

THE LOST DIAMONDS OF THE ORANGE RIVER.

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 a unique formation of crystal-spice, singularly rounded upon its face. It and the glorious canopy of hanging stalactite above it must have been refuted 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 it 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."

sibly be encountered in the twenty-minutes' crawl, which as Klaas had told me, it would take to get through. This opinion 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 eastward trek, and we had no time to lose. "In you go, Klaas," said I; and, nothing loth, Klaas dived into the bowels of the mountains, 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, which was pitch dark now - suddenly lowered, and we had to crawl along. It was 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. 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 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, leather trousers 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 a while upon the scorching rocks, and then sat up and looked about us. If the Paarl Kloof, as Klaas called it, 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. In the centre of the red cliffs, blazing forth in splendid, ran a broad band of the most glorious opalescent rock-crystal, which flashed out its 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-cut diamond, 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 more than evenly round at least two-thirds of the cliff-belt that encircled us, and I think quite the most singular of the many strange things, and they are not few, I have seen in the African interior.

Klaas called out in a hoarse voice: "A snake has bitten me!" 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 on your side of me, we can settle him; but I can't get his teeth out without your help." Crawling forward, and feeling my way with my right hand, 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, that Klaas took a fresh grip of the loathsome creature's neck, and with an effort, disengaged 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 for the first time in my life I must have swooned. But, luckily I thought me of poor faithful Klaas, sore stricken; and I called to him in cheerful 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 spot, and given up life and hope. Not so the aboriginal. "Ja, sieur; I will loup," was all he said. Then we scrambled onward, occasionally halting as the deadly sickness overtook Klaas. At last the light came, and as my poor Bushman grew feeble and more slow, I found room to pass him, and so dragged him behind me to the opening. 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 rocks 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. Klaas was now breathing heavily, and getting dull and stupidified. 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. Then Klaas's eyelids drooped, and he became drowsy and 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 reappeared with a small skin-bag, out of which he took some dirty looking powder. With an old knife he scored the skin and dash 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 inefficient, or the poison had got too strong a hold. My poor Klaas never became conscious again, though I fancied eagerly that he recognized me before he died, for his lips moved as he turned to me once. At last, within an hour and a half from the time he was bitten, he lay dead.



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