncanny passage.

"It was now three o'clock; the sun was marching steadily across the brassy firmament on his westward trek and we had no time to lose.

"'In you go, Klaas,' said I, and, nothing loth, Klaas dived into the bowels of the mountain, I at his heels. For five minutes, by dint of stooping and an occasional hands-and-knees creep upon the flooring of the tunnel, sometimes on smooth sand, sometimes over protruding rock and rough gravel, we got along very comfortably. Then the roof of the dark avenue – for it was pitch dark now – suddenly lowered, and we had to crawl along, especially I, as being taller and bulkier than Klaas, like serpents, upon our bellies. It was unpleasant, deuced unpleasant, I can tell you, boxed up like this beneath the heart of the mountain. The very thought seemed to make the oppression a million times more oppressive. It seemed that the frightful pile of rock, towering far above us, was bodily descending to crush us into a horrible and hidden tomb. The thought of lying here, squeezed down till Judgment Day, was appalling; or, perhaps, more mercifully one's bones might, ages hereafter, be discovered as these regions became settled up, in much the same state in which mummified cats are occasionally found in old chimneys and hidden closets when ancient dwellings are pulled down in England. Even Klaas, plucky Bushman though he was, didn't seem to relish the adventure and spoke in a subdued and awe-stricken whisper. Sometimes since, as I have thought of that most gruesome passage, I have burst into a sweat nearly as profuse, though not so painful, as I endured that day. At

last, after what seemed to me hours upon hours of this painful crawling and Egyptian gloom, we met a breath of fresher air; the tunnel widened and heightened, and in another five minutes we emerged into the blessed sunlight. Little Klaas looked pretty well 'baked,' even in his old leather 'crackers' and flannel shirt; as for myself, I was literally streaming, every thread on me was as wet as if I had plunged into a river. We lay panting for awhile upon the scorching rocks, and then sat up and looked about us.

"If the Paarl Kloof, as Klaas called it, from whence we had just come, had been sufficiently striking, the mighty amphitheatre in which we lay was infinitely more amazing. Imagine a vast arena, almost completely circular in shape, flat and smooth, and composed as to its flooring of intermingled sand and gravel, reddish-yellow in colour. This arena was surrounded by stupendous walls of the same ruddy brown rock we had noticed in Paarl Kloof, which here towered to a height of close on a thousand feet. An inspection of these cliffs, which sheered inwards from top to bottom, revealed the fact previously imparted to me by Klaas, that no living being could ever penetrate hither save by the tunnel passage through which we had come. The amphitheatre, which here and there bore upon its surface a thin and scattered covering of bush and undergrowth, seemed everywhere about half-a-mile across from wall to wall. In the centre of the red cliffs, blazing forth in splendour, ran a broad band of the most glorious opalescent rock-crystal, which flashed out its glorious rays of coloured light as if to meet the fiery kisses of the sun. This flaming girdle of crystal, more beautiful a thousand times than the most gorgeous opal, the sheen of a fresh-caught mackerel, or the most radiant mother-of-pearl, I can only compare in splendour to the flashing rainbows formed over the foaming falls of the Zambesi, which I have seen more than once. It ran horizontally and very evenly round at least two-thirds of the cliff-belt that encircled us. It was a wonderful and amazing spectacle, and I think quite the most singular of the many strange things (and they are not few) I have seen in the African interior.

"Well, we sat gazing at this crystal rainbow for many minutes, till I had somewhat feasted my enraptured gaze; then we got up and at once began the search for diamonds. Directly I saw the gravel, especially where it had been cleansed in the shallow spruits and dongas by the action of rain and flood, I knew at once we should find 'stones'; it resembled almost exactly the gravel found in the Vaal River diggings, and was here and there strongly ferruginous, mingled with red sand and occasionally lime.

"I noticed quickly that agates, jaspers and chalcedony were distributed pretty thickly, and that occasionally the curious banddoom stone, so often found in the Vaal River with diamonds, and, indeed, often considered by diggers as a sure indicator of 'stones' was to be met with. In many places the pebbles were washed perfectly clean and lay thickly piled in hollow water-ways; here we speedily found a rich harvest of the precious gems. In a feverish search of an hour and a half, Klaas and I picked up twenty-three fine stones, ranging in size from a small pigeon's egg to a third of the size of my little finger nail. They were all fine diamonds, some few, it is true, yellow or straw-coloured, others of purest water, as I afterwards learned, and we had no difficulty in finding them, although we wandered over not a twentieth part of the valley. I could see at once from this off-hand search that enormous wealth lay spread here upon the surface of the earth; beneath probably was contained fabulous wealth. I was puzzled at the time, and I have never had inclination or opportunity to solve the mystery since, to account for the presence of diamonds in such profusion. Whether they were swept into the valley by early floodings of the Orange River through some aperture that existed formerly, but had been closed by volcanic action, or whether, as I am inclined to think, the whole amphitheatre is a vast upheaval from subterraneous fires of a bygone period, is to this hour an unfathomed secret. I rather incline to the latter theory, and believe that, like the Kimberley 'pipe,' as diggers call it, the diamondiferous earth had been shot upwards funnel-wise from below, and that ages of floods and rain-washing had cleansed and left bare the gravel and stones upon the surface.

"From the search we had had, I made no doubt that a fortnight's careful hunting in this valley would make me a millionaire, or something very like it. At length I was satisfied, and as the westering sun was fast stooping to his couch, with a light heart and elastic step I turned with Klaas to depart.

The excitement of the 'find' had quite banished the remembrance of that awful tunnel passage so recently encountered.

"'We'll go back now, Klaas,' said I, 'sleep in your grandfather's kraal, and get to the waggon first thing in the morning; then I shall arrange to return and camp a fortnight in Paarl Kloof, leaving the waggon at the pool. In that time we shall be able to pick up diamonds enough to enrich ourselves and all belonging to us for generations. I don't mind then who discovers the valley; they can make another Kimberley of it if they choose, for aught I care.'

"At half-past five we again entered the tunnel. It was a nasty business when one thought of it again, but it would soon be over. As it flashed across my brain, I thought at the moment that two such journeys a day for six or seven days would be quite as much as even the greediest diamond lover could stomach. As before, Klaas went first, and for half the distance all went well. Suddenly, as we came to a sandy part of the tunnel, there was a scuffle in front, a fierce exclamation in Bushman language, and then Klaas called out in a hoarse voice, 'Allemaghte, sieur, een slang het mij gebissen!'" (Almighty, sir, a snake has bitten me!)

"Heavens, what a situation! Cooped up in this frightful burrow, face to face with probably a deadly snake, which had already bitten my companion! Almost immediately Klaas's voice came back to me in a hoarse guttural whisper, 'I have him by the neck, sieur; it is a puff-adder and his teeth are sticking into my shoulder. If you will creep up and lay hold of his tail, which is your side of me, we can settle him, but I can't get his teeth out without your help.' As you will remember, the puff-adder's striking fangs are very curved and are often difficult to disengage once it has made its strike. Poor Klaas! I felt certain his days must be numbered, but there was nothing for it; I must help him.

"Crawling forwards and feeling my way with fright-benumbed fingers, I touched Klaas's leg. Then softly moving my left hand I was suddenly smitten by a horrible writhing tail. I seized it with both hands, and finally gripped the horrid reptile (which I felt to be swollen with rage, as is the brute's habit) in an iron grasp with both hands. Then I felt, in the black darkness, Klaas take a fresh grip of the loathsome creature's neck, and with an effort, disengage the deadly fangs from his shoulder. Immediately I felt him draw his knife, and after a struggle, sever the serpent's head from its body. The head he pushed away to the right, as far out of our course as possible, and then I dragged the writhing body from him, and, shuddering, cast it behind me as far as possible.

"At that moment I thought that, for the first time in my life, I must have swooned. But, luckily, I bethought me of poor faithful Klaas, sore stricken, and I called to him in as cheerful a voice as I could muster, 'Get forward, Klaas, for your life, as hard as you can, and, please God, we'll pull you through.'

"Never had I admired the Bushman's fierce courage more than now. Most men would have sunk upon the sand and given up life and hope. Not so this aboriginal. 'Ja, sieur, I will loup,' was all he said.

"Then we scrambled onward, occasionally halting as the deadly sickness overtook Klaas; but all the while I pushed him forwards and urged him with my voice. At last the light came, and as my poor Bushman grew feebler and more slow, I found room to pass him and so dragged him behind me to the opening into Paarl Kloof. Here I propped him for a moment on the sand outside, with his back to the mountain, and loudly called 'Ariseep,' while I got breath for a moment.

"The sun was sinking in blood-red splendour behind the mountains, and the kloof and rock-walls were literally aglow with the parting blush of day. Nature looked calm and serenely beautiful and hushed in a splendour that ill-accorded with the agitating scene there at the mouth of the tunnel. All this flashed across me as I called for the old man. I looked anxiously at Klaas and examined his wound; there were two deep punctures in the left shoulder, and from his having had to use some degree of force to drag off the reptile, the orifices were more torn than is usual in cases of snake-bite. Klaas was now breathing heavily and getting dull and stupefied I took him in my arms and carried him to Ariseep's kraal, whence the old man was just emerging. At sight of his grandfather, Klaas rallied and rapidly told him what had happened, and the old man at once plunged into his hut for something.

"Thin Klaas's eyelids drooped and he became drowsy, almost senseless. In vain I roused him and tried to make him walk and so stay the baleful effects of the poison now running riot in his blood; he was too far gone. Ariseep now re-appeared with a small skin bag, out of which he took some dirty-looking powder. With an old knife he scored the skin and flesh around Klaas's wound and then rubbed in the powder. I had no brandy or ammonia to administer, and therefore let the old Bushman pursue his remedy, though I felt, somehow, it would be useless. So it proved; either the antidote, with which I believe Bushmen often do effect wonderful cures, was stale and inefficacious, or the poison had obtained too strong a hold. My poor Klaas never became conscious again, though I fancied eagerly that he recognised me before he died, for his lips moved as he turned to me once. His pulse sank and sank, his face became dull and ashen, his eyelids quivered a little, his breath came hard and laboured, and at last, within an hour and a half from the time he was bitten, he lay dead.

"So perished my faithful and devoted henchman; the stoutest, truest, bravest soul that ever African sun shone upon. I cannot express to you the true and unutterable grief I felt, as, with old Ariseep, I buried poor Klaas when the moon rose that night. We placed him gently in a deep sandy spruit, and over the sand piled heavy stones to keep the vermin from him.

"Then, laying myself within Ariseep's kraal, I waited for the slothful dawn. As it came, I rose, called Ariseep from his hut, and bade farewell to him as best I could, for we neither of us understood one another. I noticed, by-the-bye, that no sign of grief seemed to trouble the old man. Probably he was too aged, and had seen too much death to think much about the matter.

"The rest of my story is soon finished. I made my way back to camp, told my men what had happened, and indeed took some of them back with me to Klaas's grave and made them exhume the body to satisfy themselves of the cause of death – for these men are sometimes very suspicious – then we covered him again securely against wandering beasts and birds.

"I trekked back to the Old Colony, sold off my things and came home. The diamonds I had brought away realised in England 22,000 pounds. I have never dreamt of going to the fatal valley again; nothing on earth would tempt me after that ill-starred journey, heavy with the fate of Klaas and the Bechuana boy, Amazi. As for the tunnel, I would not venture once more into its recesses for all the diamonds in Africa, even if they lay piled in heaps at the other end of it. Except old Ariseep, Klaas had no relation that I knew of, and it was useless to think of spending the diamond-money in that quarter. The old fellow had, so far as I could make him understand me, utterly refused to accompany me from the kloof, where he evidently meant to end his days; even if he had come, what could I have done for him? At his time of life, and with his peculiar habits, he could hardly have begun the world again, even if I had brought him home, bought him a country house, taken rooms in Piccadilly, dressed him in the height of fashion and launched him upon society.

"Therefore I left him as I found him. Klaas I have never ceased to mourn from that day to this. Part of the 22,000 pounds I invested for some relatives, the balance that I kept suffices, with what I already possessed, for all possible wants of my own. Then I came back to my dearly-loved South Africa for the last time, and a few weeks later made the journey to the Chobi River, from which you rescued me in the thirstland."

Such was the story related to us by the transport rider, in a clear and singularly graphic manner, to which these pages do scant justice. Our narrator wound up by telling us that Mowbray had further imparted to him the exact locality of the diamond valley, but, he added, "I have never yet been there, nor do I think that, for the present, it is likely I shall go. Some day before I leave the Cape I may have a try and trek down the Orange River; but I don't feel very keen about that secret passage, after poor Mowbray's experiences."

We had sat wrapt listeners for some hours of that soft, calm, African night. The glorious stars looked out from above us in their deep blue dome; the Southern Cross shone in serene effulgence, as if, too, its sparkling gems claimed an interest in the legend of the lost diamonds. It was now two o'clock, and the camp fire of the transport riders burned low; just one more soupje we had with our

friendly entertainers, and then, with hearty expressions of thanks and good-will, rose to seek our beds. That night, before falling asleep, I pondered long upon the strange narrative we had heard. Often since have I done so. Often, too, have I thought of the lone grave of the English hunter, Mowbray, far out upon the verge of that dim and mysterious desert, the Kalahari.

Chapter Two.
The Story of a Tusk

It was a fine spring morning in the City: even in the great dingy warehouse, where Cecil Kensley was engaged in cataloguing a vast store of ivory in preparation for the periodical sales, the sun beamed pleasantly. It lit up the dark corners of the building, and played everywhere upon hundreds of smooth, rounded elephants' teeth, varying in colour from a rich creamy yellow to darkest brown – from the gleaming tusk, fresh chopped within the last year from the head of a young bull, to the huge, dark, discoloured, almost black-skinned tooth, that for a hundred years had lain unnoticed in some mud swamp, or for generations had decorated the grave or kraal-fence of some native chief. There they lay, those precious pillars of ivory – solid scrivelloes, Egyptian soft teeth, Ambriz hard irregulars, billiard and bagatelle scrivelloes, bangle teeth, Siam, Niger, Abyssinian, Bombay, West Coast, Cape, and all the rest of them – upon which the world sets so great a store, and for which mankind is so rapidly exterminating a species.

Those wonderful teeth, dumb memorials, so many of them, of dark tales of blood and suffering, of slave raids, plundered villages, murders, floggings, terrible journeys to the coast, unutterable scenes of horror and woe – what histories could they not unfold? But the tusks lay there, hugging their grim secrets, silent and mute enough.

Cecil Kensley, the person cataloguing these treasures of ivory in a purely matter-of-fact way, was a good-looking, fair-bearded man of thirty, partner in a wealthy firm, a bachelor, somewhat of a man of pleasure out of office hours, but in business smart, shrewd and hard-working. The cataloguing of such an accumulation of ivory as that great warehouse held was a lengthy business; and all day, until four o'clock, Kensley was engaged, with the help of the warehousemen, sorting, turning over and writing down. Before taking a short rest for luncheon, his eye fell upon one magnificent tusk – long, perfectly shaped and balanced, massive, highly polished, and, in colour, of the richest chrome yellow. It lay somewhat apart, and appeared to have no fellow; a careful inspection of the rest of the warehouse, and a single glance at that peerless tooth, showed that, even out of all that vast collection, no possible match for it could be found.

Kensley had been working all the morning at the far end of the warehouse; he now stood by the tusk which had so taken his eye.

"Hallo, Thomas!" he said, interrogating the man who stood by him, "what have you got here? What a grand tooth! Where's the fellow to it? Is it an odd one?"

"Yes, sir," replied the man, "it's an odd tooth, and a rare beauty. It's years since I saw the like of it. It's a grand tusk, as you say: I ran the measure over it, and it went 9 feet 2 inches, and it weighs just on 170 lb. It's as nigh perfect as can be, but there's just one little bit of a flaw down there by the base – an old wound, or something of the kind. There's a sight of good ivory in that tooth, and it must be as old as the hills a'most."

Kensley had seen, in the fourteen years of his experience, thousands of fine teeth; yet, connoisseur though he was, he thought, as his eye ran lovingly over that magnificent nine feet of ivory, splendid in colour, curve and solidity, that he had never seen such another. He stooped to look at the flaw the man spoke of. Within a foot of the darker portion at the base, just beyond where the ivory had manifestly emerged from the flesh of the gum, there appeared a curious fault in the graining of the tooth, elsewhere perfect. The growth had been disturbed by some foreign substance, and the graining, instead of being as regular and even as a pattern woven by machinery, swept in irregular curves round the centre of the flaw.

Kensley rose to his feet again. "It's not much of a fault," he said, "and the tooth's a real beauty. I've been meaning this long time past to have such a tusk at my rooms, to decorate a corner or hang

upon the wall. I think I'll take that fellow, Thomas, and pay for it; it will be a long time before I come across a better. See that it goes up to my flat to-morrow, will you, and take care how it's carried. I don't want it spoiled."

"All right, sir," replied the man, "I'll see to it myself. I'll give it a bit of a clean up and take it up for you to-morrow morning."

Two evenings after this conversation, Cecil Kensley left the office and walked, as was often his custom, steadily westward. He made his way by the Embankment and Pall Mall, then up Saint James's Street, and so to Mount Street, where his dwelling was situated. Arrived at Mount Street, he let himself into his flat. It was a pleasant set of rooms on the first floor, furnished in very excellent taste with most luxuries that the cultivated male mind can suggest. In one corner, leaning against the wall, stood the ivory tusk, which, now cleaned and polished, formed, if an unwonted, a very noble ornament to the chamber. Kensley's eye rested on it with pleasure; he went to the corner and carefully examined his new possession. It was now six o'clock; the cold spring evening was closing in and the light fading. At eight o'clock three friends were dining with Kensley, preliminary to a night of cards. Having drunk some tea, which his man brought in for him, and lighted a cigarette, Kensley drew his comfortable armchair towards the pleasant firelight and smoked contentedly. He had been late for several nights past – he was never a very early man – and now, having cast away the end of his cigarette, he lay back in his chair and blinked drowsily at the red glow of the firelight. In ten minutes he was fast asleep and dreaming. Now, although Cecil Kensley sometimes dozed for half an hour or an hour before dinner in this way, it was seldom that he dreamed. His dreams this evening were fantastic and most strange – so strange that they are worth recording. Here is what he saw: —

In an open clearing among pleasant African hills, covered for the most part with bush and low forest, lies a collection of huts, circular and thatched, as are all native huts. Just above them, on rising ground, and surrounded by a strong stockade, stands a larger and more important dwelling, oblong in shape, its interior screened from the fierce sun by a low veranda, and thatched, as to its roof, with grass in the native fashion. It is a hot morning in the glowing tropical summer – the season of rains – vegetation and flowers are everywhere in their freshest verdure and beauty. Fleecy clouds lie at this early hour of morning upon the face of the eastern sky, and hang in a long line midway upon the sides of a high mountain some miles distant. Seated just outside the stockaded inclosure is a European, clad in the broad-brimmed hat, doublet, loose breeches, and buff riding boots of a bygone time. Somehow the face of this European, with its sallow cast, peaked beard, and fierce moustaches, is strangely familiar to the eye and brain of the dreamer, though he cannot in his sleep exactly recall how. Round about the Portuguese, for he is of that race, are half a dozen soldiers of his country, in buff coats and steel caps, bearing in their hands antique pieces – snaphaunces. Squatting in front are thirteen or fourteen naked Africans, waiting the white man's will.

"Well," speaks the commander, for such he is, "is the gold all here? Stand forward, Kanyata."

A native steps out from his fellows, and hands the commander a quill of gold – gold dust and tiny nuggets – the fruit of a week's hard toil and labour of himself and his family. Each native in turn stands forward with his precious store, and tremblingly hands it to the fierce, sour-looking white man. In his turn a young man sullenly comes out of the rank, and hands in his quill. There is a very dangerous look in the commander's eye as he takes the quill, holds it out and surveys it. "So," he interrogates, "that is your week's work, Zingesi?"

The young man answers in a hopeless, yet half defiant way: "My lord, I have toiled for seven days in the river sands, and all that I have gained I bring to you. You took from me my wife; if it had been otherwise, the quill might have been full. I have no one to help me. I can do no more."

"Thou dog!" snaps out the commander, with a look of black passion, "I told thee seven days agone that thou mightest take the wall-eyed maid to wife, to help thee. Why hast thou neglected my warning?"

"Oh! my lord," replies the native, "I like not Mokela, the wall-eyed maid, and I will not take her to wife," – then, passionately, "Where is my own wife? There, in thy vile hut, thou thief and robber! Do thy worst: I will find no more gold for thee."

"Away with him!" roars the commander, now in a fury of passion, to his soldiers; "tie him up and give him two hundred lashes."

The soldiers seize the unfortunate, take him to a tree hard by, and tie him up. But now, before a stroke is given, an old native, somewhat fantastically adorned, who has been standing among the villagers at a little distance, comes forward and salutes the officer.

"Great chief of the Bazunga (Portuguese)," he says, "spare, I pray thee, Zingesi. He is my only son, and the punishment is great. Let him work for thee for another week. Perchance he has been bewitched. I will brew him strong medicine, and he shall bring thee more gold."

"Out with thee, Mosusa, thou evil-minded witch-doctor!" cries the commander. "'Tis too late. Thou shouldst have used thine arts with Zingesi before. Begone, or they shall serve thee as they serve Zingesi!"

With a hopeless yet terrible gesture, Mosusa quits the crowd, and retires to his hut on the village outskirts. Meanwhile, Zingesi being tied up, two Portuguese soldiers, casting off their buff coats, and tucking up their sleeves, take each in hand a cruel whip of hippopotamus hide, and begin their task. They flog by strokes of fifty; each, in presence of that grim taskmaster, laying on the blows with all his strength. With the first ten cuts the blood spouts freely from the unfortunate native, whose cries and groans might surely touch the hardest heart. But there is no mercy. Zingesi's back at the hundredth stroke is a mass of raw and bleeding flesh; his face has assumed an ashy pallor. At a hundred and fifty his head falls over upon his shoulder, he swoons, and can feel no more. The man wielding the whip halts for an instant, looks at the commander, and says, "Shall I go on, Captain?"

"Go on, of course, and be damned to you, till he has had the full two hundred," answers the captain venomously, as he rises from his chair and goes into his hut again.

The horrible task proceeds, and the soldiers, not daring to slacken their blows, complete the two hundred strokes. By that time Zingesi, his frame already weakened by recent fever, is beyond the reach of further ills. His body, unloosed from the tree, falls limply upon the hands of the soldiers, and is laid upon the shamed earth. Life has clean fled from that poor mangled piece of flesh and blood.

It is night. The short African twilight has vanished; the moon has not yet arisen. Far away in the depths of the forest there crouches over a fire of wood Mosusa, the old witch-doctor, father of the dead Zingesi. His face, lit up by the red flames, has lost the sullen misery of the morning. His eyes glare with the intensity of a fierce passion, the sweat drips from his brow, every muscle of his body quivers. He rises, paces slowly round the fire, keeping always within the limit of a circle which he has traced in the sand, uttering as he passes a low monotonous chant. Now and again he casts into the fire the skins of snakes and lizards, bones, the dried livers and hearts of certain animals, poisonous bulbs and herbs, and other paraphernalia of the native wizard. Anon he pauses in his chant, listens, and gazes intently into the gloom of the forest. On one side of the fire lies coiled up a huge serpent, a python, whose cold glittering eye watches intently Mosusa's every movement. Mosusa approaches the great snake, and says, "Will he come, think you, O my friend? The forest is wide, and the great one wandered far this morning." The serpent lifts its flat head, darts out its long forked tongue, and rubs its nose caressingly against Mosusa's leg; then, swiftly uncoiling, it glides to the other side of the fire and lies with its head pointing to the forest. Mosusa goes and stands by its side. Presently a rumbling noise is heard; nearer and louder it comes, and then from the pall of the forest there looms within reach of the firelight a huge dark form – the form of an immense bull elephant. The great creature, bulking there dark and mysterious within the ring of firelight, bears but one tusk, long, thick and even; its head moves very slowly up and down; its outstretched trunk gently quivers as it tests every air of the night; and its small sunken eye, fixed keenly upon Mosusa, indicates expectation.

"O great one," says Mosusa, saluting with upstretched right hand, "lord of the forest, wisest of the creatures, thou hast come at my summons. Hear me! Thou and I were born long ago upon the same night, in the same country. Long have we known one another, long have been friends – since the day when thy mother was slain by the spears of Monomotapa, and thou and I grew up together as children within the kraal of the king. But now I wax old, and near my end, while thou art in thy prime, still young and lusty, and like to live an old man's lifetime and more. And before I leave this earth for the land of shadows one thing I have to ask of thee. Thou rememberest, long, long years ago, how I whispered to thee, when thy tusk was budding and thy captivity grew dangerous to thyself, that now was the time to seek the forest and escape. And thou wilt remember how in thy first youth, when Monomotapa, king of the tribes, had his first hunt for ivory, and slew fifty of thy kindred within the ring of fire, I warned thee the night before by the great serpent, grandfather of Tari here, and thou fleddest away and saved thyself! To-morrow, O great one, I want thine aid. The captain of the Bazunga goes forth to hunt in the forest. This day he has slain my son. To-morrow be thou within the forest, and when he comes slay me this evil man, the cruel persecutor of thy race and mine. No harm shall come to thee. So shall we be quits, and in the land of shadows I shall remember thee and joyfully await thy coming!"

The elephant moves silently a pace or two forward, just touches Mosusa delicately upon the shoulder with its trunk-tip, then turns and disappears again into the darkness.

Again the scene shifts before the mind's eye of the dreamer; the witch-doctor and his firelight fade out, and broad daylight once more streams upon the African forest. The Portuguese captain is marching through the wilderness in search of elephants. In front of him are two trackers, who walk swiftly upon the spoor of a troop of the great tusk bearers. Not far in the rear, mingling with other hunters, is Mosusa, whose dark countenance wears this morning a very singular expression.

Presently, after passing some low hills, the white man posts himself in some thick cover in a shallow gorge commanding a broad, worn path. The bulk of the native hunters are sent far in front in a wide semicircle, to drive in elephants towards the ambush. There is a long interval, and then, crashing through the bush, appear at a slow trot the forms of five cow elephants. At the nearest of these the commander discharges his piece. The great creature, sore stricken, charges this way and that; at length, bristling with fifty spears, spouting the red blood from her trunk, and struck by other bullets from the white man's snaphaunce, she falls heavily to earth. But while the party are gathered round the fallen beast, and the natives busy themselves in extricating their spears from the carcase, a sudden noise is heard behind. There, trumpeting hideously, comes a mighty single-tusked elephant – Mosusa's elephant of the last night. The black men, naked and disencumbered, fly, all of them save one, far down the gorge, and scatter into the forest beyond. The white man, truth to tell, is bold and brave enough. Trusting to his heavy piece and his own pluck, he stands his ground. It is late indeed to fly, encumbered as he is with weapon and European clothing. As the grim monster charges down upon him, he steadily raises his snaphaunce and fires. But, just as he pulls trigger, Mosusa, standing behind his shoulder, jerks his right arm, the bullet flies wide of its intended mark, and strikes the elephant at the base of the great solitary tusk, just where the ivory is sheathed in the flesh. Mosusa leaps aside, there is a wild curse in Portuguese; in the same instant the savage scream of the enraged elephant thrills upon the hot morning air, the white man is flung to earth, and the great gleaming tusk drives deep through his body. Zingesi is avenged. The elephant withdraws his tusk, kneels upon the yet living man, and crushes the last remnants of humanity into a hideous, shapeless mass.

All this Mosusa has witnessed with bright eyes and the fiercest satisfaction. And now, raising his right hand, again he salutes the monstrous beast and speaks. "O thou great one, mighty chief, lord of the forest, I thank thee for what thou hast done. My time grows short: I die quickly. But thou, O my friend, live thou, live to slay the accursed white men, who pursue thy kindred and bring death and worse than death into this land of thine and mine." As he runs on, Mosusa's voice seems as the voice of one possessed; his eyes are fixed and open, as though gazing far into futurity. "And when

thine appointed time comes," he goes on, still addressing the mighty beast before him, "let thy tusk carry with it yet more of death and evil to the white man. There is blood now upon it: let blood be with it in its passage through the years to come, until it shall once more mingle with the earth again. And now, great one, one thing more has to be done. Let my blood mingle here with the white man's: slay me, O my friend, and all shall be finished."

But the elephant stands there in front of the frenzied African, its little eyes fixed upon his eyes, its body swaying ever so slightly from side to side, its trunk held out as if inquiring.

"I see what thou requirest, O great one," cries Mosusa. "Thy blood too must flow, and at my hands!"

Suddenly he raises his spear, plunges it into the creature's trunk, and as suddenly withdraws it. The beast screams with pain, the blood gushes forth from the spear-thrust, and in a moment, with a blow of the wounded member, the elephant has beaten the old native to the ground. In the next moment the re-infuriated beast kneels quickly upon Mosusa and crushes the life from his frame, as it had crushed the white man's. The two bodies lie there together, misshapen, mangled, yet still warm. And now the elephant, having completed his work, turns slowly away and plunges into the jungle.

The scene had again faded from the dreamer's eyes; yet its memory lingered clear, as Cecil Kensley awoke cold and shivering from his sleep. The fire burned low, the room was in darkness.

"Gad! what a curious dream!" he said to himself, as he rose stiffly from his lounge chair. "I never felt so cold in my life." By the dim low firelight he made his way to a corner of the room, touched a button and switched on the electric light. The room in an instant assumed its normally bright and cheerful aspect. First putting some coals upon the fire, Kensley went to the sideboard, poured himself out a liqueur glass of brandy, and drank it down. "That's better," he said to himself. "I must have slept a deuce of a time. Can't think why I got so cold." He turned and looked at the clock. "Half-past seven, by Jove! I must dress sharp: these fellows will be here directly."

First opening a door into an adjoining room, where he saw the dinner-table already prepared, he went to his bedroom and quickly dressed. He returned just in time to welcome his friends, who arrived almost simultaneously.

Of the three guests, two were Englishmen – average types of their race; the other a dark, good-looking foreigner, of engaging manners. Barreto, as they called him, spoke excellent English, and seemed to have a perfect knowledge of all topics – mainly pertaining to racing, matters theatrical, and cards – which came uppermost in the course of the evening. During the five minutes before dinner was announced one of the visitors caught sight of the tusk standing in the corner of the room.

"Hallo, Kensley!" he said, "what's this? Something new, isn't it?"

"Yes," returned his host; "it's a big tooth I came across in the warehouse lately. On the whole, it's about the finest bit of ivory I ever saw; and so, as such specimens grow scarcer every year, I collared it. Makes a nice ornament, doesn't it?"

"Magnificent!" rejoined Barreto, who had meanwhile approached, and was intently examining the tusk. "I've seen a good many tusks in my time, but I have never seen the fellow of this."

"Why, where did you pick up your knowledge of ivory, Barreto?" asked Kensley. "I knew you were up to most things, but I didn't know that you were a judge of elephants' teeth."

"Well, you see," returned Barreto, "my family have had to do with Africa for between two and three hundred years. Several of them have left their bones there. I served as a lieutenant with the Portuguese troops in Mozambique when I was a youngster. After that I came home what you call invalidish – no, invalided – with fever; and, as I didn't intend Africa to have my bones, I left the army and went into diplomacy."

"I see!" replied Kensley. "Well, that tusk," patting the great tooth affectionately, "must have been once something of a neighbour of yours. It came from behind Mozambique or Sofala. The elephant that carried it has, I take it, been dead many a long year. From the look of the ivory, and the way it's been preserved, I should imagine that tooth has lain in some chief's hut for best part of a

century. Possibly it has been some cherished fetish. It could tell some tall stories, I'll bet, if it could speak. But come along, you fellows: here's dinner at last."

The four men strolled into the pleasant ruby-lighted dining-room, sat themselves at the sparkling table, and for an hour devoted themselves heartily to excellent viands and wine, and to the exchange of much merry conversation.

At a quarter to ten, after some lingering over cigars and coffee, the party returned to the drawing-room, where card tables were laid. Two other men came in, and "poker" was started. The fortunes of the game waxed and waned, as they will do; but somehow, half-hour after half-hour, the luck ran dead against Barreto. It was easy to see that the Portuguese was a skilful and a smart player, yet, do what he would, bluff boldly or lie low, he steadily lost.

"Hullo, Barreto!" said one of the men to him, in a short pause for whiskies-and-soda, "what's up with you? You couldn't go wrong last week. To-night your luck's dead out."

"Yes," replied the Portuguese, who throughout the play had retained his equanimity, and lost with a good grace, "there's something mysterious in the air to-night. I have felt a great depression ever since I came into this room. I can't tell you why. I felt better at dinner, but back here again I'm wrapped in a wet blanket. A change of weather coming, I suppose. A man who's had African fever can generally foretell it."

The play went on for another half-hour, by which time, as the clock chimed the quarter-past one, Barreto had lost between 30 and 40 pounds. Kensley's English guests now rose to go, laughingly promising Barreto and their host, who also had lost some 20 pounds, their revenge on a future occasion. After a parting libation, the two men lighted cigar and cigarette, and left the flat, Kensley turned to Barreto. "Feel like an hour's écarté?" he interrogated.

"By all means," answered the Portuguese, with a pleasant smile.

Kensley brought out fresh cards, and the two sat down facing one another, the table between. It seemed at écarté that Barreto could not lose. The stakes were heavy, and Kensley's deficit began to mount up ominously. He was a practised player, and well used to the ups and downs of card luck; yet, easy as was his manner, a looker-on might have noticed a grimmer and graver look deepening about the lines of his mouth.

Suddenly Kensley sprang to his feet, his eyes flashing, his face flushed with anger.

"You damned cheat!" he gasped, throwing down his cards. "For a long time I couldn't believe my eyes, but there's no other word for it – you're a common swindler. I saw you pass that card," – pointing to a king – "I've seen you doing the same thing before. Not one cent will you get out of me. Leave my rooms, and take care neither I nor my friends ever see the face of you again. If we do there'll be trouble."

At first, as the Englishman blurted out his indignation – which, it may be said at once, was perfectly honest and deserved – Barreto attempted, with a gesture of courteous deprecation, to offer explanations. At last he obtained speech. "You are mistaken, utterly mistaken," he said calmly. "I think you must be mad. Anyhow I have won this money fairly, and I demand it. If you don't pay, I shall make the fact public."

"You damned villain!" gasped Kensley; "get out of my rooms at once, before I put you out."

The expression upon Barreto's face changed now instantly from a plausible calm to one of wild and deadly hate. He saw that Kensley was firm, and not to be played upon. He glanced round the room. As ill luck would have it, there hung, among other trophies upon the wall near him, an Indian knife in its sheath. In an instant Barreto grasped the handle, drew the knife flashing from its cover, and turned upon Kensley. "Now, Mr Kensley," he said, with a very unpleasant look upon his face, "you will pay me that 55 pounds, and withdraw what you just now said, or take the alternative."

Few Englishmen care for knife play; unlike the men of Southern Europe, they seem to have an instinctive horror of the weapon. Kensley little liked the job; the adversary before him looked very evil – far more evil than he could ever have imagined him; yet, being a man of courage and of action,

he took the only course that seemed at the moment open to him. He flung himself in a flash upon Barreto, trying to seize the man's arm before he should strike. He was not quick enough to avoid the blow; the keen knife ripped through his smooth shirt-front, and penetrated the upper part of his chest, just under the collar-bone. Kensley's fighting blood was now up; the wound, though a nasty one, was not disabling; he grappled with Barreto, forced his right arm and dagger behind his back, and then, twining his right leg round his opponent's, put forth all his strength and threw him, falling upon him as he did so. The room was thickly carpeted, and the fall, though a heavy one, made no great noise. The Portuguese gave a choking cry, and shuddered, as Kensley thought, very strangely. Barreto had ceased struggling from the instant he fell, and, in a strangely altered voice, gasped once in Portuguese, "I am a dead man." Kensley cautiously released his grip; he feared treachery – some trick. But Barreto moved no more. One glance he gave as Kensley rose; his eyes rolled, then he lay quite still. A horrible fear dawned upon the Englishman. He gently lifted the man, and looked at his back. The right arm lay listless now, and had released its grip of the knife. Alas! that long knife, fashioned by some cunning artificer for wild hill men, so keen and deadly for the taking of life, had done its work. By some ghastly misfortune, it had penetrated the ribs and pierced Barreto's heart. The man lay there, flabby and inert – as Kensley soon convinced himself, dead beyond all hope of recovery.

As Kensley rose, and with a sickening feeling at his heart surveyed the dead man's face, something in its appearance touched a chord of memory. "Great God!" he said to himself, "is it reality, or am I still dreaming? This is the face of the Portuguese soldier I saw as I sat asleep before the fire this evening!" His eye wandered from the dead man's face to the great yellow tusk gleaming there still and silent in the corner of the chamber. As he looked, a new light seemed to leap into his mind. Again he saw, as in a flash, before the eye of memory, those strange scenes in the African forest.

Now, whether it was coincidence, fate, black magic – call it what you will – the ivory tusk, standing there in the corner of that silent room, now a chamber of death and horror, was the tusk of the elephant seen by Kensley in his singular dream – vision it might rather be called – of that fateful evening. The name of the dead man upon the carpet there was Manoel Barreto. The name of the Portuguese captain whom Kensley had in his dream seen slain by the single-tusked elephant, more than two hundred years agone, was Manoel Barreto too. The one was a lineal descendant of the other. Zingesi's death was again avenged. All this, however, Cecil Kensley, as he stood there, haggard and white-faced, knew not – he only surmised dimly some part of it.

The clock chimed out two in soft, resonant tones. Kensley went to the spirit-stand, poured out some brandy in a tumbler and drank it down. Then he touched the electric bell. His man came to the door, heavy-eyed and sleepy. At sight of Barreto's body, the scattered cards upon the floor, his master's shirt-front soaked in blood, he turned ghastly pale and opened his mouth to make exclamation.

"Thompson," said his master, "there has been terrible work. Go into the street and fetch a policeman and a doctor."

Pressing a handkerchief to his wound, he sank into a chair as his man went forth upon the errand.

The great tusk, the key to that grim tragedy, still gleamed there behind him, cold, inscrutable, majestic, its history of blood not yet ended.

Chapter Three.
Jan Prinsloo's Kloof

Far away in the gloomiest recesses of a range lying between Zwart Ruggens and the Zwartberg, Cape Colony, not far from where the mountains of that wild and secluded district give place to the eastern limits of the plateau of the Great Karroo, there lies hidden, and almost unknown, a kloof or gorge, whose dark and forbidding aspect, united to the wild and horrid legend with which it is invested, prevents any but the chance hunter or wandering traveller from ever invading its fastnesses. This kloof is about seven miles from the rough track that in these regions is dignified by the name of road; it is approached by a poort or pass through the mountains, and the way is, even for South Africa, a rough and dangerous one, although there are indications that a rude waggon-track did formerly exist there. Standing upon the steep side of this kloof are the remains of what must have once been a roomy and substantial Boer farmhouse; but the four walls are roofless, the windows and doorways naked and destitute of sashes, the euphorbia, the prickly pear, and clambering weeds grow within and without, the lizard and snake abide there, and the whole appearance of the place denotes that many years have elapsed since Prinsloo's Kloof was tenanted by human life.

In many respects the wild kloof gives evidence that the Boer who first tarried there had an eye for good pasturage for his flocks and herds. The spekboom and many another succulent bush, dear to the goal breeder, flourish amid the broken and chaotic rocks with which the hill sides are strewn. A strong fountain of water runs with limpid current from the mountain at the back of the house; the flat tops of the hills around are clothed with long waving grasses, and the valley is, manifestly, well fitted to be the nursery of a horse-breeding establishment. A tributary of the Gamtoos River flows deeply, if fitfully, below the sheer and overhanging cliffs in a chain of pools, called zee-koe gats (sea-cow or hippopotamus deeps) – the hippopotamus, though his name lingers behind, no longer revels in the flood – and the bottom of the valley is in many parts fertile and suited for the growth of grain and fodder crops.

Broken and uncouth as are many portions of the Witteberg and Zwartberg, the neighbourhood of Prinsloo's Kloof far surpasses them. There the volcanic action of a bygone age has perpetrated the most extraordinary freaks. The mountains are torn into shapes so wild and fantastic, that, viewed in profile against the red glow of the setting sun, all manner of weird objects may be conjured before the imagination. In some places, as the kloof runs into the heart of the hills, the cliff sides are so deep, so precipitous, and so narrow, that but little sunlight can penetrate beneath, and even on a hot day of African summer a chill strikes upon the spectator passing through.

It is not difficult to understand, from a Boer point of view, that this stern valley was a well chosen spot in which to build a farmhouse. The distance from a roadway, is, in Boer eyes, of no great account, and, as a rule, the farther from human habitation the Dutch farmer can get the better he is pleased. As for the forbidding aspect of the kloof, the stolid, unimaginative Boer would be little troubled on that score; he has no eye whatever for picturesque or scenic effect, and will plant himself as readily upon the treeless wastes of the Orange Free State, or the most stony, barren mountain-side of the Old Colony, as in the most beautiful and wooded country that South Africa can give him.

When Jan Prinsloo trekked into the kloof, towards the end of the last century, the place must have been a very paradise and nursery of game. In the river the hippopotamus played, elephants roamed through the valleys and poorts everywhere around, the zebras ran in large troops upon the mountain tops, and many of the larger game, such as koodoo, the buffalo, and the hartebeest, wandered fearlessly and free; while of the smaller game, such as rhebok, duykerbok, and klipspringer, judging from the abundance of the present day, there must have been literally multitudes. To Jan Prinsloo, then, wild and sombre as the place was, it must have appeared, as he trekked down the

pass, a veritable Boer elysium. But Jan, having played his part in the world – a part more fierce and turbulent even than was usual to the marauding frontier Boers of a hundred years ago – made his exit from the scene in a manner cruel and horrible enough to match fitly with the rest of his wicked and violent existence.

Since Jan Prinsloo's fearful ending, which will be hereafter alluded to, the kloof has borne an evil reputation. Now and again a Boer has taken the farm, tempted by its pastoral advantages and its low purchase-money, but somehow, none have ever stayed upon it for long. The last tenant, an Englishman, quitted it hastily nearly forty years ago, and ever since then the house has become year by year more sombre and more desolate, the footsteps of human beings now rarely penetrate thither, and even the very Kaffirs avoid the place.

In September of the year 1860, a young English Afrikander, Stephen Goodrick by name, who had, from the time he could handle a rifle, been engaged in the far interior in the then lucrative, if dangerous, occupation of elephant-hunting, having amassed, at the age of thirty, some four or five thousand pounds, after fourteen years of hunting and trading in Northern Bechuanaland and the Lake Ngami region, threw up the game, and trekked down to Grahamstown with his last loads of ivory. These disposed of and his affairs settled, he took unto himself for a wife, a handsome, dark-eyed girl, the daughter of Scotch parents, living near his own family in the Western Province, and then set about looking for a farm, having determined to settle down to the more peaceful pursuits of pastoral farming. After a month of riding hither and thither, inspecting farms in the districts of Swellendam, Oudtshoorn, and George, none of which pleased his fancy, he turned his attention to the Eastern Province.

Goodrick had been long and continuously away from the Cape, and in the brief intervals when he had rested from his hunting and trading expeditions he had usually stayed with his father, an old colonist, in Swellendam, a district to the south-west of the Colony. His knowledge, therefore, of the Eastern Province was necessarily somewhat restricted. Stephen, by chance, heard one day from a Boer trekking by with fruit and tobacco, that another Boer named Van der Meulen was leaving his farm near the end of Zwartberg. Losing no time, Stephen saddled up, paid temporary farewell to his wife, whom he left at his father's house, and, traversing Lange Kloof and crossing the Kougaberg, he entered, on the afternoon of the third day, Prinsloo's Kloof, whither he had been directed.

It was a glorious hot afternoon in early summer, the sun shone as only it can in Africa, and under its brilliant rays and with the wealth of vegetation and flower life springing up everywhere around, the kloof, savage though it appeared, put on its mellowest aspect; and as Goodrick rode up to the farmhouse and noticed the flocks and herds, all sleek and in good condition, he thought that there might be worse places in which to outspan for life than this beautiful, if solemn valley.

At the farmhouse he was welcomed by the owner. Van der Meulen, and after a stroll round the kraals and supper over a business conversation took place before the family retired to rest, which, as it seemed to the young Englishman, they did hurriedly and with some odd glances at one another. Next morning all were up early, and Goodrick rode round the farm – all good mountain pasture, embracing some 19,000 morgen (rather more than 40,000 acres) in its area. The Boer, in his uncouth, rough way, warmly praised the farm; the price he asked was extremely small, and the annual Government quit rent very trifling. Van der Meulen explained as his reason for selling the place, apparently so much below its value, that he had been offered, at an absurdly small price, a very fine farm in the Transvaal by a relation who had lately annexed the best of the land of a native chief; and, as many of his blood relations, Voertrekkers of 1836, were settled there, he wished to quit the Colony quickly and join them. Finally, Goodrick agreed to buy the farm, together with part of the stock, and, early on the following morning, left the kloof. The purchase was shortly completed at Cape Town, where the vendor and purchaser met a week afterwards, and, the Van der Meulens having trekked out with all their household goods and belongings, the Englishman and his wife prepared to enter upon their property.

Stephen Goodrick, then, with two waggons, carrying his wife, her white female servant, and a quantity of furniture and household and farming necessaries, and taking with him four Hottentots and half-a-dozen horses, trekked again through Lange Kloof, over the Kougaberg, and thence through a country partly mountain, partly karroo, until one afternoon early in October, the waggons crossed the deep and dangerous drift of the river, and went up through the poort that led into Prinsloo's Kloof. After a most difficult and tedious piece of travelling for some seven miles – for the half-forgotten waggon-track lay up and down precipitous ascents and declivities, littered here and there with huge boulders, or hollowed out into dangerous spruits and holes – at length the stout but wearied oxen faced the last steep hill to the farmhouse, and with many a pistol crack of the great whip, many a Hottentot curse directed at Zwartland, Kleinboy, Engelschman, Akerman, and the rest, dragged their heavy burdens up to the open space that had been cleared in front of the homestead. It had been arranged that Van der Meulen's eldest son should remain upon the farm until Goodrick and his wife had arrived, and further, that an old Hottentot, Cupido by name, who knew the farm and its ways well, and two young Kaffirs, who had lately arrived from the Transkei in search of work, should transfer their services to the new-comer.

These four being therefore ready, having already brought in and kraaled the goats for the night, they assisted the Englishman to outspan his oxen and unload the waggons. After two or three hours' hard work, a good portion of the waggons was unloaded, and part of the furniture arranged in the house; three of the horses were placed for the night in the rough building adjoining the dwelling-house that served for a stable, while the remainder had been turned into a large stone kraal which lay on the other flank of the house. Meanwhile the white servant had prepared the supper, which partaken of, the wearied travellers retired to rest. About the middle of the night Goodrick and his wife were suddenly aroused by a great commotion in the stable; the horses were trampling, plunging and squealing as if suddenly disturbed or scared. Then there rose upon the night, as it seemed just outside the house, a wild scream, hideous in its intensity and full of horror.

Hastily thrusting on some clothes and taking a lantern, Goodrick ran round to the stable. The night, though there was no moon, was not dark, and the stars shone clear in the firmament above. Nothing was to be seen, no sound could be heard save the snorting of the horses, and the weird cry of a leopard (strangely different, as the hearer well knew, from the scream heard just previously) that sounded from the rocks a mile or so away on the right. Quickly entering the stable, Stephen was astonished to find the horses in a profuse sweat, trembling, their halters broken, their eyes startled and excited, and their whole demeanour indicating intense fear. What could be the cause? There was, apparently, no wild animal about, nothing in the stable calculated to excite alarm; the animals were old comrades, and not likely to have been fighting. Goodrick was altogether puzzled, and, leaving the stable, went to a shed in rear of the house, where the natives slept, and roused the old Hottentot. The man could give no reason for the disturbance. Wolves (hyaenas) were not likely to approach the house, and the tigers (leopards) had not been very troublesome lately, and he could think of nothing else to explain the matter. There was a scared look in the old man's face, which Goodrick thought nothing of at the time, but which he afterwards remembered. After some little trouble, fresh halters were procured, the horses tied up and soothed, and the two again retired, Cupido being cautioned to keep his ears open against further disturbance. Nothing further occurred during the night.

Next morning, after seeing the goats unkraaled, watered and despatched to their day's pasturage in charge of the two Kaffir herds, Goodrick asked the young Boer at breakfast if he had heard the noise among the horses, and the wild scream, and what could be the cause, and if there was any cattle-stealing about this wild neighbourhood. Young Van der Meulen's heavy, immovable countenance changed slightly, but he replied that he could give no explanation except that perhaps a leopard might have been prowling about; they were pretty numerous in the kloof. Stephen explained that he and the Hottentots had spoored everywhere around the stable for leopards, but could find no trace.

Here the subject dropped, and Van der Meulen relapsed into silence, except when the Englishman asked him what game there was about the hills. “You will find,” he said, “plenty of small buck – klipspringers, rhebok, and duykerbok, and there are still a fair number of koodoo which, however, take some stalking. Then on the berg tops there are several troops of zebras, as well as hyaenas and leopards; but the zebras we have seldom shot, they take so much climbing after, and you know we Dutchmen prefer riding to walking. You will find also lots of springbok and steinbok and some black wildebeest (gnu) on the plains beyond the mountains. Yes, I have had many a *mooi schiet op de plaats* (pretty shoot on the farm).” Suddenly the young man’s heavy features changed again as he said, “Allemaghte! (Almighty) but I shall be glad to get out of this place; I hate it! I want again to get on to the Transvaal high veldt, where I trekked through two years ago, and where you can shoot as many blauuw wildebeest (brindled gnu), blessbok, quagga, springbok, and hartebeest as you want in a day’s ride. Ja! that is the land for me; these gloomy poorts and kloofs are only fit for leopards and spooks (ghosts). Then, you know, Mynheer, the Transvaal is free; we never loved your Government, which is always wanting from us this, that and the other, and I shall be glad to trek out. Up in Zoutpansberg we shall be able to hunt the kameel (giraffe), and the zwart-wit-pens (sable antelope), and elephant, as much as we like, and for our winter pasture we shall not have to pay a single rix-dollar. Ja! I have had enough of Prinsloo’s Kloof, and never wish to see it again.” This long speech delivered, the Boer relapsed into silence. There was a curious look on the young man’s face as he had spoken, which Goodrick and his wife could not quite define or understand.

An hour afterwards Van der Meulen had slung his rifle on his back, packed some biltong (sun-dried meat) in his pockets, saddled up his horse, and bidden farewell to the tenants of the kloof. The Englishman and his young wife watched his retreating form as it slowly proceeded down the valley, and presently disappeared amidst a grove of acacia trees that margined the river; then they turned to the house. “I don’t quite understand that fellow,” said Stephen, “do you, Mary? I can’t help thinking there was something behind what he said. Why were his people so eager to leave this farm? However, dearest, the farm is a good one and a cheap one; we are young and strong and ought to be as happy as any two people in the Colony.”

“Yes, Stephen,” said his wife, “I thought there was something queer in what the young man said, but it could have been only fancy. I am sure we ought to be happy and contented, and with you by my side, I shall always be so.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.