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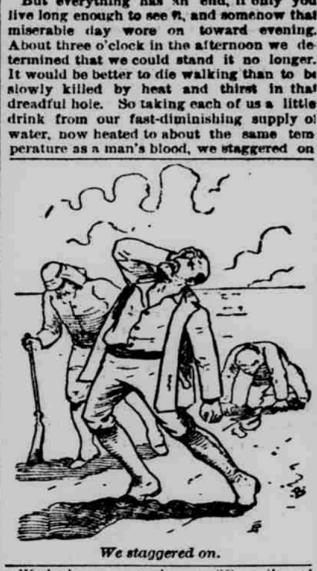


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KING Solomon's Mines.

BY H. RIDER HAGGARD.
We looked at each other blankly.
"I have it," said Good, "we must dig a hole and get in it and cover ourselves with karoo bushes."
It did not seem a very promising suggestion, but at least it was better than nothing, so we set to work, and with the trowel we had brought with us and our hands succeeded in about an hour in delving out a patch of ground about ten feet long by twelve wide to the depth of two feet. Then we cut a quantity of low scrub with our hunting-knives, and creeping into the hole pulled I over us all, with the exception of Ventvogel on whom, being a Hottentot, the sun had no particular effect. This gave us some slight shelter from the burning rays of the sun, but the heat in that amateur grave can be better imagined than described. The Black Hole of Calcutta must have been a fool to it; in deed, to this moment I do not know how we lived through the day. There we lay panting, and every now and then moistening our lips from our scanty supply of water. Had we followed our inclinations we should have finished all we had off in the first two hours, but we had to exercise the most rigid care, for if our water failed us we knew that we must quickly perish miserably.
But everything has an end, if only you live long enough to see it, and somehow that miserable day wore on toward evening. About three o'clock in the afternoon we determined that we could stand it no longer. It would be better to die walking than to be slowly killed by heat and thirst in that dreadful hole. So taking each of us a little drink from our fast-diminishing supply of water, now heated to about the same temperature as a man's blood, we staggered on.



We staggered on.
We had now covered some fifty miles of desert. If my reader will refer to the rough copy and translation of old Da Silvestra's map, he will see that the desert is marked as being forty leagues across, and the "par bad water" is set down as being about the middle of it. Now forty leagues is one hundred and twenty miles, consequently we ought at the most to be within twelve or fifteen miles of the water if any should exist. Through the afternoon we crept slowly and painfully along, scarcely doing more than a mile and a half an hour. At sunset we again rested, waiting for the moon, and after drinking a little managed to get some sleep.
Before we lay down Umbopa pointed out to us a slight and indistinct hillock on the flat surface of the desert about eight miles away. At the distance it looked like an ant-hill, and as I was dropping off to sleep I fell to wondering what it could be.
With the moon we started on again, feeling dreadfully exhausted, and suffering tortures from thirst and prickly heat. Nobody who has not felt it can know what we went through. We no longer walked, we staggered, now and then again falling from exhaustion, and being obliged to call a halt every hour or so. We had scarcely energy left in us to speak. Up to now Good had chatted and joked for us as a merry fellow; but now he had not a joke left in him. At last, about two o'clock, utterly worn out in body and mind, we came to the foot of this queer hill, or sand kopie, which did at first sight resemble a gigantic ant-heap about a hundred feet high, and covering at the base nearly a morgen (two acres) of ground.
Here we halted, and driven by our desperate thirst sucked down our last drops of water. We had but half a pint a head, and we could have drunk a gallon.
Then we lay down. Just as I was dropping off to sleep I heard Umbopa remark to himself in Zulu:
"If we cannot find water we shall all be dead before the moon rises to-morrow."
I shuddered, hot as it was. The prospect of such an awful death is not pleasant, but even the thought of it could not keep me from sleeping.

CHAPTER VI.
WATER! WATER!
In two hours' time, about four o'clock, I woke up. As soon as the first heavy demand of bodily fatigue had been satisfied, the torturing thirst from which I was suffering asserted itself. I could sleep no more. I had been dreaming that I was bathing in a running stream, with green banks and trees upon them, and I awoke to find myself in that arid wilderness, and to remember that as Umbopa had said, if we did not find water that day we must certainly perish miserably. No human creature could live long without water in that heat. I sat up and rubbed my grimy face with my dry and horny hands. My lips and eyelids were stuck together, and it was only after rubbing and with an effort that I was able to open them. It was not far off the dawn, but there was none of the bright feel of dawn in the air, which was thick with a hot murkiness I cannot describe. The others were still sleeping. Presently it began to grow light enough to read, so I drew out a little pocket copy of the "Ingoldsby Legends" I had brought with me, and read the "Jackdaw of Rheims." When I got to where—
"A nice little boy held a golden ewer,
Embosomed and filled with water,
As any that flows between Rheims and Namur."
I literally smacked my lips, or rather tried to smack them. The mere thought of that pure water made me mad.
As soon as we were all well awake we fell to discussing the situation, which was serious enough. Not a drop of water was left. We turned the water-bottles upside down, and licked the tops, but it was a failure; they were as dry as bone. Good, who had charge of the bottle of brandy, got it out and looked at it longingly; but Sir Henry promptly took it away from him, for to drink raw spirit would only have been to precipitate the end.
"If we do not find water we shall die," he

"If we can trust to the old don's map there should be some about," I said; but nobody seemed to derive much satisfaction from the remark. It was so evident that no great faith could be put in the map. It was now gradually growing light, and as we sat blankly staring at each other, I observed the Hottentot Ventvogel rise and begin to walk about with his eyes on the ground. Presently he stopped short, and uttering a guttural exclamation, pointed to the earth.
"What is it?" we exclaimed; and simultaneously rose and went to where he was standing pointing at the ground.
"Well," said I, "it is pretty fresh spring-bok spoor; what of it?"
"Springboks do not go far from water," he answered in Dutch.
"No," I answered, "I forgot; and thank God for it."
This little discovery put new life into us; it is wonderful how, when one is in a desperate position, one catches at the slightest hope, and feels almost happy in it. On a dark night a single star is better than nothing.
Meanwhile Ventvogel was lifting his snub nose, and sniffing the hot air for all the world like an old Impala ram who scents danger. Presently he spoke again.
"I smell water," he said.
Then we felt quite jubilant, for we knew what a wonderful instinct these wild-bred men possess.
Just at that moment the sun came up gloriously, and revealed so grand a sight to our astonished eyes that for a moment or two we even forgot our thirst.
For there, not more than forty or fifty miles from us, glittering like silver in the early rays of the morning sun, were Sheba's breasts; and stretching away for hundreds of miles on each side of them was the great Suliman Berg. Now that I, sitting here, attempt to describe the extraordinary grandeur and beauty of that sight, language seems to fail me. I am impotent even before its memory. There straight before us, were two enormous mountains, the like of which are not, I believe, to be seen in Africa, if, indeed, there are any other such in the world, measuring each at least fifteen thousand feet in height, standing not more than a dozen miles apart, connected by a precipitous cliff of rock, and towering up in awful white solemnity straight into the sky. These mountains standing thus like the pillars of a gigantic gateway, are shaped exactly like a woman's breasts. Their bases swelled gently up from the plain, looking, at that distance, perfectly round and smooth; and on the top of each was a vast round hillock covered with snow, exactly corresponding to the nipple on the female breast. The stretch of cliff which connected them appeared to be some thousand feet in height, and perfectly precipitous, and on each side of them, as far as the eye could reach, extended similar lines of cliff, broken only here and there by flat-topped mountains, something like the world-famed one at Cape Town; a formation, by the way, very common in Africa.
To describe the grandeur of the whole view is beyond my powers. There was something so impressively solemn and overpowering about those huge volcanoes—that it fairly took our breath away. For awhile the morning lights played upon the snow and the brown and swelling masses beneath, and then, as though to veil the majestic sight from our curious eyes, strange mists and clouds gathered and increased around them, till presently we could only trace their pure and gigantic outline swelling ghost-like through the feeble envelope. Indeed, as we afterward discovered, they were normally wrapped in this curious gauzy mist, which doubtless accounted for one not having made them out more clearly before.
Scarcely had the mountains vanished into cloud-clad privacy before our thirst—literally a burning question—reasserted itself.
It was all very well for Ventvogel to say he smelled water, but look which way we would we could see no signs of it. So far as the eye could reach there was nothing but arid sweltering sand and karoo scrub. We walked round the hillock and gazed about anxiously on the other side, but it was the same story; not a drop of water was to be seen; there was no indication of a pan, a pool, or a spring.
"You are a fool," I said, angrily, to Ventvogel; "there is no water."
But still he lifted his ugly snub nose and sniffed.
"I smell it, Baas" (master), he answered; "it is somewhere in the air."
"Yes," I said, "no doubt it is in the clouds, and about two months hence it will fall and wash our bones."
Sir Henry stroked his yellow beard thoughtfully. "Perhaps it is on the top of the hill," he suggested.
"Rot," said Good; "whoever heard of water being found on the top of a hill!"
"Let us go and look," I put in, and hopelessly enough we scrambled up the sandy sides of the hillock, Umbopa leading. Presently he stopped as though he were petrified.

Presently he stopped as though petrified.
"Nanzia manzie!" (here is water), he cried with a loud voice.
We rushed up to him, and there, sure enough, in a deep cup or indentation on the very top of the sand kopie was an undoubted pool of water. How it came to be in such a strange place we did not stop to inquire, nor did we hesitate at its black and uninviting appearance. It was water, or a good imitation of it, and that was enough for us. We gave a bound and a rush, and in another second were all down on our stomachs sucking up the inviting fluid as though it were nectar fit for the gods. Heavens, how we did drink! Then when we had done drinking we tore off our clothes and sat down in it, absorbing the moisture through our parched skins. You my reader, who have only to turn on a couple of taps and summon "hot" and "cold" from an unseen vasty boiler, can have little idea of the luxury of that muddy wallow in brackish tepid water.
After awhile we rose from it, refreshed indeed, and fell to on our "biltong," of which we had scarcely been able to touch a mouthful for twenty-four hours, and ate our fill. Then we smoked a pipe, and lay down by the side of that blessed pool under the overhanging shadow of the bank, and slept till

many.
All that day we rested there by the water, thinking our stars that we had been lucky enough to find it, and as it was, and not forgetting to render a due share of gratitude to the shade of the long-departed Da Silvestra, who had corked it down so accurately on the tail of his shirt. The wonderful thing to us was that it should have lasted so long, and the only way that I can account for it is by the supposition that it is fed by some spring deep down in the sand.
Having filled both ourselves and our water-bottles as full as possible, in far better spirits we started off again with the moon. That night we covered nearly five-and-twenty miles, but, needless to say, found no more water, though we were lucky enough on the following day to get a little shade behind some ant-heaps. When the sun rose and, for awhile, cleared away the mysterious mists, Suliman's Berg and the two majestic breasts, now only about twenty miles off, seemed to be lowering right above us, and looked grander than ever. At the approach of evening we started on again, and, to cut a long story short, by daylight next morning found ourselves upon the lowest slopes of Sheba's left breast, for which we had been steadily steering. By this time our water was again exhausted and we were suffering severely from thirst, nor indeed could we see any chance of relieving it till we reached the snow line far, far above us. After resting an hour or two, driven to it by our torturing thirst, we went on again, toiling painfully in the burning heat up the lava slopes, for we found that the huge base of the mountain was composed entirely of lava beds belched out in some far past age.
By eleven o'clock we were utterly exhausted and were, generally speaking, in a very bad way, indeed. The lava clinkers, over which we had to make our way, though comparatively smooth compared with some clinker I have heard of, such as that on the Island of Ascension for instance, was yet rough enough to make our feet very sore, and this together with our miseries, had pretty well finished us. A few hundred yards above us were some large lumps of lava, and toward these we made with the intention of lying down beneath their shade. We reached them, and, to our surprise, so far as we had a capacity for surprise left in us, on a little plateau or ridge close by we saw that the lava was covered with a dense green growth. Evidently soil formed from decomposed lava had rested there, and in due course had become the receptacle of seeds deposited by birds. We did not take much further interest in the green growth, for one cannot live on grass like Nebuchadnezzar. That requires a special dispensation of Providence and peculiar digestive organs. So we sat down under the rocks and groaned, and I for one heartily wished that we had never started on this fool's errand. As we were sitting there I saw Umbopa get up and hobble off toward the patch of green, and in a few minutes afterward, to my great astonishment, I perceived that usually uncomely dignified individual dancing and shouting like a maniac and waving something green. Off we all scrambled toward him as fast as our wearied limbs would carry us, hoping that he had found water.
"What is it, Umbopa, son of a fool!" I shouted in Zulu.
"It is food and water, Macmazahn," and again he waved the green thing.
Then I saw what he had got. It was a melon. We had lit upon a patch of wild melons, thousands of them and dead ripe.
"Melons!" I yelled to Good, who was next me, and in another second he had his false teeth fixed in one.
I think we ate about six each before we had done, and, poor fruit as they are, I doubt if I ever thought anything nicer.
But melons are not satisfying, and when we had satisfied our thirst with their pulpy substance, and set a stock to cool by the simple process of cutting them in two and setting them end on in the hot sun to get cold by evaporation, we began to feel exceedingly hungry. We had still some biltong left, but our stomachs turned from biltong, and besides we had to be very sparing of it, for we could not say when we should get more.
Just at this moment a lucky thing happened. Looking toward the desert I saw a flock of about ten large birds flying straight toward us.
"Skit, Baas, skit!" (shoot, master, shoot), whispered the Hottentot, throwing himself on his face, an example which we all followed.
Then I saw that the birds were a flock of paww (bustards), and that they would pass within fifty yards of my head. Taking one of the repeating Winchesters I waited till they were nearly over us, and then jumped on to my feet. On seeing me the paww bunched together, as I expected they would, and I fired two shots straight into the thick of them, and, as luck would have it, brought one down, a fine fellow, that weighed about twenty pounds. In half an hour we had a fine meal of dry melon stalks, and he was roasting over it, and we had such a feed as we had not had for a week. We ate that paww; nothing was left of him but his bones and his beak, and felt not a little the better afterward.
That night we again went on with the moon, carrying as many melons as we could with us. As we got higher up we found the air getting cooler and cooler, which was a great relief to us, and at dawn, so far as we could judge, were not more than about a dozen miles from the snow-line. Here we found more melons, so had no longer any anxiety about water, for we knew that we should soon get plenty of snow. But the ascent had now become very precipitous, and we made but slow progress, not more than a mile an hour. Also that night we ate our last morsel of biltong. As yet, with the exception of the paww, we had seen no living thing on the mountain, nor had we come across a single spring or stream of water, which struck us very odd, considering all the snow about us, which must, we thought, melt sometimes. But as we afterward discovered, owing to some cause, which it is quite beyond my power to explain, all the streams flowed down upon the north side of the mountains.
We now began to grow very anxious about food. We had escaped death by thirst, but it seemed probable that it was only to die of hunger. The events of the next three miserable days are best described by copying the entries made at the time in my note-book.
21st May.—Started 13 A. M., finding the atmosphere quite cold enough to travel by day, carrying some water-melons with us. Struggled all day, but saw no more melons, having, evidently, passed out of their district. Saw no game of any sort. Halted for the night at sundown, having had no food for many hours. Suffered much during the night from cold.
22d.—Started at sunrise again, feeling very faint and weak. Only made five miles today; found some patches of snow, of which we ate, but nothing else. Camped at night under the edge of a great plateau. Cold bitter. Drank a little brandy each, and huddled ourselves together, each wrapped up in our blanket to keep ourselves alive. Are now suffering frightfully from starvation and weariness. Thought that Ventvogel would have died during the night.



Presently he stopped as though petrified.
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We rushed up to him, and there, sure enough, in a deep cup or indentation on the very top of the sand kopie was an undoubted pool of water. How it came to be in such a strange place we did not stop to inquire, nor did we hesitate at its black and uninviting appearance. It was water, or a good imitation of it, and that was enough for us. We gave a bound and a rush, and in another second were all down on our stomachs sucking up the inviting fluid as though it were nectar fit for the gods. Heavens, how we did drink! Then when we had done drinking we tore off our clothes and sat down in it, absorbing the moisture through our parched skins. You my reader, who have only to turn on a couple of taps and summon "hot" and "cold" from an unseen vasty boiler, can have little idea of the luxury of that muddy wallow in brackish tepid water.
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