Mitford Bertram

Harley Greenoak's Charge

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Chapter One.
The Opening of the Compact

"You will look after him, won't you?"

"Certainly. You can rely upon me absolutely."

Thus two men on the deck of a ship. One was silver-haired, elderly, spare and very refined looking. The other, of medium height, broadly built, and middle-aged, was, in his way, of striking appearance. His strong face, lined and sun-tanned, was half hidden in a full, iron-grey beard, and the keen blue eyes with their straight glance, were of that kind which would be deadly looking at you from behind the sights of a rifle. His hands, rough and hard, were like his face, burnt almost to a mahogany brown, the result of forty-five years' exposure – man and boy – to the varying climates of the southern section of the African continent. And the first speaker was Sir Anson Selmes, Bart., and the second was Harley Greenoak, hunter, prospector, native trader, native fighter, stock farmer, transport rider, and other things – all in turn. And as he plays an important part in some strange adventures which are to befall, we have dwelt somewhat at length upon his personal aspect. His character you shall discover for yourself.

"Rely upon you? I'm sure I can," went on Sir Anson, heartily. "And Dick has a boundless capacity for getting into scrapes of one kind or another. There's no vice in him, but he simply can't help it. You'll find him no sinecure, I'm afraid."

"Oh, as to that," answered Greenoak, easily, "we shall pull all right. You see, I've already been sizing him up to my own satisfaction or I wouldn't have undertaken to look after him."

"That I'm sure you wouldn't, Greenoak," laughed Sir Anson. "You're nothing if not decisive."

"I'm afraid a man gets rather blunt after leading a life like mine," said the other.

"I'm only too fortunate in getting hold of a man of your experience to look after the boy," rejoined the baronet, heartily. "Why, there he is."

The subject of their conversation burst upon them in his breezy way. He was a tall, fine young fellow of twenty-six, blue eyed, light haired, healthy, wholesome, athletic, and looking what he was – an English gentleman.

"Hallo, dad. What are you and Greenoak plotting there? Why, you've been in earnest confab for at least an hour. What's the subject?"

"Yourself, Dick," answered his father. "You know I only took the run over here for the sake of the voyage, but now you're over you'd better see something of the country, and do a few months' knocking about with Greenoak. He has very kindly consented to look after you, only he little knows what a handful he's undertaking."

The young fellow's face lit up.

"Why, that'll be ripping." Then remembering – "But what about yourself, dad? I can't leave you to go back all alone."

"Oh, I'll be all right. Dawson'll look after me; as he has done almost ever since I've had the honour of your acquaintance. This is an opportunity though, which you can't afford to lose, so we can consider it settled. Eh, Greenoak?"

"That's right, Sir Anson," was the reply, as the speaker fished out a handful of black Transvaal tobacco, which he kept loose in his side pocket, and proceeded to cram his pipe.

"By George, what times we'll have!" sang out Dick, delightedly. "We'll yarn about it presently. Now I'm in the middle of a game of quoits with those Johnson women, and as they're about the touchiest crowd on board I shall get in a row if I keep them waiting any longer."

He strode away, whistling, leaving his seniors to their conversation. These two – the English baronet and the South African up-country man, had made acquaintance during the outward voyage, and had grown very friendly indeed. And the result of this newly formed friendship was that Sir Anson had begged Greenoak to take charge of the young fellow – in short to take him round a bit – in quite an informal sort of way.

Greenoak, although he had put by something during his varied and roving life, was by no means opulent, and had fully intended, on his return trip from England, to start up-country again at once in some capacity or other. This new line was something of a novelty to him, but it was a very welcome one, for Sir Anson Selmes had arranged it upon the most liberal terms. He had given him an absolutely free hand in the matter of expenses, and the honorarium which he was to receive was generous to a degree.

"You're very confiding, Sir Anson," Greenoak remarked in his queer blunt way. "How do you know I shan't rob you? Why, you're almost putting a premium on any man doing so under that agreement."

Still discussing the arrangement just concluded, the two were seated in deck chairs in the shade afforded by a boat slung inward on chocks. The voyage was nearly at an end. The ship had lain three days in the Cape Town docks, and now was skirting Danger Point, with its lofty cliffs and treacherous archipelago of sunken reefs. There was a fine roll on, and every now and then the nose of the liner dipped deep into the green water, throwing up a seething splash of milky spume.

"Because," answered Sir Anson, "I know something of men, although my experience has been gained in a side of life totally different from your own. Apart from that, does it occur to you that you may not be entirely unknown to some of the passengers, and even, by repute, to the ship's officers? What if I may have heard it said, more than once, that Harley Greenoak's name is better than most men's witnessed signature?"

"Well, Sir Anson, I don't want to brag, but, since you put things that way, it has certainly always been as good," was the reply.

For a minute or two both men smoked on in silence, their gaze resting meditatively on the white lines of surf storming against the base of the iron cliffs at no great distance on the port beam. Then Greenoak said:

"I believe we can't be far from where the *Birkenhead* went down. In fact I shouldn't be surprised if this was the very spot."

"Let's hope not," rejoined Sir Anson. "I mean let's hope we're a little further out from land. But it's interesting to be on it, and I'm glad you reminded me. By Jove, but that is a story which no Englishman could read or dwell upon without a thrill of pride; for I don't believe any other country could produce its parallel. Think of the splendid discipline of those heroic fellows – rank and file alike – drawn up as though on parade, staring death – certain death – straight in the face without a qualm, so that the women and children should be saved. Yet a few did manage to swim ashore, but it has always been a perfect miracle to me that they did. Now, looking at that surf yonder, it is, if possible, a still greater one."

"It wasn't only the surf and the rocks they had to reckon on," said Harley Greenoak. "These waters are simply swarming with sharks."

"Yes, one heard that at the time, which renders it still more miraculous that a single man jack of them should have escaped."

"I know a man who did. He's in the Police, and came out here as a youngster in the *Birkenhead*. He said men were dragged down on each side of him while they were swimming. I tell you what it is, Sir Anson – if I were offered half a million of money to swim ashore from here now, even with

a boat a score of yards behind me, I'd say 'No thank you.' Of course a man is bound to 'go under' sooner or later, but I don't hanker after that method of doing so."

And the speaker, rising, went to the rail to knock the ashes out of his pipe.

"God bless my soul! What's that?" cried Sir Anson, half starting out of his chair.

For a cry rang out, sharp and clear – a cry which, next to that of "Fire," is the most thrilling of all to a floating community.

"Man overboard!"

A rush was made aft. The confusion and excitement among the passengers were indescribable. Men talked, women shrieked, and one fainted. And above this scene of terror and uproar, a tall figure, lightly clad, was seen to spring upon the taffrail. For just a second it stood poised, then with hands joined above the head, sprang far out in a splendid dive. And in that second the dismayed onlookers had time to make out the form of Dick Selmes.

At the sight a cheer broke forth, somewhat quavering, to be sure. Roughly charging through the crowd a quarter-master leapt aft, and with deft and powerful sweep of the arm hurled the lifebuoy in his hand far out and across the path of the swimmer. But the latter passed it unheeded. He required nothing to hamper his pace, as with a strong, swift side stroke he clove his way through and over the tumble of the waves. The "man overboard" was now seen to be a small boy, and he had already sunk twice. No, there was no time to be lost.

But even in that brief fraction of a minute Harley Greenoak had flung off his coat, and muttering, "He's bound to need help," had leaped upon the rail and sprung out into the sea, cleaving his way with no less powerful strokes to where the two were struggling.

Dick had reached the drowning boy, and was holding him up in firm athletic grasp, but there was a nasty choppy sea running, which, breaking into spume, both blinded and choked him. He was treading water now, as though to wait until the boat should be lowered. But Harley Greenoak had picked up the lifebuoy and was towing it towards the pair, whom in a few minutes he was seen to reach. Then something like a gasp of relief escaped the spectators. Those two powerful men, with the aid of the lifebuoy, should have no difficulty in keeping both themselves and their charge afloat until they were picked up. But there was one to whom this consideration brought little if any relief at all, and that one was Sir Anson Selmes.

The agony of the unhappy father was simply hideous to endure. The conversation of a minute or two back burnt into his brain like letters of fire. These waters were swarming with sharks, and had not Greenoak just declared that no consideration would tempt him to venture into the sea at this point. Yet hardly had the words left his mouth than he deliberately did that very thing. Even his frenzied apprehension for the safety of his son could not dim a glow of admiration for this cool, brave man who had courted the ghastly death he himself had pronounced to be almost certain, when the object was the saving of life. Every second seemed an hour, every minute a week. Would they *never* lower that boat?

But the way on the steamer was far too great to allow of her being stopped at once, consequently she was being brought round to the submerged three, and although this could not be done all in a minute, it could be in far less time than that taken to pull a boat any distance in such a choppy sea.

Hurrah! The boat dropped from the davits, and went plashing through the waves as fast as sinew and muscle could send her.

"We're all jolly," bawled Dick Selmes, "only look sharp. It's beastly cold."

The words, audible to those on the ship, raised a laugh that rounded off into a mighty cheer, as the boat was seen to gain its objective and the three were hoisted in.

"Thirteen minutes from the time of going over the side," said the officer in charge of the ship, closing his watch with a snap. "Not bad time that, sir?"

"No. It's good," said the captain, who, half asleep in his cabin, had been roused by the uproar and had quickly ascended to the bridge.

“Drowned rat Number One,” sang out Dick Selmes, shoving the cause of all the bother in front of him, as they gained the deck. Then there was a great deal of hugging and kissing on the part of the mother, which was cut short by the decisive voice of the doctor, ordering the drenched and shivering boy to be taken below at once.

“Dick, you scoundrel, what do you mean by behaving like that?” exclaimed Sir Anson rather unsteadily, as he wrung the defaulter’s hands again and again. “What d’you mean by it, sir? Ah, Greenoak, I told you you’d find him a handful, and he’s lost no time in backing up what I said. And you – Why, man, after what you were just telling me – swarming with sharks, eh? Heroic – that’s what it is. You’re a hero, sir – both heroes – and – ”

“I say, dad,” interrupted Dick, quizzically, “let’s have the speech later. We want to go and change and get something hot. I swear *I* do.”

This raised a great laugh among the lookers on, tailing off into a cheer, in the midst of which the dripping ones disappeared in the companion way, followed by Sir Anson.

Chapter Two.
A Beginning

"Good-bye, Greenoak."

"Good-bye, Sir Anson."

"No need to repeat my absolute confidence in leaving him in your hands," went on the latter. "You're already begun by saving his life."

"Oh, as to that I only helped him. He'd have been all right anyhow," replied Greenoak. "And," he added, "you won't mind my reminding you of one agreement – that of that subject we have heard more than enough!"

"I agreed to nothing of the sort. It's a subject of which we could not hear enough! Well, Greenoak, when your wanderings with the boy are over, come back home with him and make a good long stay at our place, though we have nothing more ferocious to shoot than pheasants and hares. Is that a promise?"

"Delighted, Sir Anson."

The above conversation took place in the otherwise empty smoking-room of the Port Elizabeth Club. The old gentleman was returning to England that afternoon, incidentally by the same liner that had brought them out. It would be more comfortable, he reckoned, than returning by a strange boat, and the sooner Dick set off on his travels the better; a theory, by the way, which was held by Dick even more firmly than by his father. The said Dick now put in his appearance.

"Time, dad," he said, comparing his watch with the mantelpiece clock. "The last launch, you know, and she won't wait. So come along."

"Good-bye again, Greenoak," said Sir Anson, as the two men heartily gripped hands. "And don't forget your promise."

"Good-bye to you, Sir Anson. And I won't."

So Dick and his father betook themselves to the landing-place, and Harley Greenoak betook himself to lunch. With characteristic judgment he had divined that father and son would prefer to be alone together at the last, and so had refrained from seeing the old gentleman off to the ship. Now as he sat in the club dining-room he was thinking, and his thoughts, needless to say, ran upon the charge he had just undertaken. To that end he was rather glad there was nobody he knew in the room.

Needless to say, too, that after the episode off Danger Point, which might so nearly have ended in tragedy, the tendency now among his fellow-passengers was to make very much of a hero of Dick Selmes, and more especially did this hold good of the "fair" section thereof. It was as well, perhaps, decided Harley Greenoak, that only a day or two remained for the absorption of all this adulation. Towards himself the tendency was not so marked, for which he was unaffectedly glad. He had borne part in too many strange and perilous episodes in his time for one, more or less, to afflict him with "swelled head." It was all in the day's work.

Dick Selmes, of course, had plenty of invitations, and could have got through six months easily before he had run through them all. But not to this end had he been placed in charge of Harley Greenoak. The latter meant him to see something of the hard and adventurous life of the country, even of its perils, and this Dick could scarcely effect by pleasant stays at this or that comfortable stock farm, with sport made easy; perchance, too, flirting like the mischief with this or that pretty daughter of his host *pro tem*. All of which Greenoak had put to him square and straight, and Dick Selmes had whole-heartedly agreed.

"I don't want to fool about, old chap," he had said. "I want to see something of the real thing."

"Thought you would, Dick," had been the answer. "Well, I see we're going to make a real up-country man of you before we've done."

Thinking over these things Greenoak sat. Then deciding that Dick would be returning from the ship about now, he concluded to stroll down and meet him.

He left the club. From the steep hill leading down to Main Street there was a view of the bay and the shipping, the homeward-bound liner flying the blue peter and sending up a thickening volume of smoke, while away behind the Winterhoek mountains rose soft and hazy against the unclouded sky.

"Hi! – hallo, Greenoak," and a hand dropped on his shoulder from behind; but he did not start, his nerves were in far too good training for that. He only stopped.

"That you, Simcox? How are you?"

The man thus addressed was about Greenoak's own age, hard, wiry, weather-beaten. A typical colonist of the downright rough-and-ready type. Now he exclaimed:

"Well, this is a surprise. And what brings you down here?"

The other told him.

"Rum thing, isn't it," he said with a laugh, "that at my time of life I should start out in the bear-leading line? Well, this is a particularly nice young chap, so that the job's likely to turn out 'clovery' all round."

"So?" said Simcox. "Why not bring him out to my place. We could get up a hunt or two, if he's fond of sport."

The very thing, decided Greenoak. The question of how and where to make a start was solved, so he answered:

"He just is. Well then, Simcox, thanks awfully, and we'll come. When?"

"Now. To-morrow morning."

"But we've got no horses."

"I can drive you out – that is, if that young Britisher can do without top-hats and swallow-tail suits. No room in the cart for all that sort of thing."

"He'll have to. Why, here he comes. This is an old friend of mine, Dick," he went on, introducing them. "He's got a farm out on the borders of the Addo Bush, and we're going out there with him to-morrow to do a little hunting. How's that?"

"Ripping," answered Dick, brightening up, for he had been a little "down" after his recent farewell. "Perfectly, absolutely ripping."

"We're a bit rough and tumble out at our place, you know," said the stock farmer, who was appraising his guest-elect. "No champagne and cigars and all that sort of thing. Eh, Greenoak?"

The latter nodded.

"I don't expect or want luxuries, Mr Simcox," answered Dick. "Shall I tell you what I do want?"

"What?"

"To shoot as many of your bucks and things as lean."

"You're heartily welcome to."

And Simcox laughed good-naturedly, and opined that Greenoak's "bear-leading" would be no very trying job after all.

"He'll do," he pronounced, with an approving nod towards the young fellow.

Chapter Three.
The Terror of the Addo

Simcox's farm, Buffels Draai, comprised about as wild a tract of bush country as exists, although not many hours' ride or drive from the busiest of Cape Colony towns. Before Dick Selmes had been in the house two hours he had completely won the hearts of Mrs Simcox and the two grown-up nice, plain, homely girls, but blessed with no particular outward attractions; while Simcox himself pronounced him, when out of his hearing, as nice a young fellow as he had ever run against. Before he had been in the house two weeks he had shot many bush-bucks, and other unconsidered trifles, and knew his way all about the place. He took a vivid interest in everything, and imbibed veldt-craft with an adaptability which surprised his host and Harley Greenoak. Likewise he had learned what an astonishing number of things he could do without, together with what an astonishing number of things he could do for himself.

Just about that time they were seated out on the stoep one evening, talking over a projected bush-buck hunt, when there arose a sudden and terrific clamour from the dogs lying around the house. These sprang up, and rushed, barking and growling furiously, towards the nearest bush line.

"*Magtig*!" exclaimed Simcox. "Wonder if those infernal half-tame elephants are going to give us a look round? The dogs are more than ordinarily excited."

"Tame?" said Dick, inquiringly, as they stood up to gaze in the direction of the hubbub.

"Well, they're just tame enough to be *schelm* and do a heap of mischief, otherwise they're wild enough. There are buffalo too, but there is no tameness about them. They generally stick away in the thicker thorns on the other side of the bush. Here, let's go over and see what's up."

They got a gun apiece and set forth. The cause of the racket was soon revealed, and it took the form of a badly-scared old Hottentot, who had fortunately found a handy tree. The dogs were driven off, and even as they took him to the house he told his story, and a tragical story it was. A buffalo had killed Jan Bruintjes, the boy who brought the mail-bags from the local post-office. The narrator and he were walking along the road, when an enormous buffalo bull rushed out of the bush and caught Jan on its horns, flung him into the air, and when he fell, ripped and gored him again and again. Dead? Oh, he was so torn as to be hardly recognisable. He himself had hidden, and then, when the beast had gone, went back to look at his friend. Where did it happen? About half an hour from the house, where the road made a bend towards Krantz Hoek. He had come straight to tell Baas Simcox.

"Well, we can't do anything to-night," declared the latter, "first thing in the morning, I'll go round and investigate. I wonder if that's the brute that chevied the Alexandria post cart last year? The driver tootled his horn, but it had the opposite effect intended. The horses bolted and upset the cart against a tree. The driver was killed – not in the same way – gored to death. In fact this brute is suspected of having done for half a dozen in all, and it's very likely true. He set up a perfect scare at one time, like an Indian man-eater would."

"They must be a jolly nuisance," said Dick. "If I lived here I'd jolly well thin them down."

"Would you? Fine of 100 pounds a head. They're strictly preserved."

"Well, it's a beastly shame."

"So it is," said Harley Greenoak. "But buffalo rank first among game called dangerous, especially in country like this." And he told a yarn or two to bear out his statement.

One yarn led to another, and it was rather later than usual when they went to bed.

The story he had just heard fired Dick Selmes' imagination to such an extent that when he got to his room he felt it was impossible to go to sleep or even to turn in. He hung out of his open window, and in the sombre shadow of the depths of the moonlit bush, seemed to see the whole horrid tragedy re-enacted. The boom of night-flying beetles, the chirp of the tree-frog, the whistle of plover, now

invisible overhead, now lighting on the ground in darting white spots, were all to him as the poetic voices of the weirder night which could contain such tragical possibilities: and it seemed that each ghostly sound – whether of mysterious rustling, or the clatter of a stone – heralded the appearance of the terrible beast, pacing forth into the open, its wicked, massive horns still smeared with the unfortunate man's blood. Then an idea struck him – struck him between the eyes, so to speak – for it was a momentous one. What if he – ?

He got out his double gun, slipped a Martini cartridge into the rifle breech, a heavy charge of loepers into the smooth-bore, and two or three spare ones into his pocket. The window was only his own height from the ground. Out of this he dropped quietly, so as not to rouse the house.

But he reckoned without the dogs. Those faithful animals immediately sprang up, and from all directions came for him open-mouthed. They knew him well enough to quiet their clamour almost immediately, but even then their delighted whining at the prospect of a nocturnal hunt was almost as noisy. But he had to drive them back, even with stones. Then he struck into the darkest shades of the bush, relieved that the clamour had apparently aroused no one.

How glad he felt that he knew his way about fairly well by this time! In the bright moonlight he had no difficulty whatever in finding it. Yet every stealthy sound set his heart wildly beating, and he carried his gun at full cock. Ah, here was the place.

The white riband of road snaked away in the moonlight – and – here was the spot. Yes, the huge hoof-marks were plain, and the signs in the dust of a sudden scuffle; and there were two of the leathern letter-bags carried by the unfortunate man lying by the roadside, and then – Dick Selmes, for all, his pluck, for all his ambition, and the adventurous excitement that had swayed him, felt quite sick. For, lying there by the roadside, torn, horribly mangled, was the body of the unfortunate victim itself.

But somehow the sight, horrible though it was, roused in him a fierce longing for retribution. If he could but find the slayer! Yet, why not? He had no dogs to give the miscreant warning of his approach, and if it did "wind" him, in its present mood, why, it would not be the one of the two the most eager to vanish. He tried hard to follow the spoor; and up to a certain distance succeeded, then it got lost in the shadows of the bush. Even then he would not give up. He had the whole night before him, and – if he should return in the morning triumphant? The very thought acted like a spur.

Moving cautiously, his weapon cocked and ready, he was compelled to move slowly. And now every sound intensified itself tenfold, and once a bush-buck, undisturbed by his silent advance until he was close upon it, sprang up and bounded away with a rustle that made him think it could be nothing less than the gigantic destroyer itself.

Now he could not be far from the spot, he decided. Yes. Here was Krantz Hoek. There was the row of straight-stemmed euphorbia, pluming the crescent of the cliff, just as described by the old Hottentot. The bush around was mainly *spekboem* and mimosa, not growing tall, in fact scarcely higher than his head, and in some places not that. He began to feel conscious of a consuming thirst, but this was dry country and dry weather, so there was no remedy for that. He began to feel something else – to wit that he had been a fool to come, and somehow all the excitement and anticipation began to evaporate, and the process of evaporation seemed to progress with quite extraordinary rapidity. And then – and then – just as he had fully made up his mind to retrace his steps – if he could – a sudden clink and rattle of stones set him wide on the alert – and – Heavens! what was this?

Seeming to rise out of the ground, something huge and black rose up in the moonlight. There it stood, the terrible beast, the manslayer, gigantic in its might, and for a moment the spectator stood petrified. This then was what he had come out to find, he in his puniness! The curved horns gleamed viciously, the fierce head with its mail-clad frontlet moved to and fro, the dilated nostrils sniffing the air as though scenting the presence of an enemy.

It was a nerve-trying sight, and the startling suddenness of the apparition rendered it more so. Dick Selmes' nerves were sound and in good training, yet the thought that here he was, alone with this monster, certain death before him if he failed to kill at the first shot, might well have unsteadied

him. The great bull was standing turned sideways, and did not seem actually to have seen him. By slowly sinking down behind the bush he might still escape.

But escape was not what he had come out for. He had come out to kill, and that to his own hand. So aiming carefully where he thought the heart should be, he pressed the trigger.

The effect was startling. There was a snort and then a series of savage bellowings rent the night. The huge, grisly head was tossed from side to side and the white foam poured from the open mouth. Quickly Dick Selmes slipped another cartridge into the rifle brooch, but before he could so much as bring the piece to his shoulder the brute sighted him, and came straight for him.

In a flash Dick realised that there was nothing to aim at but the mail-clad head. He turned and ran, and as he ran, the dictum of Harley Greenoak as to the buffalo holding first rank among dangerous game, and held in greater respect than any by old hunters, leapt through his mind. And he in his rawness had come out to tackle this terror single-handed, and at night. The thunder of his huge pursuer shook the ground beneath him, the savage growling bellow of its appalling voice was in his ears, the vision of its mangled victim in his brain. It was upon him. Then he missed his footing and fell – shot head first into a large ant-bear hole, which yawned suddenly at his feet. Nothing else on this earth could have saved him. He felt the vibration as that vast bulk thundered past, and wormed himself with a mighty effort still further in, not without fears that those dreadful horns might still contrive to dig their way to him.

Suddenly the din ceased, but what was this? In front of him, in the black darkness something growled.

It was not the original excavator of the hole, he knew, for the ant-bear, which is not a “bear” at all but a timid and harmless beast, does not growl. Well, at any rate, as the destroyer seemed to have retreated, he had better retire as he had come, and leave this most opportune hiding-place to its lawful owner. To that intent he made a move to draw back.

But even with that slight move the growl grew more prolonged, more vicious. And then Dick Selmes realised that the peril which he had just escaped was as nothing to the ghastly peril he was in now. *He could not withdraw*.

The hole slanted downwards at an angle of forty-five, and even then it had required all the effort of despair to squeeze himself in where it narrowed. But to do this from above was one thing, to squeeze himself up again, and that backwards, was another. *He could not do it*.

The blood, all run to his head, seemed to burst his brain, and the perspiration streamed from every pore, as his most violent and powerful efforts failed to release him by a single inch. He was imprisoned by where the tunnel narrowed over his legs. If he could have got at his knife he might have done something, but his hands and arms were extended straight out in front of him, nor could he draw them back. *He had performed his own funeral*.

Who would know where to look for him? Even if he were found, it might not be for days, and by that time it would be too late. He had entombed himself, and a few yards in front of him some savage beast was growling in the pitch darkness – some beast, cowardly it might be in itself, but whose lair he was blocking, and which, realising his utter helplessness, would speedily attack him, and gnaw its way to freedom *through him*. Small wonder that an awful terror should freeze his every faculty.

What the creature might be he had no very definite idea. It was not a leopard, or it would have attacked him sooner. It was probably a hyaena or wild dog – both timid of mankind in the open, but anything is formidable when cornered. The growls grew increasingly loud and menacing – they seemed to be drawing nearer too – and every moment the helpless man expected to feel the snapping fangs tearing at his face and head. Again he made a frantic effort, but utterly without avail. The suffocating atmosphere, together with the rush of the blood to the head owing to his position, was fast causing him to lose consciousness. He was in a place of darkness, being tormented by some raging demon. Surely this was death!

"That's better. Buck up. I thought you were a 'goner.'" And Harley Greenoak's voice had a ring of concern, as he bent over his charge.

"So did I," answered Dick, unsteadily, opening his eyes to the blessed air and light. "How did you get me out?"

"Man, I gripped you by the ankles, and just lugged. It was touch and go then, I can tell you."

"But how did you know where to find me?"

"When I hear a fellow like you get up when he ought to be going to bed – when I see him slope into the bush with a gun, after the yarn we've just heard to-night, it stands to reason he wants looking after. Dick, your dad spoke true when he told me you were fond of getting into holes."

"Well, if I hadn't got into that hole I should have been still more done," laughed Dick, at his own joke. And then he told the other about the buffalo.

"If yes," said Greenoak, musingly. "You've got a hundred pounds to spare, I take it?"

"A hundred – " Then Dick broke off as a new light struck him. "Why, man, you don't mean to say I've turned over the bull?"

"Dead as a door-nail – and with one Martini bullet, too. He's lying just yonder. There's a hundred-pound fine, you know."

A ringing hurrah broke the calm stillness of the night.

"Then it's worth it," cried Dick. "By the way, there's something in that hole – a wolf or a wild dog."

"Oh," and the other cocked his rifle.

"No," said Dick, with a hand on his arm. "We'll let it off – as it let me off."

"We'll just have to finish the night here," said Greenoak; "that is if you want that head to stick up in your ancestral halls, and it's jolly well worth it. Otherwise the jackals and wild dogs'll mangle it out of all recognition before morning."

Dick readily agreed, and the two, collecting some dry wood, soon had a roaring fire under way.

"Why, this is your first camp, Dick," said Greenoak, reaching out a handful of tobacco for him to fill from, and then filling up himself.

"Rather," was the answer. "Oh, it's glorious – glorious," jumping up again to go and look at the mighty beast, lying there but a few yards off in the moonlight. Harley Greenoak laughed.

"He's all right. He won't run away," he said. "Nothing will touch him either while we are here. Better go to sleep."

"Not much sleep for me to-night. No fear," said Dick.

And he was right. The excitement, the keen fresh air, the sights and sounds of the surrounding forest were too much for this ardent young novice, and he hardly closed his eyes. Yet in the morning he was none the worse.

The astonishment in the Simcox household when they heard what had happened was something to witness. The feminine element started in to scold Harley Greenoak for allowing his charge to run such a tremendous risk.

"Oh, he'd have to find his feet some time," was the rejoinder. "He seems to have done it tolerably well too, for a young beginner."

A week or two went by, which Dick Selmes divided about equally between hunting bush-buck and rendering Greenoak's life a burden to him as to whether the head was being sufficiently cured, or whether it was quite safely out of the way of dogs or other destroyers and so forth. One morning that long-suffering individual remarked:

"We'll move on to-morrow, Dick."

"Well yes, I suppose it's about time. But – where?"

"Why, there's an old friend of mine named Hesketh who's just written me to bring you along. His farm's up in the Rooi Ruggensbergen. Man, but it's wild there I can tell you."

"All the better. What does the said Hesketh consist of?"

"Himself. He's a primitive old customer, and you'll have to rough it there. I warn you of that."

"The shoot good?"

"It just is."

"Hurrah then!" cried Dick. "I'm on."

"Well, we'll go back to the Bay, and pick up a Cape cart – it'll always sell again when we've done with it – and some more ammunition. Another horse, too, won't hurt. These two we got from Simcox are all right, but you've already shown a tendency to ride yours to death. A fellow who's as keen as you are can't go on for ever pushing the same horse over all sorts of ground from sunrise to sunset."

"Good – and good again!" assented Dick.

The farewell he took of his entertainers was a very cordial one. Their hospitality had been as genuine as it was unceremonious. He had shared their life as one of themselves, and if the experience was totally different to any former one, why he had thoroughly enjoyed it, and said so, in no half-hearted way. Further, he had readily promised to repeat it on his way homeward.

"That's a thoroughly nice young chap," pronounced Simcox, decisively, as their late guests turned for a final wave of the hand before disappearing from view down the kloof. "Not an atom of 'side,' takes us as he finds us, and no nonsense about him. I hope he'll look in again, on his way back."

And Simcox's women-kind quite enthusiastically agreed with Simcox.

Chapter Four.
The Mystery of Slaang Kloof

"But that is Slaang Kloof, Baas."

"I never said it wasn't. But – what if it is Slaang Kloof?"

"We cannot go in, Baas." And the speaker's pleasing, good-humoured face took on a dogged, not to say obstinate expression. A little more acquaintance with the country and its natives, and Dick Selmes would have known that when the countenance of one of these took on that expression, why, he might as well whisper words of sweet reasonableness into the long ears of an experienced and jibbing mule.

"Why can't we go in, Kleinbooi?" he said shortly.

"*Ou*! It is a place of *tagati*– of witchcraft," answered the Fingo.

"Witchcraft? Bosh!" exploded Dick. "Come now, Kleinbooi. Lay those dogs on to the spoor sharp, or my chances of getting that buck will become nothing at all, and I can't afford to lose such a fine ram as that because of your humbugging superstitions."

But the Fingo only shook his head.

"I can't do it, Baas," he said. "*Oud Baas* (the Old Master) would not allow it. He allows nothing living to go into Slaang Kloof."

"But why? In Heaven's name, why?" rejoined Dick, impatiently.

"Because what goes in there living comes out dead," answered the other, seriously.

Dick Selmes stamped his foot, and mildly – very mildly – swore. He looked at his companion, who seemed most abominably in earnest, otherwise he was inclined to suspect that the Fingo was amusing himself at the expense of a new-comer. But, plainly, he could not go against the wishes of his host, and if the latter chose to give way to the absurd superstitions of mere savages, he supposed his weakness must be respected, but it was precious annoying all the same.

The dogs, some half-dozen great rough-haired mongrels, lay panting on the ground. One or two were restless, and showed a desire to start off upon the yet warm spoor which led into the forbidden place, but a stern mandate from the Fingo promptly checked this, and they lay down again.

These two, the white man and the black, were standing in a wide amphitheatre of bush, walled by rocky heights, now split asunder in gigantic, castellated crags, or frowning down in straight, smooth krantzes, the nesting-places of innumerable aasvogels; as the long vertical streaks down their red, ironstone faces could testify. In front of them, opening out, as it were, through an immense natural portal formed by two jutting spurs of rock, was a lateral valley, covered with dense forest and sloping up to a loftier pile of mountain beyond, the slope ending in a line of broken cliff abounding in holes and caves. This much was visible from where they stood. But not a step nearer would the Fingo advance. Dick Selmes looked wistful.

"It was just there he went in, Kleinbooi," pointing to the slope under one of the jutting rock portals. "I glimpsed him for a minute, just under the krantz on that bare patch. By Jove, it's a pity to lose a fine bush-buck ram, and he was hit hard, too. If only you had been nearer with the dogs!"

"It is time to go home now, Baas," said the Fingo, with a glance at the sun, which was now dipping low to the skyline, causing the great rock faces to glow red gold in the slanting beams. The scene was one of wild rugged grandeur and beauty, softened by the cooing of hundreds of doves, the cheery piping whistle of spreeuws echoing from among the krantzes, and other mellow and varying bird-voices in the recesses of the brake.

"Has anybody ever met his death in there, Kleinbooi?" resumed Dick.

"Several, Baas."

"What kills them?"

"That is what nobody knows." And the speaker was so obviously unwilling to pursue the subject that Dick said nothing further upon it, but he made up his mind to question Harley Greenoak thereon without loss of time.

When the two came to where they had left their horses, it was evident that the hunt had not been altogether unsuccessful, for behind Dick's saddle was strapped a fine duiker ram, while from that of the Fingo hung several guinea-fowl and three or four dik-kop. Still, Selmes would not altogether feel comforted over the quarry he had lost.

This Kleinbooi was his host's right-hand man. He was a capital hunter, and was sent out with Dick what time no one else felt inclined to go, and in this capacity it was an advantage that he was able to speak excellent English. Harley Greenoak was not sorry, for his part; for such was his young charge's "keenness" that he would have dragged him out all day and every day in quest of some form of sport, and half the night, too, very frequently.

That evening, after supper, as they were seated indoors, for the farm was of considerable altitude and the nights were fresh, Dick Selmes was wondering how he should broach the subject to their host. Old Ephraim Hesketh was one of the early settlers of 1820. He was a widower, and lived alone on his vast farm in the wildest recesses of the Rooi Ruggensbergen. He was a tall, lank old man, of the simplest of habits, who went to bed with the sun and got up with the same, chewed biltong when he was hungry, and drank calabash milk when he was thirsty, and, owing to his solitary life, was laconic and scanty of speech. This being so, it may be credited that his domestic arrangements were primitive in the extreme; and even adaptable Dick Selmes had looked a trifle blank when he first saw his room, with its battered tin wash-basin, empty-bottle candlestick, bare thatch, and gaping wainscottings, into which latter a remarkably large centipede was at that moment disappearing. In short, Simcox's place, though rough, was a palace compared with Haakdoornfontein, as old Hesketh's place was called.

"Well, young buffalo hunter," said the latter, as they sat down to an exceedingly frugal repast, "and how many of my bush-bucks have you accounted for to-day? We can't provide record buffaloes for you here, you see. You must get back to the Addo or trek right up-country for that."

Dick Selmes laughed; then, judging the moment opportune, he launched out into an account of Kleinbooi's point-blank refusal to enter the forbidden kloof.

"He was quite right," said the old man, decisively, and his face seemed to grow serious. "Yes, quite right. In fact, I told him not even to take you near it if possible, but I suppose he didn't know he was doing so in the excitement of the hunt."

Dick Selmes' face lit up with eagerness. If this hardened old settler, who believed in little else, believed in this weird mystery, why, it would be worth hearing about. "Would you mind – er – spinning the yarn, Mr Hesketh?" he blurted out eagerly.

"Well, it's a fact that for some years past not a man Jack who has gone into that kloof from this end – and you can't get into it from anywhere else – has come out alive," answered the old man. "When searched for and spoored down, they were found quite near the entrance, stone dead."

"What killed them?"

"That's what many of us would like to know. There was a mark, just where the neck joins the shoulder at the back, a tiny mark hardly bigger than a pin-point, a mere discoloration, and the bodies wore every appearance of death by snake-bite. That's how the place got its name – Slaang – or Snake Kloof."

"By Jove! And what sort of a snake was it?" said Dick.

"There was no snake. The most careful search revealed no trace of the spoor of anything of the kind. Besides, a snake-bite invariably contains two punctures. This was only one. Another strange thing is that the mark was always the same, and in the same place, where the neck joins the shoulder; and yet another – that the people, when found, had, in each case, fallen when facing the way out of the kloof, as if they'd been running away from something. What? How many have come to grief? Seven in all – one Hottentot and six Kafirs. They had gone in after strayed stock, or to take out a

bees' nest, or something of the kind. The Hottentot was the only one who was still conscious, and he knew absolutely nothing of what had happened to him or when it had. I nearly pulled him through by treating him for snake-bite, but it was too long after, and he kicked the bucket, like the rest. Have I been in since? No. I'm too old."

"But what on earth is your theory of it, Mr Hesketh?" asked Dick Selmes, who was very much impressed by the story, and the old man's way of telling it. "Is there some kind of tree snake that drops down and swings itself up again after biting them? That would account for lack of spoor, you know."

"Quite right, young buffalo hunter," nodded old Hesketh. "But we've got no snakes that do that. All the tree sorts are harmless. The thing stumps me but – there it is."

"By Jingo, but I'd like to – " And Dick stopped short. Old Hesketh turned on him a lack-lustre eye.

"To try and solve the mystery yourself?" he supplied. "M'yes. You'd better let it alone, young fellow. Keep your energies for another destroying buffalo, and you may come out of that with a whole skin. Eh, Greenoak?"

The latter, who had been a silent listener, nodded assent. Old Hesketh had – for him – taken an immense fancy to Dick since hearing of his shooting the buffalo bull in the Addo Bush, and that alone and with a single bullet. He was far too plucky a young fellow to be allowed to commit suicide in such an unsatisfactory cause as this, he decided.

"Don't let him cut into any such foolishness, Greenoak," he went on. "Keep your eye on him, Greenoak. Keep your eye on him."

And Greenoak promised he would. Then he went to bed, and, contrary to his usual custom, did not go to sleep immediately, but lay awake thinking. And at the same time precisely the same thing was holding good of Dick Selmes.

Now, in the course of the next two or three days, while the latter seldom missed an opportunity of plying his host with questions regarding Slaang Kloof, Harley Greenoak never opened his mouth on the subject. He seemed to treat it as a mere incident: a strange incident, it was true, but still an incident, and he had come across too many such in the course of a life adventurous beyond most lives to deem one incident, more or less, worth making any fuss about. He seemed, in short, to have dismissed it from his mind.

Consequently, it is strange that a day or two later, Harley Greenoak might have been seen – were there say one to see him – standing before the entrance of Slaang Kloof alone.

His strong, bearded, sun-tanned face was set and thoughtful; his gnarled hands were closed round the barrels of a double gun, whose stock was grounded; and, slung round him, was a sort of bundle that bulged. The rifle barrel held a Martini cartridge, the smooth-bore a heavy charge of Treble A buckshot.

He stood gazing into the place of fear, as though reading every tree and bush in its sombre forest depths.

As a matter of fact, he was there to solve its secret. Old Hesketh, to whom his reputation was known as a clearer-up of many a dark and blood-fraught mystery of the veldt, and who was an old friend of his into the bargain, had sent for him with that express object, and, as it was an entirely out-of-the-way and new part of the country to show his charge, he had heartily welcomed the idea. But he had no notion whatever of counting his said charge into the adventure with him.

He looked at the two jutting rock spurs as though calculating the distance of one from the other. Then he walked steadily forward until well within the portals of the sinister and fatal valley.

Superficially it differed in no way from any round dozen of the wild bushy kloofs on any other part of the farm. There was the same vegetation, mimosa and other varieties of acacia, spongy spekboem, and spidery Kafir bean – the geranium and plumbago throwing out a confusion of scarlet and light mauve – here a row of euphorbia, there a patch of yellow-woods, from whose limbs depended a tangle of long, straight monkey-ropes. Here all was dim and cool and delightful, the sunshine

completely shut off or but faintly networked in patches on the ground and tree trunks. But it was here that every instinctive faculty of grasp and perception implanted in the up-country man became keenly alert and awake. For, by a course of intuitive calculations, he had located this spot as the one where the fell and fatal terror had overtaken its victims.

The nerve and courage of Harley Greenoak were entirely beyond question, but that did not dull his imagination or render him dead to the fact that in this cool and peaceful forest retreat he walked in very great peril indeed, that if he would escape this hidden death which had overtaken others, awful in its mysterious suddenness, he would have to muster every faculty of quick observation, lightning-like decision of action, and untiring alertness which he possessed.

As he walked, apparently unconcerned, his ears were open to every sound, and, although he knew that it was from above the peril should come, he did not look up, at least not directly. Then, suddenly, and without apparent reason, he leaped nimbly about a yard to his left; for his trained ear had caught the faintest possible sound overhead, and, as he did so, there was a soft hiss past his ear. Harley Greenoak had escaped death that time.

Quick as thought he threw up his gun, but in the moment between that action and the roar of the piece he glimpsed the most hideous and revolting object imaginable. The simian face, staring in bestial ferocity, the horn-like ears, the brown misshapen frame and limbs, were more suggestive of some forest fiend than of anything human. When the smoke had cleared away the thing had disappeared.

What did it mean? For the first time Harley Greenoak felt a thrill of superstitious misgiving as unpleasant as it was strange. He to miss, and to miss at that short distance, with a charge of buckshot too – for he had fired the smooth-bore barrel – why, it was incredible! Nothing human could have escaped. Yet this thing had done so. It had not fallen, it had simply disappeared.

He stared upward at the spot. The tall, yellow-wood tree was strong and sound, and showed no sign of hole or cleft that would have held a rat. Ha!

Lying behind a large limb, motionless as the wood itself, blending so completely with its colour as to escape detection, was the object of his search, watching him. But for the glint of the eye, he would have failed to discover it at all. Again his gun roared.

But – too late. With superhuman agility the thing had leapt away, and, springing from branch to branch with the quickness and security of cat and monkey combined, it seemed a hopeless chase to Greenoak, who, as he ran, marking its course by the swaying of the branches, had already reloaded both barrels. Just the fraction of a glimpse, and it was his last chance. Again the reverberation of the report rolled bellowing from cliff to cliff. With it was a shrill, beast-like scream, and something thudded heavily to the earth. Harley Greenoak walked leisurely up to it, and after a moment's examination came away with a smile of grim satisfaction on his face, It was not to last, though. He had not gone far when a stony glare of horror came into his eyes as they rested on something lying on the ground, the form of a man, the form of Dick Selmes, his charge.

It was lying on its face with arms extended. But as he stood over it the eyes opened with a dull stupid stare, as that of a person awakened out of a heavy sleep.

"Wake up, Dick. Wake up, man," said Greenoak, decidedly, lugging him into a sitting posture. "Here, take a drink of this."

From the bundle that bulged he produced a bottle of brandy.

"Don't want to," said the other, sleepily.

"But you must, man. If you don't you're a dead 'un."

This told, and Dick obeyed. The effect of the spirit was marvellous, for, having swallowed enough to have rendered him helpless twice over under ordinary circumstances, it merely invigorated him now. Quick as thought Greenoak had cut away his shirt collar, and, sure enough, there on the neck was the fatal mark, the tiny, discoloured speck. This Greenoak promptly lanced, applying a mixture which he had with him. Then he made his charge get up and walk smartly up and down with

him. In which occupation they were found by old Hesketh, who, having heard the shots, faint and far, had saddled up and hurried on in case the investigator should be in need of assistance.

When sufficiently restored, Dick Selmes was able to explain how he came to be there, and this he did somewhat shamefacedly. He had suspected that Greenoak was going to make some such investigation, and resented not being allowed to share in the adventure. Accordingly, he had pretended to go and hunt in a contrary direction, but had soon slipped round, so soon indeed as almost to reach Slaang Kloof first. He had entered the kloof not far behind him, and had kept him in view.

"Well, it nearly cost you your life, young fellow," said Hesketh. "Tell you what. You must have learnt something if you could keep Harley Greenoak in sight without his knowing it. What were you shooting at, Greenoak?"

"The mystery of Slaang Kloof is cleared up," answered the latter, laconically.

"I knew you'd do it if any one could. Well, what was it?"

"I'll show you later on. Now then, Dick. Take some more stuff, and walk quicker."

Harley Greenoak was not one to be hurried, but when they did return to investigate, he took them straight to where he had fired his first shot under the shade of the yellow-wood trees.

"Why, this is where I first felt queer," said Dick.

"No doubt," stooping down and picking up something that looked like a bit of stick about six or eight inches long. "See that?" showing a tiny needle-like point. "That's what made you feel queer, and all the others too. It's tipped with a strong and subtle poison."

"By Jove! You don't say so."

"Rather. I've got a theory that your clothes helped to save you. You were saying, Hesketh, that the only one of those who came to grief here and recovered consciousness was a Hottentot. Well, he would have had clothes on, and the Kaffirs wouldn't."

"Something in that, may be," answered the old man.

A little farther on he picked up another of the tiny arrows. This one was sticking in the ground.

"The one I dodged," he said. "Come on further."

He led the way. Suddenly Dick Selmes gave a start.

"What's that?" he said. "Ugh!"

"The mystery," answered Greenoak.

The monkey-like shape lying there looked more hideous and horrible in death, if possible than when it skipped along the tree-tops.

"But what is it?"

"A survivor of the original Bushmen who lived among the holes and caves of these mountains. He adopted this method of setting up a scare in order to have the run of this place unmolested. You see, if he went on the ground he'd leave spoor, and he knew that – hence the tree dodge."

"How is it we never found any of these arrows?" said old Hesketh.

"Probably you never thought of looking for them."

"No more we did."

"You see," explained Greenoak, "when you were spinning that yarn about the kloof it brought back to my mind one similar case I'd known of the kind, and I began to put two and two together. Well, the murdering little beast has only got what he deserved, but it'll save bother if we keep our mouths shut, all the same."

"But how do you know there are no more of 'em, Greenoak?" said Dick Selmes.

"I'm sure there aren't. This one is as old as Methuselah. He'd be the only one. You can use Slaang Kloof again, Hesketh."

Chapter Five.
Hazel

"A niece of mine's coming up to-morrow to stay a bit," announced old Hesketh, a few days later.

"Oh, but – I say, won't we rather be making a crowd?" protested Dick. "Had no end of a jolly time, you know, Mr Hesketh; but – er – wouldn't put you out for the world."

"Don't you bother your head about that, young buffalo hunter," answered the old man. "You're not crowding me any. I'll tell you when you are. So you've had a good time, eh?"

"Splendid," said Dick, heartily. "The shoot just is good, and as for this air, why, I never felt so fit in my life."

Old Hesketh nodded, and surveyed the speaker approvingly. The latter certainly looked as he had declared he felt – fit. His face, tanned a fine brown, was the picture of health. Out all day and every day, often having to work hard for his sport, whether for hours among the cliffs and crags stalking klip-springers or reebok, or toiling up to some high ridge on the chance of getting a shot or two into the herd of baboons which usually frequented the other side, or one or other of the varied forms of sport the place afforded, Dick Selmes had attained the pink of hard condition.

"Well, then, don't be in a hurry to run away," rejoined old Hesketh. "Though I dare say it's slow enough of evenings with a couple of old fellows like me and Greenoak."

"Thanks," remarked the latter drily, and Dick spluttered.

"Some one young about the place'll make things more lively, anyhow," went on the old man. "And there's room and to spare, and a welcome for all."

Needless to say, Dick Selmes devoted a good deal of the intervening time to speculation on the subject of the expected arrival. Even as his host had said, "some one young" would be an acquisition, and then he wondered how old Hesketh, who seemed about a hundred, could own a niece to whom that definition applied. A grand-niece perhaps he had meant. Then, too, would she prove an acquisition? And a vision rose up within his mind of some awkward, half-educated girl brought up on just such a place as this, unused to the refinements of life, proportionately without ideas, and possibly given to affectation. Nor was Greenoak in a position to enlighten him upon the point, knowing nothing of old Hesketh's relations.

The next morning Dick Selmes was up before sunrise, and, taking his gun, went off on foot to a *hoek* where he knew he should find a troop of wild guinea-fowl. He was successful, too, and as the splendid game birds dropped, one after another – for he had managed to break up the troop, and they were thus lying well – the keen and unmitigated enjoyment of the sport for the next half-hour was such as to leave no room for any outside thought or speculation. Picking up the seven of them he could find – two were runners, and of course without a dog were hopelessly lost – he started back homeward.

Now, seven full-grown guinea-fowl slung round one constitute no light load over three miles of rough and stony ground, and by the time Dick Selmes reached the house he had had more than enough of such exercise. When he did so reach it he became alive to the fact that a Cape cart, outspanned, with its harness hung over the splashboard, stood before the door. Now his curiosity would be satisfied.

Flinging down the birds, he entered the living-room. It was occupied by one person, a female, and she vigorously dusting.

She turned as he entered. Heavens! What was this? Red hair, a broad face thickly sown with large freckles, a wide mouth, and forty if a day! So this was old Hesketh's niece. "Some one young" had been his definition of her, and it was she who was to make things lively by reason of the said juvenility!

"As ugly as sin," was his mental verdict. But aloud, politely, "Good morning. I must introduce myself. My name is Selmes; but – I don't think your uncle was expecting you quite so early."

The other stared.

"Ma what? Eh, but the laddie's clean daft – or is it only haverin' he is? Not but it's a braw bit laddie too" – with an approving glance at Dick's handsome face and tall proportions.

"Oh, Lord!" thought the latter, with a mental shudder. So this was the housemate who was to make them all young again with her youth and liveliness. Decidedly he must get Greenoak to invent some pretext for changing their quarters. Then the comic side struck him. Compared with himself, no doubt old Hesketh regarded this weird person, who talked broad Scotch, as "young."

"You are very energetic," he said pleasantly, for she had resumed her dusting. "Not at all tired after your trek, eh?"

"A'm never that," was the decisive reply.

"Well, your uncle will appreciate your energy at any rate. We men, left to ourselves, are sure to let things of that sort slide," – referring to her undertaking.

"Ma – what?"

"Your uncle, Mr Hesketh."

"The laddie *is* daft," she answered with decision. "Mon – but A have nae ony uncle."

Dick stared, and was destined to stare more in about a second. A faint rustle behind him, combined with what sounded suspiciously like a suppressed gurgle, caused him to wheel sharply round.

Framed in the doorway stood a girl – an exceedingly pretty girl. She had a sweet oval face, dark hair, and well-marked brows, and lustrous eyes to match. These now seemed sparkling and dancing with merriment.

"I am Mr Hesketh's niece," began this wholly unexpected vision of beauty. "I suppose we are here earlier than we were expected," and there was a suspicious unsteadiness in the tones, as if the speaker were gulping down an irresistible peal of laughter.

"Eh, but A do believe he's been takkin' me for yeerself, Miss Hazel," spoke the red-haired woman; and poor Dick, now dead certain that the new-comer had overheard the foregoing dialogue, looked and felt about as big an ass as he had ever looked and felt in his life.

"It's my old nurse, Elsie McGunn," explained the girl. "We've been travelling ever so many hours, and now she'll be taking the cart home again after breakfast, and even then can't sit still and rest."

"Indeed, I was just admiring such a display of energy," said Dick, pleasantly.

"Deed, laddie, and ye were just admiring nothing at a' aboot me," retorted the plain-spoken Scotswoman, but quite good-naturedly.

The answer made opportunity for the girl to express her stifled feelings, and under cover of it she went off into the hearty merry peal of laughter whose main cause was the dialogue she had overheard between Dick Selmes and her unattractive retainer.

"You have been here before, I suppose, Miss Hesketh?" began Dick.

The other stared.

"Oh, I see," she said. "But my name isn't Hesketh – it's Brandon. Mr Hesketh is my uncle on my mother's side."

"Of course. But, as you most likely know, your uncle is a man of few words, and, beyond mentioning the fact that you were coming, gave us no further information. He didn't even tell us your name. Naturally I didn't like to appear inquisitive."

"Naturally," assented the other; and again the laugh struggled in her eyes, evoked by the recollection of the comical situation for which that lack of inquisitiveness was responsible. "But now – as you have the advantage of me – I have told you who I am, suppose you tell me who you are."

There was a sweet, sunny frankness about this girl, an utter absence of self-consciousness that made Dick stare. Did they grow many like her in this strange, fascinating country, he wondered? As he told her his identity a new interest came into her eyes, but wholly unsuspected by himself.

"Ay, and is yon Dick Selmes?"

The interruption proceeded from the wielder of the duster, in the further corner of the room.

"Elsie!" cried the girl, half horrified, half mirthful. "You are forgetting yourself. You needn't be quite so familiar, at any rate."

"Eh! An' would we be makkin' a stranger of the laddie?" tranquilly replied the irrepressible Scotswoman.

Dick burst into a hearty roar.

"Quite right, Elsie," he cried. "I believe we're going to be jolly good friends, you and I."

This was a character, he decided – a howling joke. He was almost sorry she was going back again directly, whereas when he had first heard the announcement he had been anything but sorry. Then the sound of voices outside told that the master of the place and the other guest had returned.

Old Hesketh greeted his niece affectionately, but undemonstratively, as was his way.

"This is Harley Greenoak," he said. "You may have heard of him."

The girl's face lit up with interest.

"I should think so," she said, as she put forth her hand. "Who hasn't?"

"Oh, about nine hundred million people, I suppose," tranquilly answered the subject of this implied exordium. "I don't expect that leaves many more in the world."

"Well, there's no one in South Africa who hasn't, at any rate," rejoined the girl. And Dick Selmes, confound it, was half ashamed of a sneaking satisfaction that Harley Greenoak's beard was rapidly turning grey.

"That you, Elsie?" said old Hesketh, shaking hands with the privileged retainer. "Well, and you haven't managed to pick up a husband yet? Ho, ho!"

"Yan's the wurrd, Mr Hesketh. They're to be had for the pickin' up. But it'll end in ma havin' to come and tak' care o' yeerself, A'm thinkin'. Yan dust," designating her recent work, "must have been lyin' aroound for a yeer at least."

This retort, naïvely ambiguous, given with perfect equability, raised a laugh among its hearers, who chose to read but one of its two potential meanings.

"Now, Uncle Eph," said the girl, decisively. "We are going to get the breakfast ready, and it's nearly ready now – and we've got a little surprise for you. I should prefer you all to go outside and amuse yourselves for the next quarter of an hour; in fact, till I call you in."

This was a command there was no gainsaying. Old Ephraim gave a dry chuckle, reached for his pipe, and obeyed without a word. Harley Greenoak likewise. But Dick Selmes said —

"Do let me stay and help you, Miss Brandon. Why, it'll be like a jolly picnic."

She hesitated a moment.

"No," she said. "We don't want any men." Then he followed the others.

When they returned they found she had been as good as her word. This was a surprise indeed. Dick Selmes, the only one given to expressing that emotion outwardly, was metaphorically rubbing his eyes. Where, for instance, was the soiled, coarse-textured old cloth, covering one end of the bare table – where the camp-kettle, handed from one to the other from its usual resting-place on the floor, as more coffee was needed? Where the weather-beaten enamel ware, the tin pannikins holding the milk and sugar, the cloudy spoons? Where, too, the dark-brown bread, and the mess badly and indifferently cooked in a frying-pan? Gone – wholly gone. Instead, a snowy cloth, bright, hissing urn, patterned china, *roester-koekjes* steaming white within. Chops, too, hot from the gridiron, juicy and crisp, and a great honeycomb reposing in a sparkling cut-glass dish. The metamorphosis was complete indeed.

"We'll come to believe in fairy tales again soon," said old Hesketh as he gazed upon this. "You haven't let the grass grow under your feet – eh, Hazel?"

"No, Uncle Eph. I'm going to civilise you a bit, now that I'm here. You men get into shockingly careless ways. What's the good of having all these nice tablecloths and tea sets if you don't use them?

So the first thing we did was to dig them out of the boxes where they were stowed away. Then we disestablished the old Hottentot cook – 'cook' indeed! – and behold the result!"

"It's great – great!" cried Dick Selmes with enthusiasm. Then, becoming guiltily aware that he might be seeming to disparage his host's normal arrangements, he added lamely, "Er – of course, we do get – er – as you say, Miss Brandon, with nobody to take care of us. And – you've done it, and no mistake."

Then old Hesketh put a few of his terse, laconic questions as to the welfare of those she had left at home, and characteristically dismissed the subject from his mind. Harley Greenoak, normally taciturn, said little; but Dick Selmes was a host in himself, and soon the conversation became a dialogue between these two young people. They were chattering away as if they had known each other all their lives.

Soon after breakfast the Cape cart was inspanned.

"I'm hopin', sir," said Elsie McGunn, just before she climbed to her seat, "that ye'll nae be takkin' it ill onything A may have said."

"Not a bit of it, Elsie," cried Dick, shaking her heartily by the hand. "Not a bit of it. Why, you've given us a thundering big laugh or two. What better could one say? Good-bye."

"Ay, but yander's a braw laddie," whispered the Scotswoman to her charge, as they bade each other good-bye. "A braw laddie, and a guid one. Mind your hairt, lassie; mind your hairt." And flicking her whip, she sent the cart jolting off down the winding stony road.

Chapter Six.
Harley Greenoak has Misgivings

The coming of Hazel Brandon effected something like a revolution at Haakdoornfontein, for she was as good as her word, and at once set to work to reform the interior of that easy-going, happy-go-lucky establishment out of all recognition. The table department she kept going on the same lines as the initiation we saw her make, and the same extended to the rooms. No more dust, no more makeshifts. From all sorts of unsuspected places she fished out hidden things. Dick Selmes, for instance, coming in after a long day's hunt, stared to find what magic had been wrought in his room. Snowy sheets and pillow-cases on the bed, things his host despised as feminine superfluities, equally snowy towels instead of the one cloudy one he had been forced to make shift with; the rickety three-legged washstand with its rusty tin basin had given way to a neat chintz-covered packing-case and patterned crockery – and the empty-bottle candlestick had been disestablished in favour of a brass one. On the same lines had the quarters of the other two been reorganised, except that old Hesketh drew the line at sheets. Blankets were good enough for any man, he declared, and flatly refused to court rheumatism at his time of life by sleeping between cold, glazy stuff like that.

Our friend Dick now began to overhaul his kit, and was conscious of searchings of heart as he realised that it was so limited. He had brought little more than absolute necessaries in the way of clothing. Greenoak had warned him that he would have to do without luxuries at Haakdoornfontein, and, by Jingo, Greenoak had been right up till now; but Greenoak, of course, had not been able to foretell the sudden irruption of a bright, refined, and exceedingly pretty girl upon their rough and ready mode of living.

And Hazel Brandon was all that. Such sunshine did her presence and merry spirits and winning ways create in this sober male household, that the two older members of the same felt almost uneasy, so incongruous did it seem to the quiet and somewhat sombre life of the place. The younger – well, he was in something of a whirl. One thing about the girl puzzled him, and that was how she could be so nearly related to his host. The latter he was very taken with. He was a dear old chap, as he was wont to say; but with all his sterling qualities, old Hesketh was certainly not quite his equal from a social standpoint. Yet this girl looked absolutely thoroughbred; was, too, in all her ways and ideas. She must have got it on her father's side, conjectured Dick, perhaps correctly.

There was one thing about her that appealed to him if only that he believed he had encountered it in her for the first time. She was so absolutely natural and devoid of self-consciousness. True he had seen the counterfeit of this in other girls of his acquaintance, but it had not seemed to ring true. He had felt sure – again perhaps correctly – that they were doing it for effect; "crowding it on," as he more tersely put it. But here he detected no trace of any such thing.

"Do you think I am such a feeble tottering creature, Mr Selmes, that I can't even turn a door handle for myself?" she said one day, when he had bounded across the room – upsetting one chair and barking his shin against another in his anxiety to perform that onerous undertaking for her.

The words were said with a bright smile. Dick mumbled something.

"Well, I can, then. I'm not one of your helpless English girls who can't even stick a stamp on a letter for themselves."

"Oh, you've been in England, then?"

"Haven't I! For three years. Not long, but still I went about a good deal."

"Where?" he asked eagerly.

She named several places; one at which he himself had stayed on the occasion of a shooting party. Here was an additional link in common.

"Has our young buffalo hunter shot all the game on the farm, Greenoak?" said old Hesketh, one day as the two sat smoking on the stoep.

"Why?"

"Because he don't seem over keen on going after it these days. His gun'll get rusty if he don't mind," chuckled the old man, reaching a handful of tobacco out of his pocket and cramming his pipe.

"The young folks seem to have cottoned to each other," he went on, between puns. The other had no need to follow the glance – for "the young folks" aforesaid had been visible to him for some time away down the kloof, and the sight, even before his companion's remark, had set Harley Greenoak thinking.

So far his charge had given him no trouble. Twice he had got him out of a situation which would certainly have cost him his life; in other words, had saved his life twice. That, however, was all in the bond. He thought nothing of that. But here loomed a complication which neither himself nor Sir Anson had foreseen. Both had only taken into consideration mere difficulties or dangers of field and flood; but here was a new side to his responsibility. With his keen insight into character he had sized up old Hesketh's niece on very short acquaintance; and his private opinion was that whoever succeeded in winning the affections of this girl – whether Dick Selmes, or anybody else – would be a very lucky fellow. But would Sir Anson be likely to share this opinion? That was the question, and in all probability one to be answered with a negative. He might have other views for his son, or he might object to the latter contracting any tie for the present – or all sorts of reasons. Harley Greenoak realised that he had some cause for anxiety.

If anything should come of this matter, and Sir Anson considered that he had failed in his responsibility, he would unhesitatingly forego any remuneration; but his anxiety rested on higher grounds than pecuniary loss. He had a great liking for his charge, and for his charge's father, and, worse still perhaps, his reliability would stand impugned. Now, it was precisely for reliability that Harley Greenoak enjoyed a reputation little short of infallible, and of this he himself was aware, and, though secretly, was intensely proud.

He wondered if Hesketh – sly old fox – had brought about the situation with deliberate design, in order to do a good turn to his kinsfolk. It might well have been – and one could hardly blame him if it were so. Instinctively Greenoak realised that it would be useless for him to interfere at this stage. He had tried it at an earlier one, though "interfere" is too strong a word for the easy, natural, tactful way in which he had suggested they should move somewhere else. His charge, equally and naturally, but quite good-humouredly, had scouted the idea. Hesketh would be hurt, he had declared. He was no end of a jolly old chap, and he, Dick, wouldn't offend him for the world. And then Haakdoornfontein was no end of a jolly place, with a different shoot, by Jingo, for every day in the year. And Greenoak had laughed drily, as he reflected that his charge's enthusiasm for that form of sport had flagged perceptibly of late. But like a wise man and a tactful one he had known better than to push the suggestion further. Things must just take their course, he decided. A matter of this kind was a delicate one, and one in which the man most concerned must judge for himself. At any rate, it was clean outside his own province.

"These young 'uns, you know, will have their heads," now went on old Hesketh, puffing out smoke. "I suppose we took our doses of foolishness, Greenoak, when we were at their time. Though, I dunno about me. It was just 'yes or no' with the old woman, 'take it or leave it.' She took it, and managed the place. I don't know, either, that things haven't been quieter – well, since I've managed it myself," he added drily.

There lay the summing up of a lifetime; a hard, lonely, matter-of-fact, out-of-the-world lifetime. Greenoak nodded. He was not going to make any comment on the situation. He was not going to ruffle his old friend's susceptibilities by any suggestion that Dick's father might object, more or less strongly, to the said situation and its logical outcome. Old Hesketh's social creed was simplicity

itself: “Black’s black and white’s white, and one white man’s as good as another, and no better.” This Greenoak knew.

Again he wondered whether Hesketh had brought about the situation with a purpose. Hesketh was a mine of natural shrewdness, and here was scope for it. Dick Selmes had spent some three weeks on this wild and remote place, roughing it as he had probably never dreamed of roughing it, his sole companions one old and one elderly man – Greenoak was modest, you see. Then, enter a bright, pretty, taking girl, who makes the rough places, as by magic, smooth, imports the refinement to which his charge has been accustomed, with one sweep of the wand, and whose personality is in itself a supplement to the sunshine. No contrast could be more strongly marked. Assuredly if Hesketh had of his own intuition brought off such a dramatic stroke, why, Hesketh was more of a genius than the acquaintance of that rugged old recluse would have given him credit for being. But this reflection did not tend to lighten Harley Greenoak’s private disquietude.

Chapter Seven.
Good News

"When are you going to shoot another back for us, Mr Selmes?" Hazel Brandon was saying. "As officer in charge of the Commissariat Department, it's my duty to tell you that if you don't we shall have to begin on mutton, and it's your especial mission to keep us in game. So – when are you?"

"When you come and help me do it."

"Help you? Yes – like the other evening when we went to *voor-ly* for a bush-buck over Slaang Draai, and you talked so much that although we sat there till it was dark none came out. Now what sort of 'help' is that?"

He looked down into the bright, teasing face, and thought he had seldom – or was it ever? – looked upon any sight which delighted him more.

"Well, you helped me to talk anyhow," he said. "Now didn't you?"

One form of sport was to gain a point overlooking this or that bushy kloof about an hour before sundown and sit still, waiting till the bush-bucks began to move. Thus a shot was to be obtained when one showed upon an open space. Dick Selmes, who had become a very fair rifle shot, had bagged several this way. The occasion to which the girl had referred was one on which he had persuaded her to accompany him – with the remit described.

"Never mind," he went on, without waiting for her answer. "It was no end jolly all the same. Wasn't it?"

"I don't know. I seem to remember it became no end cold," she laughed. "But you're trying to get away from the point. You must go and shoot a buck for me this afternoon. Why, you hardly ever hunt now. You're getting quite lazy."

It was a coincidence that her uncle should be making substantially the same remark about a quarter of a mile away.

"Lazy! I like that. How about all those jolly rides we've been having? Lazy!"

"Well, I didn't mean it in its strictly literal sense," she answered. "Yes, I have enjoyed those rides."

Hazel had been about a fortnight at Haakdoornfontein, and during that time she and Dick Selmes had become very friendly indeed. It was the old story – youth, mutual attraction and propinquity, and but for the fact that she was the stronger minded of the two, and adhered to a rigid resolution not to neglect her self-imposed household duties, it is probable that their elders would have seen very little of her or of either of them.

"You know, it was quite a surprise to me to find you and Mr Greenoak here," she went on. "You know Uncle Eph by this time. Well, he never writes a word that he isn't obliged to; so when mother sent a boy with a note to say I was coming, he just returned for answer 'Glad to see her.' That and no more."

"By Jove!" cried Dick. "And you didn't know we were here."

"Not an atom. I expected to find him alone, as usual. He never has people here."

"We ought to be flattered then. Greenoak thinks your uncle got him here on purpose to try and clear up that Slaang Kloof mystery. But that's ancient history now, and he doesn't seem to want us to go. He objected, quite strongly for him, when I suggested moving on."

"Did he? He has taken quite a fancy to you. I never knew him so gracious to any *man* under about fifty before. He's usually grim."

"I think him a dear old chap," said Dick, decisively. "Such a character too. Well, I'm jolly glad he didn't take me at my word," with a meaning look at the sweet sparkling face beside him; which look the owner of the said face chose utterly to ignore. But from the foregoing dialogue it is obvious that

Harley Greenoak's suspicions as to his host's complicity in any possible complications with regard to his charge were without foundation in fact.

"I shouldn't be surprised if Mr Greenoak was right, and that Uncle Eph did get him up here to clear up the mystery," said Hazel. "Though none of you – not even you – will ever tell me what that mystery is," she added reproachfully. "Well, never mind. I'm not going to press you to. I believe I'll ask Kleinbooi though."

Whereby it will be seen that Harley Greenoak's advice to the other two concerned, to keep silence as to the nature of the Slaang Kloof mystery, had been rigidly adhered to.

Dick laughed. "You might as well ask that tree."

"Does he know?"

"I don't suppose he *knows*, but if he guesses he'd sooner hang himself than let on a word."

"Do you know, Mr Greenoak has a reputation for clearing up mysteries. There was that haunted farm on the Sneeuw River in our neighbourhood. No one could stay there; all sorts of weird things happened. The new owner – who bought it for a song, on the strength of its dark reputation – got Mr Greenoak to investigate the affair, and he cleared it up to the satisfaction of all concerned; and the new people never had any more bother or disturbance. They've lived there ever since. But Mr Greenoak never let go a word as to what the mystery was or how he had put an end to it; no, not even to the owner himself."

"Well, I shan't ask him," said Dick Selmes, very interested, "for it's a dead cert that if he never told anybody else he won't tell me."

"There are other stories about him, too. Once he was instrumental in saving two Kafirs from being hanged – only just in the nick of time – for the murder of a Dutchman's wife, by finding out that it had been done by the Dutchman himself."

"Was the Dutchman hanged?"

"He would have been, only he got away to the Transvaal in time. He was safe there, of course."

"Well, I hope if Greenoak gets on to any more enterprises of the kind he'll cut me into them with him – that's all," said Dick. "Hallo! Here's Kleinbooi."

"Baas," said the Fingo, saluting, "I got very good bit news. There's a big tiger fast in the trap, up there, in Slaang Kloof. I go tell *Ou' Baas*. He come quick shoot it."

"Oh, good – and good again!" cried Dick. "We'll go up there sharp."

"Oh, never mind me. Only, I don't feel inclined to *run*," said Hazel, mischievously; for her companion in his excitement had started off with quick eager strides.

"So sorry," answered Dick, contritely, at once falling back.

"Never mind," said the girl, "go on ahead and tell them. Things in traps break loose sometimes if left too long. So the sooner we get there the better."

"We? Are you going with us, then?" eagerly.

"Certainly. So tell them to saddle up a horse for me too. Now go on, and don't lose any time, or the tiger may break loose before we get there and get clean away."

Presumably everybody knows that there is no such thing as a tiger on the whole African continent – north, south, east, or west. What everybody, however, may not know is that in the southern section of the same, "tiger" is the colloquial word used to designate leopard, and that invariably; hence, of course, the trapped beast in this case represented not "Stripes" but "Spots."

"Well, well," said old Hesketh, when he was told, "that's good news certainly. How was he caught, Kleinbooi?"

"By one fore leg, Baas. He seems fast, but it might be as well to go and shoot him, now at once."

"*Ja*, that's so. Tell Dirk to saddle up three horses – it don't matter which – what's that? Four?" turning to his niece, who had just joined them. "Four, did you say, girlie?"

"Certainly," said Hazel. "I'm going too. I don't why I should be left out of the fun."

The old man chuckled.

"All right," he said. Then ironically, "How long'll you take getting ready? Half an hour?"

"Half a minute," she answered, withdrawing to change into a habit skirt, and reappearing in not more than double the time named. Then they started. "Get back, you *schelms*, get back!" vociferated old Hesketh, whipping back the dogs, who, scenting sport, had sprung up, whining and yowling with delight. "We don't want you to-day. They'd spoil the skin, you know, if they started to worry it," he added in explanation to Dick. "Besides, some of 'em are bound to get badly chawed. A trapped tiger's no joke to anything that gets within reach of the brute. Clear them out, Kleinbooi."

This the Fingo did with the aid of sticks and stones, and much forcible expostulation, and the disappointed pack slunk back, to console itself by getting up a civil war on its own account.

"Don't fire at anything on the way, Dick," enjoined Greenoak, as they started. "No matter what gets up, let it go. Our catch might quite possibly pull himself loose if he got a sudden *schrek*."

Dick nodded, and went on with his conversation with Hazel, by whose side it is hardly necessary to explain he was riding. Old Hesketh was shambling along on a correspondingly veteran steed, but he had no firearm. It didn't require three men to shoot one trapped tiger, he had declared, and he wasn't going to be bothered carrying unnecessary articles. Greenoak on this occasion had his .500 Express, and Dick Selmes his combination rifle and smooth-bore.

"I only wish the beast was loose," said the latter to his companion. "There'd be rare fun in hunting him then."

"You may still have your wish, Dick," said Greenoak over his shoulder.

"I hope not," said Hazel, quickly. "And yet – I oughtn't to mind with two such dead shots beside me. Yes – I think it would be rather exciting."

Secretly the girl was not quite at ease. They were in Slaang Kloof now. Riding beneath the cool shade of the trees, the dim sunlight falling in network patches where it struggled through the "monkey-ropes" trailing from bough to ground, there was a sense of dim mystery seeming to grow out of the place. So strongly did it affect her, that although not in the least given to hysteria, Hazel Brandon realised that were she alone here now, she would be conscious of a deadly fear. As it was, what if the trapped beast had broken loose, and in its mad rage were to pounce upon them suddenly? No, the thought was not a reassuring one.

Chapter Eight.
The Trapped Leopard

Soon the forest began to lighten and the tall yellow-wood trees to give way to high scrub with open patches here and there. Here the Fingo, Kleinbooi, who had been striding on in front, his kerrie over his shoulder, now signed them to dismount. This they did, and the horses were made fast to convenient boughs.

Guided by Kleinbooi they walked cautiously forward, the three men in front, the girl just behind; Dick Selmes and Greenoak with their pieces in readiness. Then a vicious snarl, and the clank of iron told them that the object of their quest was reached, and that at any rate it had not yet succeeded in breaking loose.

A small runlet here trickled down the kloof in a chain of water-holes. Beside one of these, in a stony open space, stood a magnificent leopard. The great iron gin trap had caught the poor beast just above one front pad, and the powerful grip held him firmly.

At sight of his intending destroyers the creature sank down into a crouching attitude, uttering a hideous yell that was half a snarl, evoked by the renewed agony of the movement. His unwounded forepaw was over the trap, his hindquarters gathered beneath him as though for a spring, and his long tail waved viciously to and fro. A deep, hoarse, snarling growl issued from his throat, and in his yellow eyes was a perfectly fiend-like glare of helpless ferocity. His jaws were dropping great flakes of foam reddened with blood, for he had been plentifully licking his wounded limb.

“Oh, do shoot, and have done with it,” whispered Hazel, shuddering violently.

“Hold on, Greenoak. Don’t blaze yet,” said Dick Selmes, who had not heard. “I want to have a closer look.”

“Better not,” warned Harley Greenoak, who had already got his quarry covered. “He might break loose, or the chain might give,” – the trap was chained to a tree.

But the other laughed recklessly, and continued to advance – we dare not swear that the consciousness of having a certain form of gallery to play to did not add to his rashness. He halted within very few yards of the maddened beast.

The latter was now frightful to behold. He seemed to flatten himself lower in his crouch. The great speckled head literally opened, until, viewed in section, it resembled a crescent. The lips were drawn back from the formidable fangs till the contracted folds of the skin well-nigh closed the glaring eyes, and the infuriated snarl had become something terrific.

Suddenly every muscle in the beast’s body was seen to stiffen. With an appalling yell it flung itself forward. Dick Selmes was hurled to the ground, half stunned; his confused senses feebly conscious of the crash of a report, leading him to suppose he had been shot by accident.

“Well of all the complete young idiots I ever saw, you *are* the champion one,” cried old Hesketh, with excusable heat, having ascertained that his guest was uninjured. The latter laughed, rather feebly, for he felt sore all over.

“What’s the row, eh? Greenoak, I thought you’d shot me.”

“The row? Look there,” was the answer grimly given.

Dick screwed himself round. There lay the iron trap – empty, and further on, the spotted corpse of the great leopard. He himself was *between the two*.

“Lucky Greenoak’s got the eye of a hawk, and the quickness of a flash of lightning,” said his host, grimly. “I know *I* could never have got in that shot in time. How would you be feeling now if the brute’s spring hadn’t been cut short? He was stone dead in the middle of it when he knocked you over.”

“Did he knock me over then?” said Dick, rising to his feet.

"Rather," answered Greenoak. "Even then the muscular contraction of his claws might have given you fits; but he made a bad shot – only hit you with his shoulder and knocked you flying."

They gathered round the splendid beast, grim and terrible still in death. The heavy Express bullet had gone clean through the heart.

"By George, but I've had a narrow squeak for it!" ejaculated Dick. Then his glance fell upon Hazel Brandon, who was standing a little in the background, white and shuddering, and his heart smote him with self-wrath and contempt. He had thought to show off, and had only succeeded in frightening her, and making a most egregious ass of himself.

"Oh, Miss Brandon, I'm so sorry I've given you a scare!" he exclaimed penitently. "But it's all right now. Come and look at the tiger – such a splendid beast."

"Well, you did give me rather a fright," she said, with a faint smile, while the colour returned to her cheeks. "But – what a splendid shot!"

"Wasn't it!" answered Dick, whole-heartedly, at the same time not quite able to help wishing that the positions had been exactly reversed. He was conscious, too, that this was the third time Harley Greenoak had stepped between himself and sure and certain death. The latter was thinking the same thing, and was more than ever convinced that Sir Anson had spoken the bare truth in saying that he would find his charge no sinecure. The while he had drawn his sheath knife and was tucking up his shirt-sleeves.

"We'll just strip off this uncommonly fine skin, Kleinbooi and I," he announced imperturbably. "But as it isn't a pleasant process to watch, I'd suggest that Miss Brandon should wait for us where we left the horses."

"That's a good idea," said Dick, briskly. "Come along, Miss Brandon. We'll wait there."

Having thrown off her temporary scare, Hazel turned to her uncle and rated him soundly for having the trap set at all It was abominably cruel, she declared, unsportsmanlike too. The old man chuckled.

"Ho – ho! Not bad that, for a girl who's been raised on a farm," he said. "Don't they ever set traps down at Windhoek then, or has your father got too many sheep and calves? I can tell you this beast has been taking toll of mine finely."

"Well, why don't you hunt him then, in fair and sportsmanlike fashion," retorted the girl, "instead of setting an abominably cruel thing like that?"

"Hunt him? Ho – ho! Look there."

He pointed to the upper end of the hollow, which was shut in by a wall of terraced rock and cliff. But many a dark hole and crack on the face of this showed that the towering rampart was honeycombed by caves and labyrinthine galleries.

"How are you going to get him out of these?" went on old Hesketh. "Why, all the dogs in the world wouldn't get him out. He'd only have to skip from one hole to another. Eh, Greenoak?" The latter nodded.

"Well, it's abominably cruel all the same," repeated Hazel as she turned away. "Aren't I right, Mr Selmes?"

"A trap that doesn't kill outright always is cruel," answered the diplomatic Dick, whose last wish in the world was to disagree with her. "I know I've often thought it hard luck on the rabbits at home when they got into one – poor little beggars."

"Do you know," she went on, jumping from one subject to another, "I can't tell you how glad I am to have had the opportunity of meeting Mr Greenoak. What a splendid man he is! Isn't he?"

"Rather. He's a thundering good old chap."

Hazel lifted an eyebrow.

"Old! But you surely don't call him old. Why, he's just in his prime. Oh, I see, you mean it as a term of comradeship," she added.

"Er – yes. That was it," agreed Dick, upon whose mind a very unwelcome qualm was beginning to force itself.

"So strong and cool and clearheaded," she went on, "and such nerve. Why, he's everything a man should be. Don't you agree with me?"

"Most decidedly."

"Ah, I like to hear a man speak well of another."

"Why? Isn't it usual?" said Dick.

"No. At least not within my experience. Almost invariably if I boom one man to another that other will either agree half-heartedly, or find something disparaging to say."

"Well, even if I felt that way inclined, I should be an absolutely unspeakable cur were I to say anything of the sort about Greenoak, considering that this is the third time he has saved my life," answered Dick.

"Is it? Oh, do tell me about the others," cried Hazel, eagerly.

"I can't tell you about the other because it comes into the mystery of this place, as to which, as you know, we are sworn to secrecy. But I told you the first. It was the night I shot the big buffalo."

Looking down into the bright, sparkling eager face, Dick Selmes was conscious of that unwelcome misgiving taking even more definite hold of his mind. The eagerness with which she hung upon his words was not because they were *his* words. Greenoak of all people! Why, he must be old enough to be her father, concluded Dick, in his inexperience rather consoling himself with the thought.

"Yes, you told me that," rejoined Hazel. "But you are only one of many. Harley Greenoak has the reputation of having saved countless lives and got no end of people out of difficulties of one kind or another, yet he never talks about it, they say. I can't tell you how proud I am to have made his acquaintance."

"Shall I tell him so, for here he comes?" said Dick, mischievously. "Now, or when you're not there?"

"If you do I'll never speak to you again. And yet I don't know that I'd greatly care if you did."

They had been waiting as directed, where the horses had been left, and now the other two were coming up.

"You've made a quick job of that, Greenoak," said Dick.

"Yes. But I only took charge of the more difficult part, Kleinbooi'll do the rest. It's a good skin, Dick, and ought to look well in your hall, or wherever you stick up such things."

Dick stared.

"But it's yours," he cried. "Why, it was your shot – and a jolly fine shot too. Don't know where I'd have been but for it."

"Oh, that's all right. I've nowhere to keep trophies and you have. You'll be able to hang it under the buffalo head." And the speaker swung himself into the saddle, and resumed his conversation with old Hesketh.

"There!" exclaimed Hazel. "Isn't that like him? And you hardly said thank you."

"Greenoak doesn't like much thanking. It seems to hurt him; sets him on the shrink, don't you know."

"I can quite believe that," rejoined Hazel. "Now – you can help me to mount."

The while, the subject under discussion was some way ahead, with Hesketh. They were in fact passing the scene of that other tragedy.

"Not much trace of that affair," Hesketh was saying as he glanced keenly around. "Tell you what, though, I wonder yon tiger didn't put an end to the 'mystery' long ago, and save us the trouble. Ho-ho!"

“I don’t,” rejoined Greenoak, quietly. “It’d have to be a very smart tiger indeed to get the blind side of a veteran Bushman. The ‘mystery’ was a darn sight more likely to scoff the tiger than the tiger was to scoff the ‘mystery.’”

Chapter Nine.
A Way Out

Postal delivery at Haakdoornfontein was, as an institution, non-existent; and when old Hesketh desired communication with or from the outside world he obtained it by dispatching a boy to the nearest field-cornet's, some sixteen or seventeen miles away. This, for obvious reasons, he did not do very often.

Harley Greenoak was seated on a stone, on the shaded side of the shearing-house, thinking. The shade was almost too cool, for there was a forecasting touch of crisp winter in the clear atmosphere and vivid blue of the cloudless sky. He could see the long, gaunt figure of his host, pottering about down at the lands, and every now and then from the kitchen at the back of the house, there came to his ears the clear tones of Hazel's voice endeavouring to convey instruction into the opaque mind of the yellow-skinned cook. The sounds in no wise interrupted his train of thought; rather they fitted in with it, for in it the utterer of them bore her share.

From his pocket he drew forth a letter. This he spread out open before him, and began to study, not for the first time. It had arrived the previous evening, and was several days overdue, owing to Hesketh's erratic postal provisions as set forward above. The writing was not easily decipherable, and the contents, well – they were commonplace on the surface, but beneath, to one well acquainted with the writer, meaning enough could be read. Now Harley Greenoak and the Commandant of the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police were very old friends indeed.

There was restlessness on and beyond the border. The Transkeian tribes needed watching, and some careful handling, and the Police might have work cut out for them. And, by-the-by, where was Greenoak now, and what was he doing; because if nothing in particular, added the writer, why shouldn't he come up to the border and stay with him a bit, and have some talks over old times?

Such was the gist of the letter, but its recipient read deeper than that. Few men understood natives and their ways more thoroughly than himself, few men were as well known to and as thoroughly trusted by them, and none better. He foresaw a possibility of usefulness, of great usefulness; and when such was the case, it must be a very grave impediment indeed that Harley Greenoak would allow to stand in his way.

Hazel Brandon had not exaggerated in her estimate of his character; and time after time his natural gifts had found for him the opportunity of being of service to his friends – often to the saving of life – and that without hope or thought of reward. And here stood forth another such opportunity; but – how would it fit in with the charge he had undertaken? As it happened it would so fit in.

Every day of late he had been growing more anxious; every day he had seen reason for desiring to get Dick Selmes away from Haakdoornfontein. Every day seemed to draw the two young people together more and more. This, under other circumstances would have been nothing but satisfactory, but – what of his own responsibility towards the father of his charge? If the affair was more than skin deep, if it had reached a serious stage on both sides, why they could both very well afford to wait; Dick until he had consulted his father, and so until his – Greenoak's – charge was at an end. Then he could return, on his own responsibility, and if he succeeded in winning this girl, why in the thinker's estimation he would be very lucky, as we have said. That would be the only straight and satisfactory solution of the difficulty, decided Greenoak.

And towards such solution the Commandant's letter seemed now to open a way. If he read Dick's character aright, the prospect of a certain amount of adventure would irresistibly appeal. They would respond to the invitation and join his old friend; and he would show his charge some of the phases of border life, as in any case he had intended eventually to do.

“Well, Mr Greenoak, and have you decided the knotty point yet? It must be a very knotty one.” And the speaker’s winsome face, framed within an ample and snowy *kapje*, sparkled with sheer light-heartedness.

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