



## Sand and Diamonds

By Victor Rousseau

*Like ghosts of the night, Rawlins and Simons, of the Bechuanaland Mounted, melted forever into the ominous maw of Ngami*

LIEUTENANT CONNELL, of the Bechuanaland Mounted Police, South Africa, frowned as Sergeant Luke Evans stepped into the office of the barracks at Boskop. "Read that, Evans!" He tossed a telegram across the table to the sergeant, who picked it up and read:

*Kiss Boskop good-bye for me. Not coming back. Johannesburg's as fine as ever. Rawlins.*

The sergeant raised his eyebrows.

"You think Rawlins has deserted the Force, too, sir, like—"

"Like Simons? What do you think, Evans? You knew Simons and Rawlins intimately. Each of them was sent to patrol the Ngami district. A week or two later each of them sends an impudent wire in turn, announcing his desertion."

"I don't believe either of them deserted, sir, or sent that wire."

"What is your theory, then? Who sent that wire from Johannesburg in Rawlins's name, and who sent that one from Cape Town, signed Simons, telling us that he was sailing for England? What is there in the Ngami district?" he went on, without waiting for the sergeant's answer to his first question.

"Sand, baboons, thorn scrub, and thirst."

"You're right, Evans. You know the district as well as it can be known. A lot of it is included in that enormous block of land that old Duplessis holds, but it'll never see any humans except a few wandering Bushmen. Still, it's in our district, and—"

He paused. "You don't think Rawlins and Simons quit because they didn't want to patrol the desert, do you, Evans? You know the natives have queer stories about its being peopled by ghosts, and so on. Of course that wouldn't have scared our men. Still, when a man's been riding week after week with only thirst for a companion..."

“I want you to go up there at once,” Connell finished abruptly. “Report back to me after you’ve thoroughly covered the district. Try to get on the tracks of Simon and Rawlins, that’s to say, learn whether they actually went to the Ngami or not. And don’t you send me a wire from down country telling me that you’ve deserted, because I won’t believe it.”

He grinned at Evans, who grinned back at him. No one would believe that of Sergeant Evans, with five wounds and half-a-dozen medals gained on the battlefields of France.

“You’d best start right away,” continued Connell. “And when you reach old Duplessis’s farm stop in and pay him your respects. We’ve got to keep in with him, however much he hates us.”

Evans was just at the door when Connell called after him:

“I wish we could get hold of old Pete Flanagan. If any man knows the Ngami from end to end it’s Pete. Haven’t heard anything of him of late, have you, Evans?”

“Haven’t seen or heard of him for months, Lieutenant. I s’pose he’s off looking for more of those diamond mines.”

The other nodded, and Evans left the office. His preparations were simple, and occupied almost no time at all. Into his saddlebags he stuffed a few tins of bully beef, a quantity of flour, a small bottle of effervescent saline, as a substitute for yeast, and a roll of sun-dried beef, biltong, of the appearance and consistency of blackened sole-leather. In addition he took tea, matches, sugar, salt, and a quantity of compressed vegetables. He had also a double billy, for cooking, two large water-flasks, and, besides his service revolver, a carbine, grounded in the leather bucket that was suspended from the off side of his saddle.

Three miles down-hill from the police post lay the settlement of Boskop. It consisted of the usual large market square, common to all South African towns, and three or four

wide streets criss-crossing each other at right angles, lined with one-story brick buildings roofed with galvanized iron; stores, old clothes shops, and “ice-cold drinks” emporiums devoted to the native trade.

All about lay the half-desert country, at present a uniform brown, though when the rains began—if they began—it would be transformed almost overnight into an expanse of emerald. The *spruits* would run water, the empty dams and cisterns would be brimming, crops would be sown—if the rains came.

Boskop was on the fringe of the desert. Usually the four months’ downpour materialized in Boskop. Sometimes it did not. It never rained in the Ngami country, over beyond the fringe of *kopjes* on the horizon, or only enough to maintain the stunted thorn scrub that dotted the land like the wool fibres on a native’s head.

That was Luke’s destination, a land where no one lived except the wandering Bushman and his cousin, the baboon. A few had traversed it, among them Pete Flanagan, the oldest and most sanguine diamond prospector in the district. According to Pete, the Ngami region was thickly sprinkled with diamond “pipes,” the volcanic outlets in which the stones were made. Pete’s volubility had long since been discouraged, and nowadays it was only under the stimulus of a few drinks that he would repeat the old story for the amusement of his entertainers. For some time past nothing had been seen of the old man.

Diamonds had been found near Boskop. Twenty miles away two men, Hart and Van Reenen, had found stones two years before. A rush had followed, but the supply had proved to be only a single pocket.

Hart was the district money-lender, and had his hands on everything negotiable. Van Reenen was his chief satellite, an adventurer who was probably wanted under various aliases in many parts of the country.

Sergeant Luke rode through Boskop,

past the line of stores, with their crowds of chattering natives pawing over the second-hand clothes and bargaining with the gesticulating proprietors; past the market square, with its few teams of longhorns inspanned to heavy Dutch wagons, out into the land beyond. Just on the other side of the town was Jacob's Hotel, Hart's headquarters.

On the *stoep* Sergeant Luke saw Hart sitting, tilted back in his chair, his thumbs in his armholes. Though it was not yet noon he was already drunk. He sprawled there, a drunken blotch in the sun, fanned by a Sechuana boy with a palm leaf. Upon the little table at his elbow stood a bottle of whiskey, and a tumbler, half-full.

Seated beside him, leaning forward and gesticulating, was "Baldy" Smith, one of Hart's crowd, and one of the hard characters left stranded in Boskop after the diamond rush had petered out and the disgruntled prospectors had removed to other haunts.

Inside the store adjacent to the hotel Sergeant Luke saw the mean, wizened face of Jacobs as he bent over a roll of cloth from which he was measuring a short yard for a colored woman.

"Hello, Sergeant!" called Hart from his chair, as Luke rode up. "Looks like you're starting off on patrol somewhere. Going to meet Rawlins, I suppose, and bring him back with you?"

Luke saw the furtive glance that "Baldy" Smith shot at the other. Hart's gross face assumed an expression of infantile blandness.

For the first time the idea came into Luke's brain that Hart might know something about the two troopers' disappearance. But though the police had proved a thorn in Hart's side, notably in curbing some of the grosser evils of frontier life in whose existence Hart was pecuniarily interested, he could not imagine that Hart had been so mad as to set himself in open opposition to the Force.

The sudden impulse was killed by the flash of reason.

"Maybe," Luke answered non-committally. "I hear Van Reenen's left town," he continued casually.

Hart guffawed. "Oh, yes, after big game, sergeant. Him and old Duplessis have gone after a herd of springbok out in the Ngami."

This speech gave Luke food for thought. Prodigious herds of these antelopes migrate periodically through the desert regions, armies of several hundred thousand sometimes covering hundreds of miles on those strange *treks* that are the peculiar characteristic of this animal. Luke knew that old Duplessis's passion for hunting was almost on a par with his hatred of Englishmen—one of his two dominant passions, in fact.

Still Luke also was aware that Hart and Duplessis were at odds. Hart held a mortgage on the old man's lands and was pressing him hard. Three thousand *morgen*—six thousand acres of the old Dutchman's holdings—were fair ranching land, and worth all that Hart had advanced on the total, composed preponderatingly of thorn scrub. Duplessis had acted queerly in going off hunting with the associate of his bitterest enemy.

"So?" Luke commented. "Well, so long, Hart."

He touched the reins and the stocky Basuto pony set off upon his tireless gait, known as the "triple," which bore a close resemblance to that of a rocking-chair.

Hart and Baldy watched him till he had disappeared below the dip of the road. Jacobs came out of the store and joined them. The three broke into guffaws.

"Another of them damn policemen on the trail," said the hotel-keeper. "One arter another, like flies going into a jam-trap."

Hart cursed volubly. "That'll be the last," he said. "We've got to make that clean-

up and get down country in the next two weeks now, or hell won't have nothing on Bechuanaland for hotness."

Baldy grinned at his employer. "Don't worry, Hart," he answered. "Well pick him up where we landed the other two."

"How about wiring one of our agents to send another telegram?" suggested Hart, turning to Jacobs.

"Give 'um time. We'll wire the post from Kimberley arter we git there."

"I'll leave that part to you, Jacobs." Hart leaned back in his chair, drained the glass of whiskey, and cursed the boy with the fan in Zulu, the lingua franca of the country.

"Get on the job, Baldy," he told his henchman.

He uttered a grunt of satisfaction as he saw Baldy riding back into town a few minutes later.

"Well," he said to Jacobs, "we've got that feller Evans, and we'll worry along for two weeks more without any more damn policemen mixing in."

The hotel-keeper's face took on a saturnine expression.

"If Van Reenen don't spill the beans by fooling with that Duplessis girl," he observed.

"Hell!" exploded Hart. "I've warned him that this is business."

"Well, Van Reenen ain't the kind of man who keeps his pleasure and his business separate enough," responded Jacobs.

## CHAPTER II INTO THE DESERT

AS he rode on toward the desert through the scorching sunlight Sergeant Luke was anticipating his reception at the Duplessis farm with mixed feelings.

The farm was some sixty miles from

Boskop, on the very fringe of the desert, a goodish way, but only a day's journey for one of the hardy native horses such as he rode. Here years before Jan Duplessis had built up a flourishing ranch, with a string of dams fed by a *spruit* in the wet season, and substantial enough to defy the eight months of drouth that succeeded it.

Of course there would be a welcome for him, a meal, coffee, a bed if he cared to stay. No South African would deny that even to his bitterest enemy without feeling himself disgraced forever, provided he came with the necessary emblem of respectability—to wit, a horse. The horseless white man would be invited to eat alone and sleep among the natives.

Sergeant Luke had met pretty Emmy Duplessis several times. She always had a smile and a blush for him, which had sometimes made him dream of the date of his discharge, when, with his savings and a small legacy that had come to him, he meant to take up land and start out for himself with a small flock of sheep.

On the other hand, Jan Duplessis's reception of him had been, to say the least, devoid of warmth. The old man, who came of an old Boer family with a strain of French Huguenot blood, had always been an irreconcilable enemy of the British. He had migrated to the edge of the desert after the War, a generation before, and vowed that no Englishman should cross his threshold again. If time and circumstance had forced him to modify that vow he none the less retained his ancient prejudices. As he had told Sergeant Luke the last time he had visited the ranch-house:

"I've got nothing against you as a man, Sergeant. But I won't have any *verdommte Engelsmans* buzzing around my girl. When, she marries it will be one of our own people."

Luke had wondered if the old man was thinking of Van Reenen. Adventurer as the

fellow was, he had a superficial air of breeding, and was insinuating enough to have acquired a certain ascendancy over the simple-minded old farmer, in spite of his being Hart's right-hand man. Besides, two almost rainless seasons succeeding each other had brought the Duplessis ranch to the verge of ruin, and Duplessis might have hoped to win favor with Van Reenen with the idea of placating Hart, who held the mortgage.

At any rate, Van Reenen, as Duplessis's son-in-law, would probably avert ruin. Luke thought that Emmy had hinted as much the last time they had met, when there were tears in her eyes, but he had not felt justified in speaking to the girl then—not without his discharge in his pocket.

The sergeant decided not to make the ranch-house that night, with a view to saving his horse for the long desert marches that were to come. When the sun dipped under the horizon, and darkness was a matter of minutes he off-saddled, knee-haltered the animal, built a little fire of dead branches of thorn, and cooked his supper. He rolled up in his blanket, and was asleep almost immediately.

He was astir at sunrise, shivering in the icy wind that would change to a burning sirocco inside of two hours. He upsaddled after a breakfast of coffee, *biltong*, and a couple of cakes made hastily on the ashes of his fire, and rode on at a leisurely gait. Time had lost much of its meaning for him in those wastes. He calculated on striking the Duplessis ranch about mid-afternoon.

All that morning he rode steadily. A bite of lunch, and on again through the heat of the afternoon. The line of *kopjes* marking the fringe of the desert loomed nearer. Now he was among them, low, single hills emerging from the plain, their tops heaped fantastically with boulders, and crowned with solitary cacti. Baboons barked at him and scampered away as he threaded the narrow cart track that at last emerged into the Duplessis ranch, the

last outpost of civilization.

Luke saw the homestead in the far distance set beside the series of great dams, around which the thirsty cattle crowded under the grateful shade of the immense eucalyptus trees. Reaching the cluster of native huts two miles from the house Sergeant Luke was surprised to discover that they were empty. In place of the smiling, native women, eternally washing rags or sweeping the mud floors, was solitude.

The sergeant pulled in sharply. He shouted, but there came no answer.

This wholesale abandonment of the native quarters meant that something untoward had happened. He spurred his horse up past the dams, in which a little water still remained, and dismounted at the entrance to the *stoep*, throwing the reins.

He strode up and hammered on the door. No sound came from the house, which was already in the long shadows cast by the *kopjes*. There was no sign of life anywhere.

Luke tried the door and found that it was open. He stamped inside, calling. No sound came but the echo of his own voice.

The big living-room, which Emmy had furnished tastefully from Cape Town was in disorder. The rugs were disarranged, the table pushed into a corner, three chairs overturned. Indication were that a struggle had taken place.

What had happened? A marauding raid, from some wandering tribes? The natives had been at peace for years, and, if such a thing had happened, old Duplessis would not have been caught napping.

Sergeant Luke strode through the house, shouting. He stopped. He thought that he heard a moaning sound in answer.

He stepped into the kitchen and called again. This time he heard the answering moan distinctly. It came from a small cellar that Duplessis had hollowed out for a larder.

Luke made his way down the rickety

wooden stairs. Hams and dried peaches hung from the roof of the little place, barrels of flour and crates of groceries were ranged along the sides.

The moaning came from a far corner. Fighting down his terror, the sergeant made his way there.

He was conscious of intense relief. Among a heap of old rags and rubbish he saw the wizened body and monkey-like face of old Jantje, Miss Emmy's Hottentot body-servant. The Hottentot, being of a higher or more adaptable mentality than the negro, is usually attached to the house in a personal capacity, generally as groom. Jantje had always accompanied Miss Emmy when she went abroad. He had been with her since she was a baby.

The sergeant saw that the yellow man was unconscious, though he was moaning. He had been shot or stabbed. His rags were streaked and stained with blood. Stooping, he raised the man in his arms and carried him up to the living-room. A quick examination showed that Jantje had been shot twice in the head. Both bullets had glanced off his forehead without shattering the bone, but had traveled around the scalp, causing considerable loss of blood.

Administering water and binding up his wounds, Luke soon had the Tottie restored to consciousness. Jantje recognized him and sat up, jabbering incoherently in Dutch.

"Where's Miss Emmy?" demanded Luke in the same language.

"That devil-man Van Reenen take her. She fight. No good. Plenty mans along with Van Reenen," Jantje muttered with an effort.

"When? Tell me all that happened as quick as you can!" Luke cried.

Jantje seemed to pull himself together. "Yesterday afternoon Van Reenen come and tell Baas Jan there's a big herd of springbok out in the Ngami country. Baas Jan go mad. He stuff a roll of *biltong* into his saddlebag,

strap on bandolier, take his rifle, and jump on his horse. In five minutes they both gone together toward the Ngami."

"Go on!"

"Last night late Van Reenen come back, with him that man Brouwer Miss Emmy always scared of and two more. Van Reenen say Baas Jan fell off his horse and hurt himself. Miss Emmy to go back with him while Brouwer ride for the doctor. Miss Emmy is getting ready when I tell her Van Reenen is lying. Then she says she won't go.

"She asks questions and sees that Van Reenen is lying. He catches hold of her, and she fights him. I ran to get gun to shoot them, but Van Reenen shot me in the head twice and I fell down. They thought I was dead because I lay still. They carried me downstairs and threw me into a corner. When they were gone I tried to get up, but I remembered nothing more till you came, Baas Luke."

"Where have they taken her?"

"Into the Ngami. They doing something there, I don't know what."

"Jantje, I'm going to leave for there at once. As soon as you are able, hurry to the police camp and tell Lieutenant Connell.

"No use, baas. Too long. Jantje go with you. White man cannot follow their *spoor* through the desert without Tottie man. We go together. See, Jantje strong now."

Making a great effort, the little yellow man got on his feet and stood looking up into the sergeant's face with a twisted grin.

"Jantje strong now. No time to go back to police camp for help when that devil-man and his other devil-mans have got Miss Emmy."

### CHAPTER III THE VALLEY OF GHOSTS

SERGEANT LUKE reflected quickly. He

decided that the Hottentot's advice was sound. It would be hopeless for any white man to attempt to follow the tracks of horses through the scrub and over the sun-baked ground. Only a Hottentot or a Bushman could do that.

He realized that Hart and the rest of his crew had been in the conspiracy. Hart had told him that Van Reenen had invited Jan Duplessis to accompany him on the hunting trip several hours before the invitation had actually been extended. Hart must, therefore, have known of Van Reenen's intention.

"But can you travel?" Luke asked the Tottie.

"You feed horse; when you finished, Jantje strong again."

Luke knew enough of the recuperative powers of the natives to believe that Jantje would prove as good as his word. In spite of the urgent need of haste, he must feed his horse, also pack some oats on his saddle; he had intended to procure a small sack at the Duplessis ranch in any event. He offsaddled the animal, watered him, and fed him in the stable, where he filled a small sack with oats, which he strapped to the saddle. A handful or two a day would sufficiently supplement what the hardy little beast could pick up in the desert.

Jantje, meanwhile, had proceeded to dig a small tunnel, about nine inches long, in the hard ground outside the house. Kindling a handful of a native herb in one end, he ran a quill through the opening and inhaled the smoke until the last embers had burned away. Then, bleary-eyed and choking but apparently quite restored to strength by the drug, a species of hemp, he sauntered up to the sergeant, who was ready for the journey.

"You get a horse, Jantje?"

"Me go on foot."

It had grown dark, but there was a brilliant moon which shed a bright light over the face of the country. Luke let his horse proceed at its comfortable triple. Jantje ran

beside it like a dog, picking up the *spoor* of the horses as rapidly as was necessary. An hour or two passed, during which Jantje changed the course two or three times, before Luke reined in.

"Jantje, you say Van Reenen and his gang are doing something out in the Ngami country?" he asked. "What is it?"

Jantje only clicked gutturally in answer.

"Are they on Baas Duplessis's land?"

"All his land everywhere."

Luke knew that the old Boer's holdings covered an immense extent of territory. Like the old-fashioned men of his nation he lived in dread of being crowded by his neighbors, and being crowded, in the Boer idea, is being able to see the smoke of your neighbor's chimney anywhere from your property. The land in question had been purchased from a native chief years before at about a penny for ten acres.

They went on steadily, while the terrain grew rougher, threading deep denies among the *kopjes*. Luke did not know whether Jantje was following the tracks all the way, or whether he had only divined the direction that the kidnapers had taken. It was well on toward morning when he told Luke that they were ready to camp for the remainder of the night.

Luke knew that there was water here and there in the Ngami, and his patrol route was mapped out to enable him to halt at various pools that never ran quite dry, being fed by subterranean streams. Here, however, being off his course, he was trusting entirely to Jantje. He was about to drink from his water-bottle when the Tottie signed to him to put it away, and disappeared with a guttural warning.

Ten minutes later he was back with an armful of wild melons, bitter gourds with roots that extended twenty or thirty feet below the ground and tapped the subterranean water supply. The horse devoured them greedily,

and Luke, scooping out the pulp, as he had learned to do on patrol, quenched his thirst.

He dozed at intervals during the remainder of the night, feverishly impatient to get on, yet knowing that in the desert it is literally a case of the more haste the less speed. His mind was tortured with fears for Emmy. He started up from an uneasy doze at dawn, to see Jantje on his hands and knees beside him, puffing at his remedial herb, while the billy boiled on the fire.

A feed for the horse, coffee made of the bitter fluid from the interior of the melons, and they were off again. Luke asked no more questions; he could see no trace of *spoor* upon the sun-baked ground, and it seemed impossible that the Tottie could be following one—yet as Jantje ran before him he scanned the ground ceaselessly, turning now to the right, now to the left.

All the morning they traveled through the howling desert of sand and stones, with here and there a stunted thorn or mimosa tree. At noon they halted.

“Van Reenen six hours ahead,” the Tottie volunteered. “Another man join them an hour back.”

“Let’s push on!”

“When the afternoon grows cool, Baas.”

Fuming, Luke was forced to acquiesce. He had only a little water left in one of the bottles, and the last of the melons was gone.

In mid-afternoon, when the sun’s heat had begun almost imperceptibly to decline, they set off again.

This was the worst stage of the journey. It was less hot, but nevertheless an inferno. Luke had finished the water, of which the little dried-up Tottie had refused to drink. Jantje skipped agilely ahead of the panting horse, which labored over the stones of that desolate route. Not a vestige of vegetation was to be seen as they threaded their way from one shallow depression into another.

Toward sunset a line of *kopjes* sprang up suddenly before them. They were approaching them as the sun dipped under the edge of the sky.

“They go through there,” said Jantje, indicating a narrow defile in front of them. “No go farther.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ghosts walk in that valley, Baas. Tottie man no go on. Ghosts kill Tottie man, no harm white man.”

Without much hope, knowing the strength of native superstitions, Luke tried to persuade his companion. The Hottentot, trembling and mute, refused to go farther. Not even for his beloved Miss Emmy would he enter the valley ahead, where he believed the spirits of the dead to dwell.

“All right, make camp,” said Luke. “I’ll go on. Wait here for me. You think they’re in there, do you?”

“Three hours ago they pass here,” said the Tottie. “Me wait, Baas.”

Luke climbed back into his saddle and rode on into the defile. The sun was down by the time he reached it. Dark-rode on into the defile. The sun was the moon was already lighting up the sky. The chill night wind made the sergeant shiver after the heat of the day.

Reaching the crest of the narrow pass, Luke reined in and looked down into the valley beneath him. He was surprised to see that here the desert yielded to a long extent of densely set thorn scrub, indicating that there was water. The entrance was a winding path hardly more than three yards across, between two massive walls of rock.

Luke dismounted to survey the valley in front of him the better. Leaving his horse he went on afoot for fifty—a hundred yards. It was surprising how long the defile was. At last, however, it ended abruptly in the large crater-like bowl of the valley.

Something glittering in the moonlight at his feet arrested his attention. Luke stooped

and picked it up. It was a metal badge of the Bechuanaland Police. Attached to it were a few shreds of khaki tunic.

The discovery instantly put him on the alert. That badge must have been worn by either Simons or Rawlins. The presence of the shreds of cloth indicated that it had been torn by force from the wearer's shoulder.

One of his two men had been there, then. The little piece of metal spoke as clearly of foul play as if Luke had himself witnessed the scene. The trooper must have been murdered, and the badge thrown away by his murderer to prevent identification of the remains.

Half-involuntarily gripping his revolver, Luke began the descent of the little incline leading from the pass into the valley. He followed a narrow trail amid the thorn scrub. The discovery had accentuated Emmy's peril in his mind. He meant to solve the mystery before the night was much older.

He reached the level flat of the valley. In front of him two fallen trees formed a knee-high barrier, the trail winding around it. Luke stepped aside to follow it.

As he did so, the ground yielded underfoot. He felt himself falling, clutched at the surface of the ground, missed it, and went sliding down amid a shower of sand into emptiness.

#### CHAPTER IV THE DEATH TRAP

FOR just a few moments Luke lay unconscious, though this was more by reason of the swiftness and unexpectedness of the fall than from the depth into which he had fallen. Half-buried by the mass of sand that had accompanied him, and by the sandy bottom into which he had plunged, he finally struggled out, blowing the grains from his

mouth and nostrils, and got upon his feet.

He saw that he was standing in a circular sandpit, not very much larger than a spacious room, and perhaps twenty to twenty-five feet deep. All around it rose the rock walls of soft, crumbly sandstone, emerging out of banks of shelving sand and gravel. The floor was strewn with masses of some substance gleaming white in the moonlight.

Assuring himself that he still had his revolver, and still under the impression that what had happened to him was no more than an accident, Luke made his way toward the wall. He looked about him for some means of ascent. He began to make a detour of the pit.

Presently he paused, turning his attention to the white things that he had seen on the floor. They were the bones of animals. Then he identified the place into which he had fallen. It was no natural pit, but a trap hollowed out by the Bushmen, perhaps a hundred, perhaps five hundred, years before. It was one of those pitfalls made by a whole generation of those indefatigable little hunters, in which they caught their game—the antelope, the bush-hog, even the elephant.

One might have expected the floor of the pit to be covered with bones, but the game had long since ceased to frequent that region, so that the greater part of the bones had pulverized and disintegrated, strewing the floor with silvery, glistening flakes.

At the farther side of the pit, however, a heap of fresh bones was gleaming white in the moonlight. As Luke approached them he started back at the sight of a glistening skull.

No skull of baboon, that—a human skull unmistakably. Piled up about it were the ribs, the long thigh-bones, the bones of human arms. Shreds of clothing still clung to this human framework. But it did not need the presence of those wisps of cloth, fluttering to and fro in the night wind, to tell Luke it was all that remained of Rawlins and Simons.

Now he began to realize that it was no

accident, this fall of his into the sand-pit, but a cunning trap devised just at the spot where one who was unwarned must inevitably step into it. Caught in the same trap as himself, the skeletons of the two troopers lay hunched up together—but in horrible disarray.

Surely no man, however hard the death agony might have been, could have twisted his limbs like that ... and that!

It looked as if ghouls had descended into the pit, and hacked the two troopers limb from limb. Even the bones were splintered and horribly mutilated. Yet surely no human fiend would have committed this sacrilege on men who were already dead.

No human fiend! The explanation came to Luke next moment when, from a little shallow recess at the base of the rocks behind the pile of bones, without a sound, a hideous shape launched itself at his throat.

It was a striped hyena, one of the few denizens of those wastes, which had fallen into the pit weeks before, and had gorged itself, like the vampire that this creature is, upon the bodies of the dead men. Now, famished by its long fast, and mad with terror, it had forgotten the instincts that make it the most cowardly of all the creatures of prey, the offal-eater that follows the lion to feast on what the killer leaves. Famished and desperate, the huge grey bulk launched itself at Luke's throat.

It was Luke's backward stumble over the heap of bones that saved him from the crunching jaws that snapped together as the lean shape shot past and over him. Before it had recovered itself Luke was upon his feet again. He turned to face it, and realized what it was.

Again the hyena leaped. Luke's revolver barked too late. The bullet, shot without aiming, merely glanced off the great dome of the rounded skull. The weapon was knocked from Luke's hand as the beast shot past him again, the outward thrust of its feet

sending him sprawling.

Luke scrambled desperately to his feet. At its next spring, quick as a flash, the monster smashed against Luke's body. Both went sprawling to the floor of the pit. There ensued a nightmare of struggle.

With the fetid breath of the foul animal nauseating and choking him, Luke managed to get a grip on the upper and lower jaws, wrenching and straining to get the head back and dislocate the vertebrae. Man and beast rolled over and over among the bones, but Luke never relaxed his hold.

Failing to break the shaggy neck, fortified with its masses of matted hair, Luke suddenly shifted his grasp and caught the hyena by the throat. There he clung, with the jaws spouting venom over him, and the great body thrashing in an agony of pain.

Beaten almost into unconsciousness by the monster's convulsive struggles, dashed to and fro across the heaps of bleaching bones, Luke never relaxed his hold. At length the struggles of the beast grew fainter.

With the last power of his muscles Luke tightened his grip to the uttermost, flinging the entire weight and tension of his body into that grip of his hands, till, after a convulsive shudder, the creature ceased to struggle.

Staggering to his feet, the sergeant found his revolver, and extinguished the remnants of life with a bullet through the brain.

He sank back exhausted. With reviving strength there came to him again the problem of escape. He began circling the pit, seeking an egress. His attempts to scramble up the side merely precipitated the fall of a cloud of sand. There was no niche in the soft rock in which he could set his foot. An attempt to hack a foothold with his jack-knife broke away the crumbling surface of the rock as fast as he indented it.

It was maddening to be trapped like

that, with the upper ground and the thorn scrub clearly visible in the light of the moon. Sometimes Luke would manage to win a few feet upward, and clinging there like a fly on a wall, would work with infinite care to carve out a footrest a little above him. With four or five such niches he could attain the surface. Just when hope began to rise the rock would crumble. Losing his balance he would roll over and over into the heap of bones beneath.

Time and again Luke tried, while the night wore on, doggedly, desperately, and always in vain. As he realized the hopeless nature of his situation it became difficult to preserve his sanity, to check an impulse to hurl himself against those walls and beat his fists against them.

There was a brief interval when he did yield to this weakness. He pictured Emmy in the power of Van Reenen and realized that, come what might, he could hardly hope to save her.

There was another interval when, lying exhausted among the bones in the moonless second half of the night, he heard the jingle of horses' bits above him, the creak of leather, the voices of men.

He sprang to his feet and stumbled forward, shouting for aid. Mocking laughter came back to him from the edge of the pit. He recognized Hart's voice.

"Hello, sergeant," called the other. "Met Rawlins yet?"

Hoarse guffaws of mirth met this sally. Looking up, Luke distinguished two or three other horsemen dimly outlined at Hart's side.

"Looks pretty, Rawlins does, eh, sergeant?" Hart shouted. "That feller without the head is Simons. Hyenas got into the pit and made a meal of him. They'll be coming back for you, sergeant."

With a shout of fury Luke loosed a shot into the dark. He heard cries of alarm. The figures disappeared abruptly.

"Put up that gun!" he heard Hart

yelling. "We ain't going to shoot the feller. Let him stew there in the sun tomorrer. Good-bye, sergeant," he called mockingly. "We'll be back to see you when the hyenas and the ants have picked you clean. You'll look as pretty as Rawlins and Simons, sergeant."

More guffaws, and the cavalcade receded into the darkness. Luke raged to and fro like the trapped beast that he was, till at last he succumbed to utter weariness.

Dawn came, in splendor of red and gold, across the desert. The sun rose. Luke made another survey of his prison. With the new day his sanity had come back to him. Everywhere were the same walls of sandstone and the loose sand.

He spent the morning in a succession of dogged attempts to scale the walls. At last he gave up hope, sat down in the bottom of the pit, and awaited the inevitable.

Rawlins and Simons must have made the same efforts too, builded the same hopes, and sunk back into the same despair.

He knew he would not have very long to wait. As the incredible heat of the desert sun beat down upon his head he felt his senses leaving him. He heard himself babbling. He had a curious sense of being two persons, the one collected and resigned, watching and listening to the other one, demented, now raging to and fro, now sunk upon the floor among the bones and calling Emmy's name.

How quiet that other man was lying at last! The thirst that filled the swollen mouth like red-hot, searing iron—what had that to do with him?

The icy cold of the night wind came at last, and the two beings were welded into one again. Sick and faint, Luke lay on the floor of the pit, shivering in his sweat-soaked clothes, knowing that only one more day of torture lay between himself and death.

He had already lapsed into a coma when through the dark he fancied that he heard a voice calling. Through the dark of

unconsciousness, by a supreme effort, he struggled back to reality.

A voice was calling him, although not by name, from the edge of the pit above. Luke sat up dizzily. He was sure it was Hart and his crew, come back to finish him off. But better that than another day of such torment as he had endured!

Pulling himself together, he took out his revolver and crept forward, crying out of his swollen throat, and peering craftily about him for a sight of his persecutors.

He heard something swish softly at his feet. His fingers encountered the strands of a rope.

Half-incredulous, he pulled at it. It was fastened to something above, and held tight. He thought this must be Jantje.

"Make a noose and sling it about ye. I'll pull ye up," he heard a familiar voice, although he could not place it.

Luke knotted the rope about his body. Slowly he felt himself being dragged up the slippery ascent, amid a cloud of sand. Another moment, and he sank down exhausted upon the surface under the thorn scrub.

He looked into the face peering into his own and recognized it as that of the half-mad, wandering prospector, Pete Flanagan.

## CHAPTER V THE RENDEZVOUS

THE contents of Pete's flask of water liberally mixed with raw Cape spirit, soon brought Luke back to complete consciousness. He staggered to his feet and caught his rescuer by the arm.

"Emmy Duplessis!" he cried.

"Hurray!" yelled Pete. "Emmy and old Jan and diamonds! They got the diamonds, policeman, but they won't have them long. You and me and Emmy and old Jan, and the

big, shining diamonds! You're lucky not to be rotting with them two poor fellows, policeman. If I hadn't heard 'em talking, and guessed they had another policeman here, the hyenas would be crunching your bones now, like them poor fellows."

Luke pulled himself together and observed his companion. Old Pete was drunk, incoherently drunk, and in that condition he was a sort of childish madman. He tapped him on the shoulder.

"Listen, Flanagan. You've seen Emmy?"

"I've seen her. Van Reenen's got her and old Jan in the nice house I builded me long ago. He thinks he's got the diamonds, too, but old Pete Flanagan was too clever for 'em. Those two poor fellows was calling for days, but Van Reenen wouldn't let me go to them."

Luke shuddered at the words.

"Ya! They thought Pete Flanagan was a harmless old drunkard, so they didn't kill him, only fed him brandy and locked him in the room. Tonight I heard them saying they'd got another policeman in the pit, and I gave them the slip, because I knew you'd help me get the diamonds." His voice took on a note of frenzy. "Diamonds, big yellow boys I found, policeman! We'll get them, you and me and Van Reenen, and share them. That's why I come to you, so as you'll clean up that nest of thieves and get the diamonds."

"Where is it? Where's this place they're holding Emmy?"

"Not far. We're going to get them now. You and me, and then the diamonds. Big, fine, white, shining stones, policeman! You and me, and old Jan—"

He went on babbling incoherently. Luke shook off the last traces of his mental confusion. He was feeling stronger now. Old Pete's horse was standing near, and that reminded Luke of his own. He had no hope of finding the animal, of course. Either it had

strayed or Hart and his crowd had roped it in. Nevertheless, he decided to go back to the pass.

Explaining to Flanagan, who regarded him with a look of suspicion, then followed him, Luke went back. Of course there was no sign of the horse. Dawn was not far away and the moon was down. It was impossible to see far despite the brilliance of the stars. He would not wait till day; he was burning to get on and find Emmy.

He had left his carbine on the saddle. He carried only his service revolver and three or four dozen rounds of ammunition. Moreover, he was one man against seven or eight. But delay was not to be thought of.

"Come, Pete, show me where they are," he insisted.

Pete urged him to ride.

"You'll need the horse for fighting," he hiccupped. "I ain't going to fight. I'm only showing you where the diamonds is, and you divide with old Pete. You won't keep them all?" he pleaded anxiously, upturning a face as woeful as a child's.

"I'll see that they're divided fairly, according to the law," answered Luke, and Pete seemed satisfied. Chuckling and staggering, the old man took up the trail, first past that awful pit of death, then through the scrub.

How far it was, Luke had no idea, but they had not gone more than a mile or two, and there was only the faintest tinge of saffron in the east when the flicker of a campfire appeared through the scrub, at the base of a low *kopje*.

Pete indicated to Luke to dismount, and he did so, fastening the horse to a thorn tree. Silently the two crept forward, not going directly toward the fire, however, but circling it. Luke pushed through the scrub in the old man's wake, until he reached a clearing.

In the distant foreground, outlined by the fire, he could see a queer little brick house,

composed of hand-pressed bricks, which Flanagan had fashioned in the simplest manner with a wooden square out of earth and water, evidently the structure that he had made for himself during the years that he haunted the desert. Immediately before him, in the centre of the clearing, Luke saw a wide hole in the ground. At the top was a crude windlass for letting down a bucket.

Cautiously he went forward. The pit was of blue earth—the famous diamond earth that decomposes into a yellow clay after exposure to sunlight for a lengthy period, revealing the stones embedded within. Beside the pit was a long, leveled stretch of ground, covered with decomposing clay.

Luke looked at it and was completely enlightened as to the motives that had led to the murder of his companions, and the kidnaping of Emmy and her father. There was no doubt but that Hart and his men had discovered the diamond pipe on old Jan's land, and had kidnaped him in order to force from him a deed to the property. The two murdered policemen must have nosed out the trail of the conspirators.

As Luke looked down he felt a tug at his arm. Pete Flanagan was at his side once more.

"They've got the stones!" he whimpered. "Big, white, shining stones, as good as De Beers. They're going to make their escape with them. My stones that I found when everybody laughed at old Pete and called him a madman! Kill them, policeman, and we'll divide the stones between ourselves. We'll be rich! We'll have everything we want. I tell you they are the finest stones that ever came out of South Africa!"

Suddenly, from the house, came an outburst of oaths and drunken laughter. Instantly Luke was all alert. Shaking off the old man, who vanished, still whimpering, into the darkness, Luke turned his steps toward the house, his hand gripping his revolver. As he

approached he heard a renewed outburst of quarreling, more distinct.

As he began to round the structure, he caught the faint reflected light of a candle upon the ground outside. Creeping nearer, Luke perceived that the building was divided into two rooms, to judge from a tiny window at the rear, but there seemed to be only a single door, with another window beside it.

Advancing softly to the rear window, Luke raised himself on tiptoes and looked inside. A single candle was guttering in its socket. Luke could make out an iron cot, and old Jan Duplessis stretched out upon it. From the posture in which the old man was lying Luke surmised that he was bound. It was impossible to see anything clearly.

Beside her father crouched Emmy, with ropes about her body. The sight awakened all the sergeant's indignation, and it was with difficulty that he succeeded in keeping in control his impulse to rush in upon the kidnapers in the outer room. He must act cautiously, he realized, if he was not to encounter disaster. How many of them there were he could not know for sure, but there would be, in addition to Brouwer and his two confederates, Van Reenen and the party he had brought with him and which had mocked the policeman from the edge of the pit.

If only Pete Flanagan could be relied on! But Luke realized that the old man would be worse than useless in an emergency.

He made his way around the house to the little window beside the door, and peered through the sheets of mica that covered it. Dimly he could see that there were seven men in the room. Four of them, Hart, Van Reenen, Brouwer, and Baldy Smith, were seated around a table, thumbing a pack of greasy cards by the light of a candle stuck into the neck of a bottle. The three others were stretched out upon the floor asleep. Each of the players had a bottle of Cape smoke and a tin mug before him, and a pile of money at his

side.

As the sergeant hesitated, preparing for the leap through the doorway beside the window, the wrangle broke out again, and he awaited the propitious moment.

Hart and Van Reenen were facing each other across the table, snarling savagely. Baldy Smith and Brouwer, upon opposite sides, looked on at the dispute impassively to outward appearances, yet their unconscious attitude showed that the former was with Hart, as the latter was with the Dutchman.

"You've won that pot, Hart," Van Reenen shouted, "but I want my revenge! I'll play you for the mine. The whole damn mine and all the stones we've got to go to the winner of the next pot! Are you game, Hart? Or are you afraid? All to the winner of the next pot, I say, after Baldy and Brouwer here have had their share. If you win the stones, I'll be satisfied with the girl!"

## CHAPTER VI RED BATTLE!

"I'LL go you, Van Reenen!"

Hart's face was livid with excitement. Luke saw Brouwer glance at Van Reenen, lean toward him, and whisper something.

"You keep out of it, Brouwer!" Hart shouted. "This here's between Van Reenen and me. All or none—that's the game I've played all my life, and by God I'll play it now! First pot, the winner takes the stones. If either of you two blokes wins, it's off till the next one."

"Stones or the girl!" Van Reenen affirmed. "The winner gets his choice, the loser takes the other."

"To hell with her! If you win the stones, you can have her, too!" shouted Hart. "Cut the cards, Baldy. Van Reenen deals."

The play began. Brouwer opened on

the second deal. He drew two cards. Van Reenen drew three, Hart one, and Baldy Smith sat out. Brouwer bet five pounds, and Van Reenen raised him five. Hart raised five more.

The betting grew faster and more furious. Luke, completely absorbed in the spectacle, and concluding his moment had not yet come, crouched between the window and the doorway, listening. One of the three drunken men upon the floor staggered to his feet and came up to the table, blinking in the light of the candle. The two others sat up.

“And ten!” yelled Van Reenen, pushing forward two five-pound notes into the great heap in the centre of the table. “That’s the last of my money. Never mind raising me no more. See me, if you ain’t afraid!”

“I’ll see you!” Hart shouted.

Brouwer, though he had opened, had withdrawn from the game in the beginning. His eyes were watching the three men like a hawk’s, Baldy more than either Hart or Van Reenen. The gold formed a pyramid, prevented from toppling over by the crumpled five-pound notes that banked it up.

Slowly Hart laid down two pairs, queens up. Van Reenen, with a savage shout, revealed two pairs, aces up, on his side of the table.

The shouting gave place to absolute silence. The three men were standing watching. Luke felt his heart thumping. In a moment...

With a snarl, Van Reenen dropped his fifth card, a deuce. He had been playing with two pairs.

Hart, with a shout of triumph, disclosed another queen, giving him a full house, queens and tens.

“It’s mine! My game, and my stones!” he yelled, and reached for the kitty.

As if the others had been awaiting that precise movement on Hart’s part, Van Reenen’s and Brouwer’s guns roared out their death-message simultaneously. It was at Baldy

Smith that Brouwer fired, Van Reenen at Hart.

Baldy’s gun alone answered. He had been waiting for that move. But he was a second late. Brouwer’s bullet caught him between the eyes. He crumpled forward in his chair, collapsed, and rolled to the floor.

With a terrible cry Hart staggered back, upsetting the table, Van Reenen’s bullet in his throat. A wild, inhuman scream broke from his lips as he pressed his fingers to the wound, from which the blood came spurting.

There was the bitter foretaste of death in the wild cry that bubbled from Hart’s lips. Holding his wound, he rocked to and fro, while Van Reenen, knocked to the floor by the overturned table, deliberately picked himself up and walked toward him.

Deliberately he shot Hart through the brain. The bloated body crashed down among the gold that strewed the floor. Even as it fell the inner door burst open and Emmy Duplessis appeared upon the threshold, screaming.

Her arms were bound to her sides. She was struggling desperately to free herself. At the sight of the two dead men she screamed again.

With a howl of triumph Van Reenen leaped forward and seized her in his arms.

“I’ve got the stones, and I’ve got you, too, Emmy!”

By the light of the flickering candle in the little room behind, Sergeant Luke could see old Jan Duplessis struggling with his bonds as he tried to free himself from the iron cot to which he was bound.

The sergeant stepped inside the house, his revolver leveled at Van Reenen.

“Throw up your hands!”

At the sight of the man whom he had supposed to be lying in the death-pit, Van Reenen released Emmy and started back with a cry. His hands went up instinctively.

Brouwer was more quick-witted. Luke saw him, crouching over the overturned table,

draw rapidly. Both men fired together.

Luke had made an instinctive movement sidewise. He felt the other's bullet sear his cheek, like a red-hot iron. Brouwer pitched forward, regained his feet, and came stumbling forward, yelling like a maniac. But the words that poured from his lips were meaningless babble.

He stopped, twitched, and began to spin like a teetotum, his arms extended, his fingers twitching. Then he collapsed over the body of Hart. Cries and movements had all been purely reflex, for he had been shot through the brain.

The only light that now afforded was that of the single candle in the small inner room. It went out, upset by old Jan's frantic struggles to free himself. Outside the day was breaking, it was still night inside. Luke ran to where he thought Emmy was standing. He heard the girl's frightened gasps, but it was Van Reenen into whom he stumbled.

Like a flash the Dutchman wheeled upon him and fired. The bullet passed through Luke's sleeve, grazing the flesh. Luke fired and missed. Before he could fire again, Van Reenen had flung his arms around him, bearing him to the ground, howling to the three drunken men to come and finish the job.

Luke succeeded in gripping the other by the wrist and pointing the gun toward the floor. More he was unable to do. Van Reenen was at least as strong as he, and fighting desperately as he saw himself deprived of the diamonds for which he had staked everything.

In a moment the three confederates had precipitated themselves upon the sergeant.

"*Schiet hem!* [*"shoot!"-ed*] *Schiet, schiet!*" yelled Van Reenen, as he disengaged himself from the melee.

The four were struggling on the floor, rolling over and over. Luke's hand came in contact with his gun, which had been knocked out of it by the impact of Van Reenen's body. His fingers closed upon it. He fired into the

body of the man immediately above him, who was pinning him down, clutching him by the throat.

The grip relaxed. Luke struggled to his feet and fired again. The hammer fell upon a spent cartridge. He brought the muzzle smashing down upon the head of another of his assailants, heard the gurgle that came from the man's throat, and found himself free.

As he turned to face the last man and Van Reenen, a stunning blow fell on his head. He staggered backward, groping for consciousness. He heard a rifle roar, had a glimpse of old Jan Duplessis faintly outlined against the growing light, felt the wall against him, and, grasping for a hold, subsided into unconsciousness.

## CHAPTER VII FINALE!

THE taste of raw spirit in his mouth, the sound of an insistent voice in his ears brought Luke back to reality. He opened his eyes, staring at the bright sunlight that lay in a mottled pattern on the floor and walls of the cabin.

For a moment or two his mind went groping backward for a clue to his situation; then he saw the dead men huddled upon the floor and remembered.

He was lying half-propped against the wall. Old Jan Duplessis was bending over him, pouring the last drops of brandy down his throat.

The old man was still in the ropes that had fastened him. Only his right arm was free. Hampering him was a part of the iron cot from which he had broken away in his struggle. He was covered with blood from a wound in the upper part of the right arm, which hung helpless at his side.

Luke started up.

"Emmy!" he cried.

"He's got her, the *verdommte swart-sel!* He has taken her away, with the diamonds!"

"How long ago?"

"One hour. I have been trying to restore you. How is your head; Can you stand?"

Sergeant Luke forced himself to his feet with a groan. Although his wounded cheek had bled a good deal it was the blow on the head that had put him out of action. The room was whirling round him. Nevertheless he succeeded in standing without support.

"I'm going after him. Which way did he go?"

"Into the desert. There is a water-hole twenty miles away, but it is a hard ride—too hard for you. Once there he can circle back to the road that runs south thirty miles east of Boskop. If you untie these ropes, we can go together."

The sergeant tugged at the ropes, which had become knotted fast by the old man's struggles. He worked furiously. Each moment was carrying Emmy farther away from him. In five minutes he succeeded in loosening the main strand. After that it was not a difficult matter to free Duplessis from the remainder of the cot.

"We shall go. There are horses—" Duplessis began, but suddenly toppled backward in a dead faint. The loss of blood had overcome him.

A glance into the old man's pallid face showed Luke that Duplessis was in no condition to take up the pursuit. He must follow alone. He must key up all his strength and enterprise to that last accomplishment.

He lifted Duplessis up and staggered with him into the smaller room where he laid him upon the mattress from the cot. The old man opened his eyes and fixed them on Luke's face with intense anxiety.

"You'll get her?"

"I'll get her and bring her back safe,"

Luke promised him.

The brandy had revived his strength, though his head was still swimming, and ached abominably. He staggered out of the cabin. Three or four horses were standing a little distance away, grazing on a few blades of grass that grew around a small, sandy pool of water in a dry nullah. Luke, to his delight, recognized his own mount among them.

It came at his whistle. He led it back to a small shed in which were saddles, stores and equipment. He had it saddled and bridled in a few moments. Then he filled his water-flasks, found and reloaded his revolver and picked up the rifle lying on the floor with which Duplessis had shot the last of his assailants.

"I'll get her!" he told the old man. Mounting, he took up the trail indicated by the horse's hoofs in the heavy sand.

There was only one route Van Reenen could have taken. It ran straight between the two ranges of low, flanking hills toward the water-hole of which Duplessis had spoken, and of which Luke had heard, though it had never been patrolled. This was the most hideous part of the Ngami. Not a scrap of vegetation grew amid these parched and shifting sands.

From the water-hole there ran an old Bushman trail toward civilization. This was the trail by which Van Reenen hoped to return with the diamonds.

And Emmy?

The thought made Luke quicken his horse's gait despite the heat which, at eight in the morning, had already become insupportable. He rode toward the neck of the hills, feeling more comfortable than he had expected in spite of the dull ache in his head. He was forced to drink repeatedly from the water-bottle, for all his resolution not to use the precious supply until it became essential. The heat seemed to suck every drop of moisture out of his body.

Long before noon the desert had become a shimmering waste alive with mirages. Here on the horizon was a lake of sparkling water, there a great mountain where was nothing but the flat. The sand, stirred by a hot wind, rose up and filled his nostrils.

Luke felt himself a part of this mirage. It all seemed like a dream to him, that ride, or a play which he was witnessing, Only the realization of the prize at stake kept him upon his course.

At last, when he had surmounted the low rise of land at the neck, where the lines of *kopjes* came together, he came back to reality. There, far in the distance, were two little black specks, outlined against the vast face of the desert.

Emmy and Van Reenen!

He urged his tired horse on. He had drunk one of his canteens, but now, seeing that the beast was faltering for lack of water, he unscrewed the top of the other, and, after moistening his own lips, poured the whole contents down the horse's throat.

How far the water-hole was he could not know, but from that moment he lived only in the two figures an immeasurable distance ahead of him.

There was no possibility of taking cover in the flat of the desert, smooth as a billiard table save where the winds ruffled it, that now unveiled itself before him. They must have seen him.

Again he urged on his horse, but the distance between himself and the fugitives seemed hardly to decrease, and he had a nightmare feeling of standing still.

It was not until of a sudden, a shifting of the wind cleared away the haze and the mirage that he realized he had been steadily gaining on them. They were perhaps a little over half-a-mile distant.

Luke spurred his horse recklessly, driving it to the utmost.

A puff of smoke, the whistle of a bullet

past his head, the distant crack of the discharge a moment later. Again—again! Van Reenen was shooting wildly through the mirage. How far away was he?

Even as the horse made his last spurt Van Reenen appeared, looming immense through the wavering air, with Emmy on the horse beside him, her hands bound to her sides.

Next moment the two horses crashed together. Both went down. Luke felt the sting of the powder as Van Reenen's bullet brushed his cheek. He fired into the Dutchman's savage face, that grinned with bared teeth into his own. He saw the blue hole that suddenly appeared between the mouth and nostrils. Van Reenen's body crumpled.

After that Luke was only dimly aware of Emmy beside him, calling to him, shaking him. Several times he tried to rise, but the raging thirst and fever that had hold of him were stronger than his limbs.

Hours must have passed under that inferno of burning blue sky, with the inferno of molten copper blazing down. Then it was night. Emmy lay very quiet beside him. She still breathed faintly, but her lips were swollen out of all recognition, as he knew his own must be.

Hours of half-consciousness mixed with coma, then the terror of the dawn, now flooding the east with gold.

The sun was coming up. His last day, and Emmy's. Even if he had known the secret of the water-hole, he could not have risen to his feet. And that secret was hidden in the pulseless brain of that bloated thing not far away.

Shouts rang in Luke's ears. He closed his eyes, not to credit that hallucination. But they were strangely persistent.

Out of the depths of coma Luke came to himself as water was poured down his throat, to find himself looking into the face of Lieutenant Connell.

“It’s all right, old man. Keep still. Yes, she’s recovering, and we’ve brought spare horses. We’ll start back tonight. Jantje’s putting up the tent. He came back and notified the post just as I was opening a wire saying you’d gone to Kimberley. Here’s the clue. The pipe was on Duplessis’ land, and they tried to

force him to assign it.”

Weak as he was Luke gaped at the bag of stones, brilliant even in their uncut state, that Connell displayed.

But he forgot them as his eyes met Emmy’s.