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AUTHOR OF "KING SOLOMON'S MINES," "SHE," "JESS," "THE WITCH'S HEAD," ETC.

CHAPTER IX.
INTO THE UNKNOWN.

A week had passed, and we all sat at supper one night in the Mission dining room, feeling very much depressed in spirits, for the reason that we were going to say goodby to our kind friends the Mackenzies, and depart upon our way at dawn on the morrow. Nothing more had been seen or heard of the Masai, and save for a spear or two which had been overlooked, and was rusting in the grass, and a few empty cartridges where we had stood outside the wall, it would have been difficult to tell that the old cattle kraal at the foot of the slope had been the scene of so desperate a struggle. Mackenzie was, thanks chiefly to his being so temperate a man, rapidly recovering from his wound, and could get about on a pair of crutches, and as for the other wounded men, one had died of gangrene, and the rest were in a fair way to recovery. Mr. Mackenzie's caravan of men had also returned from the coast, so that the station was now amply garrisoned.

Under these circumstances we concluded, warm and pressing as were the invitations for us to stay, that it was time to move on, first to Mt. Kenia, and thence into the unknown in search of the mysterious white race which we had set our hearts on discovering. This time we were going to progress by means of the humble but useful donkey, of which we had collected no less than a dozen to carry our goods and chattels, and, if necessary, ourselves. We had now but two Wakwafis left for servants, and found it quite impossible to get other natives to venture with us into the unknown parts we proposed to explore.

That evening, while we were sitting on the veranda, smoking a pipe before turning in, who should come up to us but Alphonse, and with a magnificent bow announce his wish for an interview. Being requested to fire away, he explained at some length that he was anxious to attach himself to our party—a statement that astonished me not a little, knowing what a coward the little man was. The reason, however, soon appeared. Mr. Mackenzie was going down to the coast, and thence on to England. Now, if he went down country, Alphonse was persuaded that he would be seized, extradited, sent to France and guillotined. This was the idea that haunted him, as King Charles' head haunted Mr. Dick, and he brooded over it till his imagination exaggerated the danger ten times. As a matter of fact, the probability is that his offense against the laws of his country had long ago been forgotten, and that he would have been allowed to pass unmolested anywhere except in France; but he could not be got to see this. Constitutional coward as the little man was, he infinitely preferred to face the certain hardships and great risks and dangers of such an expedition as ours than to expose himself, notwithstanding his intense longing for his native land, to the possible scrutiny of a police officer—which is, after all, only another exemplification of the truth that, to the majority of men, a far off, foreseen danger, however shadowy, is much more terrible than the most serious present emergency. After listening to what he had to say, we consulted among ourselves, and finally agreed, with Mr. Mackenzie's knowledge and consent, to accept his offer. To begin with, we were very shorthanded, and Alphonse was a quick, active fellow, who could turn his hand to anything, and cook—ah, he could cook! I believe that he would have made a palatable dish of those gaiters of his heroic grandfather which he was so fond of talking about. Then he was a good tempered little man, and merry as a monkey, while his pompous, vainglorious talk was a source of infinite amusement to us; and what is more, he never bore malice. Of course, his being so pronounced a coward was a great drawback to him, but now that we knew his weakness, we could more or less guard against it. So, after warning him of the undoubted risks he was exposing himself to, we told him that we would accept his offer on condition that he would promise implicit obedience to our orders. We also promised to give him wages at the rate of £10 a month should he ever return to a civilized country to receive them. To all of this he agreed with alacrity, and retired to write a letter to his Annette, which Mr. Mackenzie promised to post when he got down country. He read it to us afterward, Sir Henry translating, and a wonderful composition it was. I am sure the depth of his devotion and the narration of his sufferings in a barbarous country, "far, far from thee, Annette, for whose adored sake I endure such sorrow," ought to have touched up the feelings of the stoniest hearted chambermaid.

Well, the morrow came, and by 7 o'clock the donkeys were all loaded, and the time of parting was at hand. It was a melancholy business, especially saying goodby to dear little Flossie. She and I were great friends, and often used to have talks together—but her nerves had never got over the shock of that awful night when she lay in the power of those bloodthirsty Masai. "Oh, Mr. Quatermain," she cried, throwing her arms round my neck and bursting into tears, "I can't bear to say goodby to you. I wonder when we shall meet again?"

"I don't know, my dear little girl," I said. "I am at one end of life and you are at the other. I have but a short time before me at best, and most things lie in the past, but I hope that for you there are many long and happy years, and everything lies in the future. By and by you will grow into a beautiful woman, Flossie, and all this wild life will be like a far off dream to you, but I hope, even if we never do meet again, that you will think of your old friend and remember what I say to you now. Always try to be good, my dear, and to do what is right, rather than what happens to be pleasant, for in the end, whatever sneering people may say, what is good and what is happy are the same. Be unselfish, and whenever you can, give a helping hand to others—for the world is full of suffering, my dear, and to alleviate it is the noblest end that we can set before us. If you do that you will become a sweet and God fearing woman and make many people's lives a little brighter, and then you will not have lived, as so many of your sex do, in vain. And now I have given you a lot of old fashioned advice, and so I am going to give you something to sweeten it with. You see this little piece of paper. It is what is called a check. When we are gone give it to your father with this note—not before, mind. You will marry one day, my dear little Flossie, and it is to buy you a wedding present which you are to wear, and your daughter after you, if you have one, in remembrance of Hunter Quartermain."

Poor little Flossie cried very much, and gave me a lock of her bright hair in return, which I still have. The check I gave her was for £1,000 (which, being now well off, and having no calls upon me except those of charity, I could well afford), and in the note I directed her father to invest it for her in government security, and when she married or came of age, to buy her the best diamond necklace he could get for the money and accumulated interest. I chose diamonds because I think now that King Solomon's mines are lost to the world, their price will never be much lower than it is at present; so that if in after life she should ever be in pecuniary difficulties, she will be able to turn them into money.

Well, at last we got off after much handshaking, hat waving, and also farewell saluting from the natives, Alphonse weeping copiously (for he has a warm heart) at parting with his master and mistress; and I was not sorry for it at all, for I hate those goodbys. Perhaps the most affecting thing of all was to witness Umslopogaas' distress at parting with Flossie, for whom the grim old warrior had conceived a strong affection. He used to say that she was as sweet to see as the only star on a dark night, and was never tired of loudly congratulating himself on having killed the Lygonani who had threatened to murder her. And that was the last we saw of the pleasant Mission house—a true oasis in the desert—and of European civilization. But I often think of the Mackenzies, and wonder how they got down country, and if they are now safe and well in England, and will ever see these words. Dear little Flossie! I wonder how she fares there where there are no black folk to do her imperious bidding, and no sky piercing, snow clad Kenia for her to look at when she gets up in the morning. And so goodby to Flossie.

After leaving the Mission house we made our way comparatively unmolested past the base of Mount Kenia, which the Masai call "Donyo Egere," or the "speckled mountain," on account of the black patches of rock that appear upon its mighty spire, where the sides are too precipitous to allow of the snow lying on them; then on past the lonely lake Baringo, where one of our two remaining Askari, having unfortunately trodden upon a puff adder, died of snake bite in spite of all our efforts to save him. Thence we proceeded a distance of about 150 miles to another magnificent snow clad mountain, called Lekakisera, which has never, to the best of my belief, been visited before by a European, but which I cannot now stop to describe. There we rested a fortnight, and then started out into the trackless and uninhabited forest of a vast district called Elgumi. On emerging from the great Elgumi forest, we, still steering northward, in accordance with the information Mr. Mackenzie had collected from the unfortunate wanderer who reached him only to die so tragically, struck the base in due course of the large lake called Laga by the natives, which is about fifty miles long by twenty broad, and of which it may be remembered he made mention. Thence we pushed on nearly a month's journey over great rolling uplands something like those in the Transvaal, but diversified by patches of bush country.

Into the unknown.

All this time we were continually ascending at the rate of about 100 feet every ten miles. Indeed, the country was on a slope which appeared to terminate at a mass of snow tipped mountains, for which we were steering, and where we learned the second lake, of which the wanderer had spoken as the lake without a bottom, was situated. At length we arrived there, and having ascertained that there was a large lake on the top of the mountains, ascended 3,000 feet more till we came to a precipitous cliff or edge, to find a great sheet of water, some twenty miles square, lying 1,500 feet below us and evidently occupying an extinct volcanic crater or craters of vast extent. Perceiving villages on the border of this lake, we descended with great difficulty through forests of pine trees, which now clothed the precipitous sides of the crater, and were well received by the people, a simple, unwarlike folk, who had never seen or even heard of a white man before, and treated us with great reverence and kindness, supplying us with as much food and milk as we could eat and drink. This wonderful and beautiful lake lay, according to our aneroid, at a height of no less than 11,450 feet above sea level, and its climate was quite cold, and not at all unlike that of England. Indeed, for the first three days of our stay there we saw little or nothing of the scenery, on account of an unmistakable Scotch mist which prevailed. It was this rain that set the tsetse poison working in our remaining donkeys, so that they all died.

This disaster left us in a very awkward position, as we had now no means of transport whatever, though, on the other hand, we had not much to carry. Ammunition, too, was very short, amounting to but 150 rounds of rifle cartridges and some fifty shotgun cartridges. How to get on we did not know; indeed it seemed to us that we had about reached the end of our tether. Even if we had been inclined to abandon the object of our search, which, shadow as it was, was by no means the case, it was ridiculous to think of forcing our way back some 700 miles to the coast in our present plight; so we came to the conclusion that the only thing to be done was to stop where we were—the natives being so well disposed and food plentiful—for the present, and abide events and try to collect information as to the countries beyond.

Accordingly, having purchased a capital log canoe, large enough to hold us all and our baggage, from the headman of the village we were staying in, presenting him with three empty cold drawn brass cartridges by way of payment, with which he was perfectly delighted, we set out to make a tour of the lake in order to find the most favorable place to make a camp. As we did not know if we should return to this village, we put all our gear into the canoe, and also a quarter of cooked water buck, which when young is delicious eating, and off we set, natives having already gone before us in light canoes to warn the inhabitants of the other villages of our approach.

As we went we began to pass a considerable accumulation of floating rushes, weed, boughs of trees, and other rubbish, brought, Good supposed, to this spot by some current, which he was much puzzled to account for. While we were speculating about this, Sir Henry pointed out a flock of large white swans, which were feeding on the drift some little way ahead of us. Now I had already noticed swans flying about this lake, and having never come across them before in Africa, was exceedingly anxious to obtain a specimen. I had questioned the natives about them, and learned that they came from over the mountain, always arriving at certain periods of the year in the early morning, when it was very easy to catch them, on account of their exhausted condition.

Well, we set to work to stalk the swans, which kept drawing as they fed nearer and nearer to the precipice, and at last we pushed the canoe under shelter of a patch of drift within forty yards of them. Sir Henry had the shotgun loaded with No. 1, and waiting for a chance, got two in a line, and, firing at their necks, killed them both. Up rose the rest, thirty or more of them, with a mighty splashing, and, as they did so, he gave them the other barrel. Down came one fellow with a broken wing, and I saw the leg of another drop and a few feathers start out of his back, but he went on quite strong. Up went the swans, circling ever higher and higher till at last they were mere specks level with the top of the frowning precipice, when I saw them form into a triangle and head off for the unknown northeast. Meanwhile we had picked up our two dead ones, and beautiful birds they were, weighing not less than about thirty pounds each, and were chasing the winged one, which had scrambled over a mass of drift weed into a pool of clear water beyond. Finding a difficulty in forcing the canoe through the rubbish, I told our only remaining Wakwafi servant, whom I knew to be an excellent swimmer, to jump over, dive under the drift, and catch him, knowing that as there were no crocodiles in this lake he could come to no harm. Entering into the fun of the thing the man did so, and soon was dodging about after the winged swan in fine style, getting gradually nearer to the rock wall, against which the water washed as he did so.

Suddenly he gave up swimming after the swan, and began to cry out that he was being carried away; and indeed we saw that, though he was swimming with all his strength toward us, he was being drawn slowly toward the precipice. With a few desperate strokes of our paddles we pushed the canoe through the crust of drift and rowed toward the man as hard as we could, but, fast as we went, he was drawn faster toward the rock. Suddenly I saw that before us, just rising eighteen inches or so above the surface of the lake, was what looked like the top of the arch of a submerged cave or railway tunnel. Evidently, from the water mark on the rock several feet above it, it was generally entirely submerged; but there had been a dry season, and the cold had prevented the snow from melting as freely as usual, so the lake was low and the arch showed. Toward this arch our poor servant was being sucked with frightful rapidity. He was not more than twenty paces from it, and we were about thirty when I saw it, and with little help from us the canoe flew along after him. He struggled bravely, and I thought that we should have saved him, when suddenly I perceived an expression of despair come upon his face, and there before our eyes he was sucked down into the cruel, swirling, blue depths, and vanished; at the same moment I felt our canoe seized as with a mighty hand and propelled with resistless force toward the rock.

We realized our danger now, and rowed, or rather paddled, furiously in our attempt to get out of the vortex. In vain; in another second we were flying straight for the arch like an arrow, and I thought that we were lost. Luckily, I retained sufficient presence of mind to shout out, instantly setting the example by throwing myself into the bottom of the canoe, "Down on your faces—down!" and the others had the sense to take the hint. In another instant there was a grinding noise, and the boat was pushed down till the water began to trickle over the sides, and I thought that we were gone. But not suddenly the grinding ceased, and we could again feel the canoe flying along. I turned my head a little—I dared not lift it—and looked up. By the feeble light that yet reached the canoe I could make out that a dense arch of rock hung just over our heads, and that was all. In another minute I could not even make out as much as that, for the faint light had merged into shadow, and the shadows had been swallowed up in darkness utter and complete.

For an hour or so we lay there, not daring to lift our heads for fear lest the brains should be dashed out of them, and scarcely able to speak even, on account of the noise of the rushing water which drowned our voices. Not, indeed, that we had much inclination to speak, seeing that we were overwhelmed by the awfulness of our position and the imminent fear of instant death, either by being dashed against the sides of the cavern or on a rock, or being sucked down in the raging waters, or perhaps asphyxiated by want of air. All of these and many other modes of death presented themselves to my imagination as I lay at the bottom of the canoe listening to the swirl of the hurrying waters, which ran whither we knew not. One other sound only could I hear, and that was Alphonse's intermittent howl of terror coming from the center of the canoe, and even that seemed faint and unreal. Indeed the whole thing overpowered my brain, and I began to believe that I was the victim of some ghastly, spirit shaking nightmare.

CHAPTER X.
THE ROSE OF FIRE.

On we flew, drawn by the mighty current, till at last I noticed that the sound of the water was not half so deafening as it had been, and concluded that this must be because there was more room for the echoes to disperse in. I could now hear Alphonse's howls much more distinctly; they were made up of the oddest mixture of invocations to the Supreme Power and the name of his beloved Annette that it is possible to conceive; and, in short, though their evident earnestness saved them from profanity, were, to say the least, very remarkable. Taking up a paddle, I managed to drive it into his ribs, whereon he, thinking that the end had come, howled louder than ever. Then I slowly and cautiously raised myself on my knees and stretched my hand upward, but could touch no roof. Next I took the paddle and lifted it above my head as high as I could, but with the same result. I also thrust it out laterally to the right and left, but could touch nothing except water. Then I bethought me that there was in the boat, among our other remaining possessions, a bull's eye lantern and a tin of oil. I groped about and found it, and having a match on me, carefully lit it, and as soon as the flame had got a hold of the wick I turned it on down the boat. As it happened, the first thing the light lit on was the white and scared face of Alphonse, who, thinking that it was all over at last, and that he was witnessing a preliminary celestial phenomenon, gave a terrific yell, and was with difficulty reassured with the paddle. As for the other three, Good was lying on the flat of his back, his eyeglass still fixed in his eye, and gazing blankly into the upper darkness. Sir Henry had his head resting on the thwarts of the canoe, and with his hand was trying to test the speed of the water. But when the beam of light fell upon old Umslopogaas I could really have laughed. I think I have said that we had put a roast quarter of water buck into the canoe. Well, it so happened that when we all prostrated ourselves to avoid being swept out of the boat and into the water by the rock roof, Umslopogaas' head had come down uncommonly near this roast buck, and so soon as he had recovered a little from the first shock of our position it occurred to him that he was hungry. Thereupon he coolly cut off a chop with Inkosi-kaas, and was now employed in eating it, with every appearance of satisfaction. As he afterward explained, he thought that he was going "on a long journey," and preferred to start on a full stomach. It reminded me of the people who are going to be hanged, and who are generally reported in the English daily papers to have made "an excellent breakfast."

As soon as the others saw that I had managed to light up the lamp, we bundled Alphonse into the farther end of the canoe with a threat, which calmed him wonderfully, that if he would insist upon making the darkness hideous with his cries we would put him out of suspense by sending him to join the Wakwafi and wait for Annette in another sphere, and began to discuss the situation as well as we could. First, however, at Good's suggestion we bound two paddles mast fashion in the bows, so that they might give us warning against any sudden lowering of the roof of the cave or water way. It was clear to us that we were in an underground river, or, as Alphonse defined it, "main drain," which carried off the the superfluous waters of the lake. Such rivers are well known to exist in many parts of the world, but it has not often been the evil fortune of explorers to travel by them. That the river was wide we could clearly see, for the light from the bull's eye lantern failed to reach from shore to shore, although occasionally, when the current swept us either to one side or the other, we could distinguish the rock wall of the tunnel, which, as far as we could make out, appeared to arch about twenty-five feet above our heads. As for the the current itself, it ran, Good estimated, at least eight knots, and fortunately for us was, as is usual, fiercest in the middle of the stream. Still, our first act was to arrange that one of us with the lantern and a pole there was in the canoe should always be in the bows ready, if possible, to prevent us from being stove in against the side of the cave or any projecting rock. Umslopogaas, having already dined, took the first turn. This was absolutely, with one exception, all that we could do towards preserving our safety. The exception was that another of us took up a position in the stern with a paddle, by means of which it was possible to steer the canoe more or less, and to keep her from the sides of the cave. These matters attended to, we made a somewhat sparing meal off the cold buck's meat (for we did not know how long it might have to last us); and then feeling in rather better spirits, I gave my opinion that, serious as it undoubtedly was, I did not consider our position altogether without hope, unless, indeed, the natives were right, and the river plunged straight down into the bowels of the earth. If not, it was clear that it must emerge somewhere, probably on the other side of the mountains, and in that case all we had to think of was to keep ourselves alive till we got there, wherever "there" might be. But, of course, as Good lugubriously pointed out, on the other hand we might fall victims to a hundred unsuspected horrors, or the river might go winding away inside the earth till it dried up, in which case our fate would indeed be an awful one.

"Well, let us hope for the best and prepare ourselves for the worst," said Sir Henry, who is always cheerful and even spirited—a very tower of strength in the time of trouble. "We have come out of so many queer scrapes together that somehow I almost fancy we shall come out of this," he added.

This was excellent advice, and we proceeded to take it each in our separate ways—that is, except Alphonse, who had by now sunk into a sort of terrified stupor. Good was at the helm and Umslopogaas in the bows, so there was nothing left for Sir Henry and myself to do except lie down in the canoe and think. It certainly was a curious, and indeed almost a weird, position to be placed in—rushing along, as we were, through the bowels of the earth, borne on the bosom of a Stygian river, something after the fashion of souls being ferried by Charon, as Curtis said. As I how dark it was! the feeble ray from the little lamp did but serve to show the darkness. There in the bows sat old Umslopogaas, like Pleasure in the poem, watchful and untiring, the pole ready to his hand, and behind in the shadow I could just make out the form of Good, peering forward at the ray of light in order to make out how to steer with the paddle that he held, and now and again dipped into the water.

"Well, well," thought I, "you have come in search of adventures, Allan, my boy, and you have certainly got them. At your time of life too! you ought to be ashamed of yourself, but somehow you are not; and awful as it all is, perhaps you will pull through after all; and if you don't, why, you cannot help it, you see! And when all's said and done, an underground river will make a very appropriate burying place."

It was nearly mid day when we made our dive into darkness, and we had set our watch (Good and Umslopogaas) at 2, having agreed that it should be of a duration of five hours. At 7 o'clock, accordingly, Sir Henry and I went on, Sir Henry at the bow and I at the stern, and the other two lay down and went to sleep. For three hours all went well, Sir Henry only finding it necessary once to push us off from the side; and I that but little steering was required to keep us straight, as the violent current did all that was needed, though occasionally the canoe showed a tendency, which had to be guarded against, to veer and travel broadside on.

When I had been for three hours or so at the helm I began to notice a decided change in the temperature, which was getting warmer. At first I took no notice of it, but when at the expiration of another half hour I found that it was getting hotter and hotter, I called to Sir Henry and asked him if he noticed it or if it was only my imagination. "Noticed it?" he answered, "I should think so. I am in a sort of Turkish bath." Just about then the others woke up gasping and were obliged to begin to discard their clothes. Here Umslopogaas had the advantage, for he did not wear any to speak of except a mocha.

Hotter it grew, and hotter yet, till at last we could scarcely breathe, and the perspiration poured out of us. Half an hour more, and though we were all now stark naked we could hardly bear it. The place was like an antechamber of the infernal regions proper. I dipped my hand into the water, and drew it out almost with a cry; it was nearly boiling.

We consulted a little thermometer we had—the mercury stood at 123 degs. From the surface of the water rose a dense cloud of steam. Alphonse groaned out that we were already in purgatory, which indeed we were, though not in the sense that he meant it. Sir Henry suggested that we must be passing near the seat of some underground volcanic fire, and I am inclined to think, especially in the light of what subsequently occurred, that he was right. Our sufferings for some time after this really pass my powers of description. We no longer perspired, for all the perspiration had been sweated out of us; we simply lay in the bottom of the boat, which we were now physically incapable of directing, feeling like hot embers, and I fancy undergoing very much the same sensations that the poor fish do when they are dying on land, namely, that of slow suffocation. Our skins began to crack, and the blood to throb in our heads like the beating of a steam engine.

This had been going on for some time, when suddenly the river turned a little, and I heard Sir Henry call out from the bows in a hoarse, startled voice, and looking up saw a most wonderful and awful thing. About half a mile ahead of us, and a little to the left of the center of the stream—which we could now see was about ninety feet broad—a huge pillar like jet of almost white flame rose from the surface of the water and sprang fifty feet into the air, when it struck the roof and spread out some forty feet in diameter, falling back in curved sheets of fire shaped like the petals of a full blown rose. Indeed, this awful gas jet resembled nothing so much as a great flaming flower rising out of the black water. Below was the straight stalk, a foot or more thick, and above the dreadful bloom. And as for the fearfulness of it, and its fierce and awesome beauty, who can describe it? Certainly I cannot. Although we were now some 500 yards away, it, notwithstanding the steam, lit up the whole cavern as clear as day, and we could see that the roof was here about forty feet above and washed perfectly smooth with water. The rock was black, and here and there I could make out long, shining lines of ore running through it like great veins, but of what metal they were I know not.

On we rushed toward this pillar of fire, which gleamed fiercer than any furnace ever lit by man.

On we rushed toward the pillar of fire.

"Keep the boat to the right, Quatermain—to the right," shouted Sir Henry, and a minute afterward I saw him fall forward senseless. Alphonse had already gone. Good was the next to go. There they lay as though dead; only Umslopogaas and I kept our senses. We were within fifty yards of it now, and I saw the Zulu's head fall forward on his hands. He had gone, too, and I was alone. I could not breathe; the fierce heat dried me up. For yards and yards round the great rose of fire the rock roof was red hot. The wood of the boat was almost burning. I saw the feathers on one of the dead swans begin to twist and shrivel up; but I would not give in. I knew that if I did we should pass within three or four yards of the gas jet and perish miserably. I set the paddle so as to turn the canoe as far from it as possible, and held on grimly.

My eyes seemed to be bursting from my head, and through the closed lids I could see the fierce light. We were nearly opposite now; it roared like all the fires of hell, and the water boiled furiously around it. Five seconds more. We were past; I heard the roar behind me.

Then I, too, fell senseless. The next thing that I remember was feeling a breath of air upon my face. My eyes opened with great difficulty. I looked up. Far, far above me there was light, though around me was deep gloom. Then I remembered, and looked. The canoe still floated down the river, and in the bottom of it lay the naked forms of my companions. "Were they dead?" I wondered. "Was I left alone in this awful place?" I knew not. Next I became conscious of a burning thirst. I put my hand over the edge of the boat into the water and drew it up again with a cry. No wonder; nearly all the skin was burnt off the back of it. The water, however, was cold, or nearly so, and I drank pints and splashed myself all over. My body seemed to suck up the fluid as one may see a brick wall suck up rain after a drought; but where I was burned the touch of it caused intense pain. Then I bethought myself of the others, and dragging myself towards them with difficulty, I sprinkled them with water, and to my joy they began to recover—Umslopogaas first, then the others. Next they drank, absorbing water like so many sponges. Then, feeling chilly—a queer contrast to our recent sensations—we began as best we could to get into our clothes. As we did so Good pointed to the port side of the canoe; it was all blistered with heat, and in places actually charred. Had it been built like our civilized boats, Good said that the planks would have certainly warped and let in enough water to sink us; but fortunately it was dug out of the soft, willowy wood of a single great tree, and had sides nearly three inches and a bottom four inches thick. What that awful flame was we never discovered; but I suppose that there was at this spot a crack or hole in the bed of the river through which a vast volume of gas forced its way from its volcanic home in the bowels of the earth towards the upper air. How it first became ignited it is, of course, impossible to say—probably, I should think, from some spontaneous explosion of mephitic gases.

As soon as we had got some things on and shaken ourselves together a little we set to work to make out where we were now. I have said that there was light above, and on examination we found that it came from the sky. Our river that was, Sir Henry said, a literal realization of the wild vision of the poet, was no longer underground, but was running on its darksome way, not now through "caverns measureless to man," but between two frightful cliffs which cannot have been less than 2,000 feet high. So high were they, indeed, that though the sky was above us, where we were was dense gloom—not darkness, indeed, but the gloom of a room closely shuttered in the daytime. Up on either side rose the great straight cliffs, grim and forbidding, till the eye grew dizzy with trying to measure their sheer height. The little space of sky that marked where they ended lay like a thread of blue upon their soaring blackness, which was unrelieved by any tree or creeper. Here and there, however, grew ghostly patches of a long gray lichen, hanging motionless to the rock, as the white beard to the chin of a dead man. It seemed as though only the dregs or heavier part of the light had sunk to the bottom of this awful place. No bright winged sunbeam could fall so low; they died far, far above our heads.

By the river's edge was a little shore formed of round fragments of rock washed into this shape by the constant action of water, and giving the place the appearance of being strewn with thousands of fossil cannon balls. Evidently when the water of the underground river is high there is no beach at all, or very little, between the border of the stream and the precipitous cliffs; but now there was a space of seven or eight yards. And here, on this beach, we determined to land, in order to rest ourselves a little after all that we had gone through, and to stretch our limbs. It was a dreadful place, but it would give an hour's respite from the terrors of the river, and also allow of our repacking and arranging the canoe. Accordingly we selected what looked like a favorable spot, and with some little difficulty managed to beach the canoe and scramble out on to the round, inhospitable pebbles.

"My word," called out Good, who was on shore the first, "what an awful place! it's enough to give one a fit." And he laughed.

Instantly a thundering voice took up his words, magnifying them a hundred times. "Give one a fit—ho! ho! ho!" "A fit—ho! ho! ho!" answered another voice, in wild accents, from far up the cliff. "A fit! a fit! a fit!" chimed in voice after voice, each flinging the words to and fro with shouts of awful laughter to the invisible lips of the other till the whole place echoed with the words and with shrieks of fiendish merriment, which at last ceased as suddenly as they had begun.

"Oh, mon Dieu!" yelled Alphonse, startled quite out of such self command as he possessed.

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!" the Titanic echoes thundered, shrieked and wailed in every conceivable tone.

"Ah," said Umslopogaas, calmly, "I clearly perceive that devils live here. Well, the place looks like it."

I tried to explain to him that the cause of all the hubbub was a very remarkable and interesting echo, but he would not believe it.

"Ah," he said, "I know an echo when I hear one. There was one lived opposite my kraal in Zululand, and the Intombis" (maidens) "used to talk with it. But if what we hear is a full grown echo, mine at home can only have been a baby. No, no—they are devils up there. But I don't think much of them, though," he added, taking a pinch of snuff. "They can copy what one says, but they don't seem to be able to talk on their own account, and they dare not show their faces," and he relapsed into silence, and apparently paid no further attention to such contemptible fiends.

After this we found it necessary to keep our conversation down to a whisper—for it was really unbearable to have every word one uttered tossed to and fro like a tennis ball, as precipice called to precipice.

But even our whispers ran up the rocks in mysterious murmurs, till at last they died away in long drawn sighs of sound. Echoes are delightful and romantic things, but we had more than enough of them in that dreadful gulf.

As soon as we had settled ourselves a little on the round stones we proceeded to wash and dress our burns as well as we could. As we had but a little oil for the lantern we could not spare any for this purpose, so we skinned one of the swans and used the fat off its breast, which proved an excellent substitute. Then we repacked the canoe and finally began to take some food, of which I need scarcely say we were in need, for our insensibility had endured for many hours, and it was, as our watches showed, midday. Accordingly we seated ourselves in a circle, and were soon engaged in discussing our cold meat with such appetite as we could muster, which, in my case at any rate, was not much, as I felt sick and faint after my sufferings of the previous night, and had besides a racking headache. It was a curious meal. The gloom was so intense that we could scarcely see the way to cut our food and convey it to our mouths. Still we got on pretty well, although the meat was tainted by the heat through which it had passed, till I happened to look behind me—my attention being attracted by a noise of something crawling over the stones—and perceived sitting upon a rock in my immediate rear a huge species of black fresh water crab, only it was five times the size of any crab I ever saw. This hideous and loathsome looking animal had projecting eyes that seemed to glare at one, very long and flexible antennæ, or feelers, and gigantic claws. Nor was I especially favored with its company. From every quarter dozens of these horrid brutes were creeping up, drawn, I suppose, by the smell of the food from between the round stones and out of the holes in the precipice. Some were already quite close to us. I stared, quite fascinated by the unusual sight, and as I did so I saw one of the beasts stretch out its huge claw and give the unsuspecting Good such a nip that he jumped up with a howl and set the "wild echoes flying" in sober earnest. Just then, too, another, a very large one, got hold of Alphonse's leg, and declined to part with it, and, as may be imagined, a considerable scene ensued. Umslopogaas took his ax and cracked the shell of one with the flat of it, whereon it set up a horrid sort of screaming which the echoes multiplied a thousand fold, and began to foam at the mouth, a proceeding that drew hundreds more of its friends out of unsuspected holes and corners. Those on the spot, perceiving that the animal was hurt, fell upon it like creditors on a bankrupt, and literally rent it limb from limb with their huge pincers, and devoured it, using their claws to convey the fragments to their mouths. Seizing whatever weapons were handy, such as stones or paddles, we commenced a war upon the monsters, whose numbers were increasing by leaps and bounds, and whose stench was overpowering. So fast as we cracked their armor others seized the injured ones and devoured them, foaming at the mouth, and screaming as they did so. Nor did the brutes stop at that. When they could they nipped hold of us—and awful nips they were—or tried to steal the meat. One enormous fellow got hold of the swan we had skinned and began to drag it off. Instantly a score of others flung themselves upon the prey, and then began a ghastly and disgusting scene. How the monsters foamed and screamed, and rent the flesh and each other! It was a sickening and unnatural sight, and one that will haunt all who saw it till their dying day—enacted as it was in the deep, oppressive gloom, and set to the unceasing music of the many toned, nerve shaking echoes. Strange as it may seem to say so, there was something so shockingly human about these fiendish creatures—it was as though all the most evil passions and desires of man had got into the shell of a magnified crab and gone mad. They were so dreadfully courageous and intelligent, and they looked as if they understood. The whole scene might have furnished material for another canto of Dante's "Inferno," as Curtis said.

"I say, you fellows, let's get out of this, or we shall all go off our heads," sung out