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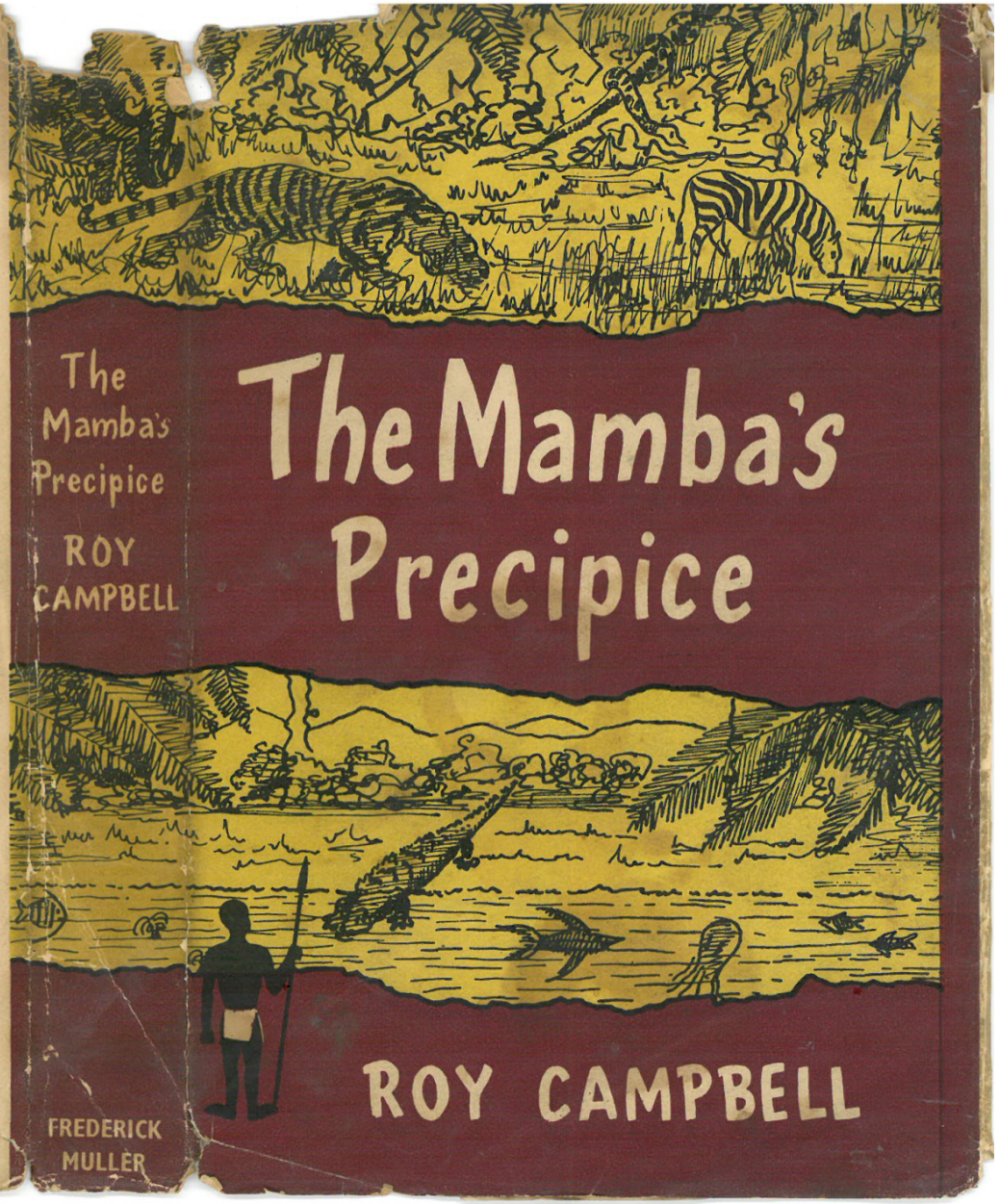

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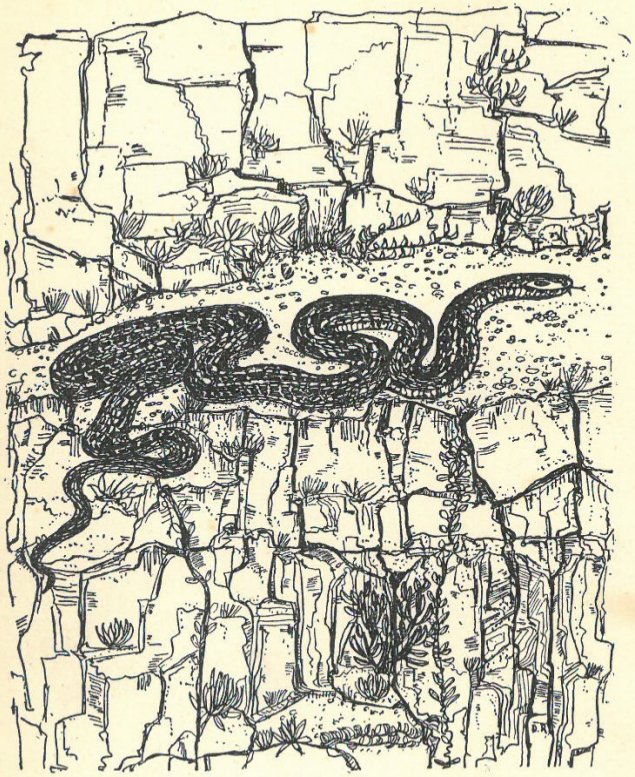

THE BLACK MAMBA

THE MAMBA'S PRECIPICE

by

ROY CAMPBELL

Illustrated by Dolf Rieser

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To
HUGH LYLE,
SANDRA COX,
KERRY SWIFT,
AND
MICHAEL STUART.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE LONG HOLIDAYS

IT was the first evening of the holidays, and the Jackson family had just finished their packing. The next day their uncle, Dr. Jackson's brother, was sending a big lorry from his sugar-mill, twenty miles out of Durban, to take their luggage; and they were going to spend some weeks in their Beach Cottage, many miles away in the forest.

Dr. Jackson was driving them down in his car, but as he was a busy man he could only stay two days, and would have to come back after that to his patients in Durban. Then Michael, the eldest son, who was fifteen, would have to take charge of his mother, his sister Mary, who was sixteen, and his two little brothers John and Billy, who were twelve and eleven years old, not to speak of the baby Stephen, who was three. John had been very ill for a year and had nearly died—so he had been a little bit spoiled and had got somewhat soft and selfish.

When they were at the cottage Michael would have to ride to the station-store six miles away to fetch the provisions and the post. He would have to provide them with venison or guinea-fowl for the larder. Above all, as his father warned him, he had to be responsible for the safety of his mother and the children, and to see that the latter did not stray too far in the forest, or get bitten by snakes, or get swept away by the backwash or taken by sharks when they were fishing or bathing in the surf. Of course, he had old Tom to help him.

Tom was the faithful old Zulu servant who had worked for Dr. Jackson's father since he was ten years old. He

drove Mrs. Jackson's horse carriage when she went out shopping in Durban, and very smart he looked in his white suit with a great red fez on his head. But when he went in the country he used to wear Dr. Jackson's old army clothes that he had worn in the first Great War when Tom had accompanied him through the campaigns of German West and German East Africa. Tom had also been with him in the siege of Ladysmith, and he liked nothing better than to remember his soldiering days. As soon as he had put on the old tattered uniform, he would stick out his chest like a sergeant-major, and swagger, and give the military salute every time he was spoken to. Everybody loved old Tom. He was always laughing and whatever he was told to do, whether it was a pleasant job or not, his response was always the same: "Ya, Baba! Ha! ha! ha!" (Yes, Master! Ha! ha! ha!)

Then there was the Indian cook, Moonsammy. Moonsammy was the best cook in Natal; but he liked his comfortable kitchen in Durban, and he hated going away to the ramshackle old cooking-hut which had been built on to the Beach Cottage in the bush. However, he was a devoted servant and he pretended that he didn't mind, though really he was terrified of snakes, and also of the great breakers which roared up the beach to within sixty yards of the front balcony of the house, and shook the rafters with every crash they made. He would never go near the sea, except sometimes at very low tide, because he had a passion for oysters, and when the tide was very low indeed he would wade about in the shallow rock-pools with a crowbar, collecting oysters, of which there were hundreds to be found.

Michael went to bed late, on that first night of the holidays, but he was awake next morning by six o'clock. He sat up in bed and wondered if he had packed everything that he needed. It was a good thing that he did so, because he had really forgotten one of the most important

things of the lot. In attending to so many details, he had forgotten his bicycle-lamp, which was one of those old-fashioned carbide lamps. They make a brilliant bluish-white ray and they are very useful for going through the forest in the dark, or for making the fishes jump out of the water when going out at night in the boat on the lagoon.

Michael dressed and took the lamp off his bicycle. Then he went round to his father's garage and found a huge tin of carbide which he placed with the lamp in his hold-all. After that he went into the kitchen where Moonsammy was already making the coffee. Moonsammy spoke English of a kind, but always pronounced his Fs as Ps, as most Indians do.

"Good morning, Moonsammy," said Michael.

"Good morning, Master Michael, I just making coppee por Master and Missis."

Then they heard the whirr of a motor-lorry outside and Michael ran out into the road. It was Ramsammy, Moonsammy's brother, who was driving the lorry, so Michael ran back to tell Moonsammy because he knew it would make him feel better about the hated journey if Ramsammy were there, since the two brothers were very fond of each other. Moonsammy brightened up considerably at the news, and he made a nice breakfast.

Mary was the next to come down. She was looking very pretty and happy. Then came Dr. Jackson and Mrs. Jackson, with the baby, Stephen.

Michael went upstairs to wake John and Billy; they had stayed awake so long, the night before, whispering their plans to each other that it was now almost impossible to rouse them. Michael shook John, who only grumbled: "Aren't we there yet?" and rolled over. Billy was snoring with his mouth open, but after a little pushing and punching they both woke up and stared around.

"Nice hunters and fishermen you'll make!" said

Michael, " snoring and rolling about in bed, when everyone else is up and going! "

By the time they had finished breakfast all their luggage and provisions had been stacked up into the lorry. Moonsammy sat disconsolately on the biggest sack, on the top of everything, like a man on a camel. Tom sat beside the driver, Ramsammy. Tom had offered the seat to Moonsammy, but Moonsammy said it was too hard and bumpy in front with his brother so he had climbed right up on to the top until he had found a big sack full of mattresses. If he had only known, it was the most uncomfortable spot on the lorry, because the mattresses bounced and joggled when they got on to the rough roads. Also he had to use one hand to hold on to his turban. So if at the beginning, when the lorry was still, he looked like a man on a camel, afterwards, when the lorry was jolting, he looked more like a cowboy on a bucking horse.

But Moonsammy was always like that. He was so fussy about comfort that he always ended by making himself more uncomfortable than anyone else. Yet he was a very kind man, and whenever there was a big dinner-party at the house in Durban the children would tip-toe down to the kitchen door, and he would smuggle them all the best of the meringues, the sundaes, and the whipped cream that he could spare from the party. Even when the Governor-General was a guest at the house, he never forgot to give the children their share; but he always pretended to be cantankerous and grumbling.

Dr. Jackson backed his car out of the garage. He told Michael to get in front with him and hold the shotgun in case they needed it on the way. Mrs. Jackson sat in the back with Mary, who was holding Stephen, and next to her sat Topsy, the native nurse-girl. John and Billy sat on the two little seats. Then they all started off, with the lorry following the car. It was still early in the morning.

They drove along the main road and were soon out of town. The wind had dropped and the sun had just risen over the sea. In June in South Africa it is winter time and the sun doesn't rise till seven.

After driving through a dozen villages they branched off from the main road to the right and went by their own private road which was not metalled. It was full of ruts and big stones, so Dr. Jackson had to drive carefully. It was here that poor Moonsammy, on his mattresses, began to feel quite giddy; the mattresses tossed him up and down as if he were being tossed by a bull.

" Look out, Moonsammy, here comes a tree! " Tom would shout, and Moonsammy would have to duck under the branches of some big flat-crown or wild fig-tree, which overhung the road and threatened to scrape him off if he did not lie as flat as he possibly could. Except for turning the mincing machine, it was the first bit of exercise Moonsammy had had for years; and it did him no harm.

Just after they turned off the main road they came to the Suluman's shop. The Suluman* was a large round Arab who was always dressed in a spotless white robe, like a night-gown, with a large red tarboosh, or fez, on his head, from which a black tassel swung to and fro. His face was a brick-red colour to match his fez; and he always lay outside his shop in a green silken hammock rocking himself with his toe which he pushed against the side of the verandah while he read a little pink book; it was Gamage's catalogue translated into Arabic!

The pillow-end of his hammock was tied round the white stem of a gorgeous winter-flowering kaffir-boom tree, which towered above him with its cascades of scarlet blossoms. A hundred tiny, burnished sunbirds of different kinds, with feathers like fish-scales of emerald and ruby, were sucking honey out of the flowers with their long beaks, chirping and fighting, and scattering scarlet flakes of bloom all over

* Suluman, Zulu word for Arab.

the Suluman's white dress and his long white whiskers, which lay across his chest and stomach like the tails of two white circus-horses.

His children, dozens of them, rolled, romped, played and fought on the ground all round him, while his wives attended to the duties of the household and the shop. Nobody knew how many wives and children he had, unless he kept a note of them himself. He seldom got out of his hammock except when it was raining. But when he heard the car and the lorry approaching he bounced up and stood bowing and salaaming to the doctor and his family.

"Look!" cried Stephen in an ecstasy of delight, "Father Christmas! Father Christmas!" and he certainly did look like Santa Claus. Besides, little Stephen was not so very far wrong, for the Suluman's shop was full of sweets, toys, fishing-lines, brass-trinkets, beads, wonderful shawls for Indian women, mats, turbans and tarbooshes. His name was Mustapha and he always looked as if he had flown straight out of the *Arabian Nights* on a magic carpet with his shop.

Dr. Jackson pulled up his car and spoke to the Suluman who, without stirring far from his hammock, learned all the gossip of the neighbourhood from his customers, most of whom were Indians and natives.

"Is the lagoon-mouth open into the sea?" asked the doctor.

"No," was the reply. "The sand-bar is blocking it, and the lagoon is very full of water so that it is flooding the sugar-cane fields, and doing damage. It is time that they sent some natives to open the sand-bar with spades."

"Are the fish biting?"

"Not very much. But the yearly migration of the sardines has not passed yet and they are expected any day now. There are lots of sea-gulls and gannets flying southward. That is a good sign. Soon the sardines will be coming and the big fish will be following in their wake; and then the sport will begin."

Having got as much news as they could from the Suluman, the little caravan moved on jolting over the bumpy road, which got worse and worse as they descended into the wild country, crossed the river, and passed by the abandoned pump-house under the mamba's precipice.

This mamba was a terrible old deadly snake. The pump-house had had to be given up since no one would work near the haunts of the mamba. He lived amongst the scarlet-flowering aloes, the creepers and the monkey-ropes which clung to the side of the precipice. He had been there for three or four years and was nearly thirteen feet long. His colour was really black on top and yellowish-white underneath, but when, every year, he changed his skin, the old skin would not peel properly from just behind his neck, and when he reared up his head, the old skin, which had bleached white, stood up in a great frill and fluttered in the wind, like a bunch of ostrich feathers. The natives who had seen him imagined that this crest was made of real feathers and that this was not an ordinary mortal mamba, but the ghost of one of their chieftains, who had come back to this world to revenge himself upon some enemy, still wearing the white ostrich feathers which he had worn as a chieftain when alive.

Mambas can move with the speed of a galloping horse. Their bite is absolutely fatal and there is no remedy for it, as there is for the bites of most other kinds of poisonous snakes—puff-adders for instance. There are two kinds of mambas, the smaller green mamba which lives in the shady trees and is of a wonderfully beautiful shape and colour; and the black mamba who loves the hot sunlit sides of precipices and kranzes, or the clearings round deserted native huts.

Many times Michael's uncle, Mr. Jackson, had gone to look for this mamba with his shotgun and, one dry summer, he had set fire to the creepers on the precipice in the hope that the flames would scorch it out on to the road so that

he could get a shot at it; but the old mamba had some cool nook in a cranny of the rocks, and he just laughed at any attempt to surprise him. He seemed to know when anybody had a shotgun and only showed himself to people who were unarmed.

Not only had he killed the Indian who had last worked the now abandoned pump, but he had also killed three natives, and two valuable draught-oxen who had got into his line of retreat, when he had been down to the river, across the road, to drink. The Indian had been buried by the lagoon not far away: and the natives believed that his ghost haunted the spot, because the Indians used to leave food for it on his grave.

Once when the overseer had been driving past in his car, and the snake had darted like a streak of lightning across the road, the front wheel of the car had just brushed the tip of his tail. The mamba had recoiled like a spring and slashed at the overseer, missed him, and spattered the canvas hood of the car, which was strapped down, with venom enough to kill a dozen men.

Even in winter when most snakes get lazy and go to sleep, the old mamba of the precipice, who seemed to suffer from insomnia, was still sometimes to be seen. Instead of using the road, most of the natives used to make a wide detour over the back of the hill in order to avoid the *Indlondhlo*, as they called this mamba.

None of the family spoke as the car passed across the two hundred yards of road which was overshadowed by the mamba's precipice; but they saw nothing and heaved a sigh of relief as the car came out again between the plantations of sugar-cane.

This cane was of the kind that has a purple bark; it almost melts in the mouth, and when Billy and John saw it they began to beg their father to stop and get some, since none of that kind of cane was to be found elsewhere in the neighbourhood.

Stephen also saw it and began to cry for some. So Dr. Jackson stopped the car and Michael jumped out to cut some. Ramsammy stopped the lorry, too, and Tom got out and slashed half a dozen canes for Ramsammy, Moonsammy and himself. He handed a fine stick of it up to Moonsammy, but the poor cook had such a job to hang on to his perch that he asked Tom to keep it for him until the end of the trip, though he was quite thirsty by now because the sun was already getting hot, and his mouth watered for a taste of the cool sweet juice.

"Hurrah!" shouted Michael. "I can see the sand-dunes at the mouth of the lagoon. We're nearly there." John and Billy stood up and saw them, too, and gave a cheer. Hardly had they swerved off from the sugar-cane and come alongside the dark trees of the forest when a big bush-buck ram, followed by a ewe, leaped clean across the road in front of them.

"What a beauty!" said Michael, "just like black velvet and with white tips to his horns! I shall mark him down for your first buck, Billy, as soon as mother wants some meat for the larder."

The ewe disappeared into some low bushes but the ram raced on, through the scrub, up the hillside, and as he went he gave great thundering barks of alarm twice as loud as a great dane.

Presently they scattered a big troop of monkeys which happened to be crossing the road a little farther on.

They came at last over the rise and there was the red roof of their Beach Cottage, half overshadowed by a giant milk-wood tree, and nestling amidst the green of the forest, with the glittering expanse of the Indian Ocean in the background.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BEACH COTTAGE

DOWN at the cottage there was the old caretaker, Nyali, who was over ninety. As a boy he had fought with the great Zulu armies under the black King Cetewayo, against the British. But after that he had worked for Dr. Jackson's grandfather, and now, to make his old age comfortable, Dr. Jackson had given him the job of caretaker, which was a very easy one.

Nyali had been a brave, honest servant, and once when Dr. Jackson, as a boy, had been charged by a savage buffalo, Nyali had stepped in the way of it and saved his life. The buffalo, before it was finished off, had tossed Nyali, knelt on him and broken several of his ribs; he still bore a great knotted scar from his hip to his shoulder, as a result of his brave action. Also he had a mark on his cheek, like small-pox, where the buffalo had licked him with its sandpaper-like tongue, to see if he winced and was still alive.

Nyali was a real wild native, who had never lived in a town. He dressed in an old kilt of buckskin and wore a bone spoon through a hole in his ear, and a big black ring of beeswax, like a black pudding, round the top of his head to signify his rank of *kethla*, or head-man. The spoon in his ear was wonderfully carved with criss-cross patterns, and it was used for taking snuff, which he did about forty times a day, out of a little dried calabash, covered with beads, which he wore round his neck. He had a white beard and the rest of him was as black as ebony.

Another old retainer of the Jacksons, called Papatom,

lived in a shack about thirty yards from Nyali's, but he was not a native Zulu like Nyali. He was of Malay descent and came from the far-away island of Mauritius, where they speak French. He was an old sailor and had served many years in the French Navy. Later he had come to Africa to work in the sugar industry.

Papatom had lost a leg in an accident at the sugar-mill. He had been given a pension by Michael's uncle, and Dr. Jackson had given him a shack down by the beach where he was employed to catch fish and bait for the family, when they were in residence, and for himself when they weren't. He was passionately devoted to fishing, and would kneel all day with his wooden leg screwed deep into the sand. This gave him a steadier foothold than if he had had both legs, in his tussles with sharks, barracudas and kingfish, which sometimes lasted for hours.

Papatom was about sixty. He was almost as black as Nyali and had a grizzled beard and a great shock of grey hair which was not woolly, like that of the natives. He usually wore an old felt hat, a blue sweater and a pair of khaki slacks. But on Sundays he wore a silver-grey tailored suit, with a bowler to match and one bright yellow boot on his good leg. He would then limp seven miles to the chapel to hear Mass.

On the fourteenth of July, when the French celebrate their Revolution Day, Papatom would run amok. He would put on his fine suit and disappear for a whole week at a time. Then he would return, zigzagging along the road as if he were a shepherd looking after a whole herd of sheep—only there were no sheep there. The truth was he was drunk! At such times he would sing the " Marseillaise " in a loud voice. But as he was so well-behaved during all the rest of the year, Dr. Jackson did not give him the sack and, after Nyali had put him to bed, everybody pretended to forget about it. Then he would behave normally until the next fourteenth of July.

He and Nyali were always teasing each other about their different customs, but without any malice. Nyali refused to eat fish, and for this Papatom laughed at him. But Nyali always said that if the Great Spirit, who made the world, had meant fish to be eaten, He would not have put them far away in the deep blue water, so safely out of the reach of man, but made them trot about on the land like hares or cane-rats or buck. He believed that fish were poisonous. Papatom's retort would be that Nyali ate snakes, which neither he nor any white man would touch. And he was always trying to persuade Nyali to taste some fish, but without any success.

In Nyali's corrugated-iron hut he had his great-grandson, Vemvan, which means Butterfly, to attend him as his page. Vemvan was ten years old, and it was also his job to look after the horse, Swap, and the herd of cattle and calves which belonged to the cottage and provided Nyali, Vemvan and Papatom with most of their food, apart from maize. They solidified the milk in calabashes and called it *Maas*.

Vemvan led a wonderful life. He never went to school. He drove the cattle out to grass in the morning, and took the horse to drink at the spring. Then he would sit on a high ant-heap where he could watch them all, and play weird tunes on a mouth-organ which Michael had given him the Christmas before. When he was tired of that, he would take his little knobkerries, or throwing sticks, and his little spear, and go hunting for cane-rats and birds, while his cattle grazed.

He set traps all over the place, and it was very seldom that he did not return in the evening to his great-grandfather with some nice little titbit for the pot, in the shape of a hare, a plump cane-rat, a wild guinea-fowl, or a few quails. Then, as a reward, when they settled down by the fire, Nyali would tell him the strange old Zulu folk-tales, which he would only tell when the sun was down. Vemvan would listen with his eyes popping out of his

head while, at the same time, he tore with his teeth at the succulent ham of a cane-rat or a young porcupine, or the juicy drumstick of a guinea-fowl.

Vemvan, though he was not what might be called a civilised native, was not so old-fashioned or finicky about his clothes as his great-grandfather. On his head he wore a cast-off party hat of Mrs. Jackson's, with artificial flowers decorating it, and round his neck he tied a broken pair of Michael's braces, by way of ornament. Instead of a buck-skin kilt, he had repaired an old pair of Miss Mary's knickers, which had been bright blue once. Attached to the end of the braces swung a little pouch made out of a mole's skin, and in this pouch he kept his greatest treasures—a broken pen-knife and the mouth-organ.

He had thought out presents for each one of the family who were coming to the Beach Cottage. For Michael he had discovered, by following a honey-guide, a huge beehive in a hollow tree not far from the edge of the big forest. For John he had made a cane-rat trap out of reeds woven with grass. For Billy, who had still not shot his first buck, he had found the place where the big bush-buck liked to take the early morning sun. For Dr. and Mrs. Jackson he had a fine baby python's skin, about ten feet long, big enough to make a nice belt for the doctor and a couple of pairs of shoes for Mrs. Jackson.

Vemvan had found the python fast asleep and scarcely able to wake up, because it had just swallowed a whole peetie-buck,* and had settled down for a month or two, for an after-dinner siesta. It had a big bulge in the middle of its body, and so Vemvan knew it was almost powerless. But he had not felt strong enough to kill it by himself, and intended to fetch Nyali and Papatom to help him. While he was knotting some grass by the footpath, to mark the spot, he had nearly stumbled on the orphan lamb of the

* Blue Duiker: ipiti in Zulu. By far the smallest South African antelope.

peetie-buck which had just been swallowed. The lamb had been only a few days old, and was too bewildered to run away, so he had caught it and taken it home with him.

Nyali and Papatom had come and made short work of the python with a cane-cutter. It had been too drowsy after its heavy meal to make any resistance. Vemvan had skinned it, and he and Nyali had had python-steak for supper.

It is difficult to imagine anything as dainty or pretty as a peetie-buck, with its tiny horns and hooves. When it was full-grown, it would only be about the size of a rabbit; then, it was no larger than a guinea-pig. Vemvan brought it up on cow's milk. It slept in a little box full of straw and grew quite tame. He called it *Bonsela*, which means gift, for though he had grown very fond of it, he intended to give it to Miss Mary, as a pet.

Vemvan had not forgotten Stephen's present, either. He had collected all the prettiest shells that he could find on the beach, and put them in a large shiny calabash. There were shells of a hundred different sizes and shapes, from the big leopard-spotted cowries to the tiny sea-shells which glittered like rubies and sapphires.

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE LAGOON-MOUTH

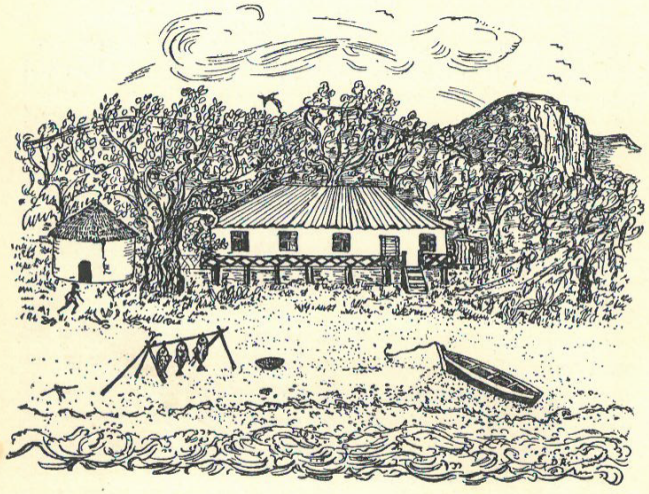
WHEN the Jacksons' car appeared, Vemvan sprang up from the side of the road and raced along beside it as fast as his legs would carry him, shouting all sorts of greetings and compliments, while his big dog Moya went round and round in circles, barking and jumping with delight.

Dr. Jackson pulled up under the great milk-wood tree which half covered the house on one side, and on the other side spread out its huge branches like an archway so that their tips touched the ground again, forty feet from the trunk.

Papatom came running down from his shack with his present of a big salmon-bass for their lunch, which he forced on to Moonsammy who was still recovering from the effects of the journey, and then started clapping his hands, and dancing round on his wooden leg, and trying to kiss everybody's hands at once.

Nyali came out of the kitchen and saluted by raising his knobkerrie high above his head after the dignified fashion of a Zulu warrior. Then he shook hands with Tom, and Tom, from amongst the luggage, produced an enormous sheaf of dried tobacco leaves which he gave to Nyali to be ground, with stones, into snuff. He could not have brought him a nicer present.

Now it was Vemvan's turn to show off. He was bursting with excitement. He ran back to the shack and brought out his presents; then he fetched the little peetie-buck lamb, which came frisking along at his heels as if he had been



THE BEACH COTTAGE

its own mother. Round its neck it had a delightful necklace made of pink sea-shells which Vemvan had pierced, and threaded on a fine brass fishing-trace which he had begged off Papatom.

" Oh, what a darling little buck! " cried Mary.

" It is for you, Inkosasana*," said Vemvan.

Mary took it up and kissed it, and it didn't seem the least frightened. Vemvan showed her how to feed it later on and it became as fond of Mary as it had been of Vemvan.

When the Jacksons opened the house and went inside, they found yet another beautiful present. On the dining-room table was a huge hand-woven lace table-cloth. It had been made by the sisters of the town Orphanage, who were the last people to whom the house had been lent so that they could get some fresh sea-air for their children. There was an envelope pinned to the cloth to say: " With many thanks from us all for a delightful holiday."

The Jacksons had hardly finished lunch when they heard a carriage rumbling along the road. It was Dr. Jackson's brother, Dick. He had brought a huge hamper full of pineapples, paw-paws, oranges, grapefruit, tangerines, sweet-lemons and avocado-pears.

After he had greeted them all, he said: " Now come along, all of you. We are just going to open the lagoon in your honour. The natives have been down at the mouth digging the channel since this morning, and they have started a small trickle already."

Mrs. Jackson stayed behind to arrange the house with Topsy, but the others all started along the beach together, taking Stephen with them. He sat on the horse, Swap, in front of Mary, and Billy sat behind her, clutching hold of her frock. Nyali attended the cows and let Vemvan have the day off. Tom stayed to chop firewood. It was low tide, so the sand was nice and hard, and in a few

* Miss.

minutes they had covered the half mile between the house and the mouth of the river.

When they got there they found about twenty natives all sitting down beside their spades and watching a thin sluice of brown muddy water trickling through the ditch they had dug between the lagoon and the sea. At the moment they arrived, the level of the lagoon was about six feet above that of the sea. As the sluice flowed, the ditch grew wider, and deeper, and swifter. The water undermined the sand on either side, so that it toppled into the stream and was swept out to the waves.

In about twenty minutes the sluice became a roaring torrent, shooting along as if it were being forced out of some gigantic fireman's hose, and striking against the incoming breakers so that they made fans of spray twenty feet high. For hundreds of yards round the sea was becoming dark brown.

The waves kept on trying to roll in and batter themselves against the overwhelming force of the torrent, heaving, and groaning, and making huge whirlpools as they collided and were swept aside. The torrent now formed itself into an undulating switchback as it ground down to the huge rocks, which had lain buried under the sand-bar.

Then suddenly, the whole of the sand-bar collapsed with such a roar that Swap, who was now tethered to one of the bushes on the top of a sand-dume, tore it out by the roots and galloped, in a terrible fright, along the beach back to his stable, dragging the bush behind him.

It was an awe-inspiring sight. Hundreds of thousands of tons of water rushed through the gap in half an hour. The water from the lagoon went right over the top of the breakers and no more sign of them could be seen, except for a feeble undulation under the main current. The sea was reddish brown for a mile out.

At each side of the lagoon-mouth where the river struck the sea there were two wide, rapid, but shallow, whirlpools,

where big fishes were thrown out on to the sand, and then swept back into the water. But it was far too dangerous to go near the mouth.

They all watched the amazing spectacle from about fifty yards from the top of one of the big solid sand-dunes. These dunes, beneath their outer coating of sand, were really enormous piles of mussel-shells. They had been deposited there by one of the most ancient races of man, the strand loopers or beach-walkers, who were tiny dwarfs like the bushmen. Their bones could be found in these middens, but the race had died out long ago.

Very soon the lagoon was almost completely drained, sand-banks appeared in the middle of it covered with stranded fish and eels flapping around in the shallow water, and swarms of bewildered shrimps hopping about and shimmering in the sun.

A huge eagle, with a snow-white head and neck and a chestnut-coloured body, gave a scream, and swooped on a large mullet that lay helplessly in a puddle near by. Big crabs scuttled about from puddle to puddle trying to find their way back to the water. There were still two channels, however, and large patches of deep water here and there. One of the channels ran beside the north bank where the boat-house was, about three hundred yards from the dune where they were all standing.

"Look, Father," said Michael, "there is a huge rock-salmon lying on that sand-bank over there. It would be a pity to let it die and rot; let's go and get it for Uncle Dick to have for tomorrow's dinner. The lagoon has finished running out. Can't I take the boat and fetch it?"

"Yes, and let me come too," said John and Billy at the same moment.

"All right," said Dr. Jackson. "It seems safe enough now."

So off they went, the three of them, leaving the others to watch them. Michael rowed out to the sand-bank in

the middle of the lagoon and got the rock-salmon while John and Billy sat in the stern of the boat.

What happened after that was a very rare occurrence indeed. The lagoon had run out with such force that it had overdrained itself. At the same moment the spring tide had just started to come in. The first thing that anybody knew about it was that there was a terrific crackling noise and a wall of blue water came into the lagoon from the sea. As soon as it came through the mouth it fanned out on all sides so that the lagoon had two surfaces; one was three or four feet higher than the other and this began to cover the lower surface with tremendous speed, rushing along with an edge of foam a yard high, and making a sound like the rattle of a thousand machine-guns. It looked exactly as if it would capsize and swamp the boat.

Dr. Jackson shouted: "Meet it head-on!" but his voice was completely drowned in the din of the tidal wave, and Michael did the very reverse. He was a resourceful young fellow but he had never been confronted with a predicament like this before. He did not have much time to think, but he remembered his experience with a surf-board as a child, for he had long discarded a board when bathing, and could ride a ten-foot breaker like any grown-up man. He remembered that if you place your board at right angles to the fringe of the wave and kick off hard at the right moment you can generally avoid a ducking. So he started rowing as hard as he could with his boat tail-on to the advancing wave. "Hang on tight," he cried to the children.

John, who had looked back, was crying with fear. Billy was scared enough by the noise though he was sitting in the bottom of the boat and could see nothing of the advancing wave, which suddenly struck the stern of the boat and lifted it three feet above the bows to a very steep angle.

There was a moment of terrible suspense as to whether

the boat would turn to one side or the other, or go head over heels, but Michael had got it moving so directly in line with the drive of the wave that it merely shuddered and then, wonder of wonders! began to surf the wave as if it had been a surf-board. The stern settled more and more comfortably into the wave but the bows were cutting the smooth level in front and sending up a shawl of foam on both sides like a modern motor speed-boat.

The sensation was so unbelievably exhilarating that, after having had the fright of his life a moment before, Michael began to laugh, and sing, and shout with joy. But he kept the tips of the oars almost feathering the water, so that, by merely dipping either of them, he could have put on the brake and corrected the angle of the keel, and so avoided disaster.

The two children, in the stern, as soon as they found they were safe, began to feel the same triumphant thrill as Michael. With the tears still in his eyes John stood up and cheered and waved his hat to the anxious group, who, powerless to help, had been watching all this time from the sand-dune.

The wave by this time had carried them right round the first bend of the river, a distance of more than half a mile where it petered out into a shallow ripple. But by this time Dr. Jackson knew that Michael had weathered the danger, and he mopped his brow and sat down.

The water in the lagoon was now quite level, and soon the happy boatload was seen returning round the bend.

Tom, who had remained near the stable chopping wood when Swap returned trailing the torn-up bush, had caught him and ridden him back along the beach. Michael and his brothers came up panting and laughing, and Mary lifted the two younger children into the saddle before and behind her, while Vemvan told Tom of the adventure he had just witnessed.

"It's a good thing that I wasn't in the boat," said

Vemvan, " or they would all have been drowned—and me too! "

" What makes you say that? " laughed Michael, who spoke Zulu perfectly.

" Well, you see," said Vemvan, " you white people eat fish and that acts as medicine against the waves, so that you don't get drowned. But if I had been there, I have no medicine in my stomach in the way of fish, so that I have no magic against the water. The boat would certainly have capsized if I had been in it, for it would have counteracted your medicine to have somebody in the boat who had no fish inside him."

Everybody laughed at this and they all made their way home along the sand. They had had enough excitement for one day; but it had given them enormous appetites.

After supper Mr. Jackson drove home, and the family went down to the beach and made a big fire of driftwood to keep them warm while they watched the moon coming up over the ocean. Then they all went to bed.

That night, John, who had had such a scare in the afternoon, had the most wonderful dreams. He had a habit of talking in his sleep, and he twice shouted out: " Here comes another! Hurrah for the jolly old wave! "

South African rivers end in lagoons instead of running out to sea all the year round, because in South Africa there is a very big surf along the coast. Even on the calmest day, there are seven or eight lines of breakers rolling in to the shore such as are very seldom seen even on the stormiest days in England. These waves are so much stronger, as a rule, than the rivers, except when the latter are in flood, that they pile up huge sand-banks at the mouths of the rivers, through which the water can only filter underground. When the river is flooded it rushes out. Then the clean sea-water comes in for a few days and re-stocks the river with fish. The land flooded by the swollen lagoon is relieved, and the crops and plantations

are thereby saved. The breakers soon wash the sand back into a barrier; but the lagoon remains at a lower level until the next heavy rains either necessitate a digging operation, or else burst the sand-bank by their own weight. There are only a very few ordinary river-mouths or estuaries in South Africa and hardly any that can be entered even by small ships.

CHAPTER FOUR

BEES AND SNAKES

NEXT day Vemvan came to the window outside Michael's room and woke him before the dawn, whilst it was not yet even twilight and there was frost on the grass. " Now is the time to take the hive," he said, " while it is still cold."

Michael got up as quietly as he could and took his bicycle lamp, a hatchet, and two big buckets from the wash-house, which Vemvan carried.

" Take the path up the edge of the Big Forest," said Vemvan, and Michael went in front flashing his lamp from side to side.

As they passed a cultivated patch of sweet-potatoes behind Papatom's house, the ray of the lamp suddenly lit up three pairs of green eyes.

" Look at those wretched bush-buck," whispered Vemvan. " Every night they jump the fence of Papatom's sweet-potato patch and eat up all the sweet-potato leaves, so that soon he won't have any left."

The three buck stood fixed and hypnotised in the shadows by the glare of the lamp; all that could be seen of them was their eyes. " We'll put a stop to that," said Michael, " as soon as my mother needs some meat. That must be the big *Inkonka* (bush-buck ram)," he added, as it launched forth its loud dane-like bark of alarm, and dashed away followed by the two other vague shapes.

" Oh, but he is very clever," said Vemvan. " He has never seen a bright lamp before. That's why he was bewildered for a moment. You will not get so close to

him another time, unless you are very lucky. But we'll try. I know where he browses in the morning when the sun's up. I found the place for Master Billy."

As they passed by the side of the forest the lamp from time to time lit up other pairs of eyes; some were orange, some were yellow, some were green. The orange eyes in the tree-tops were those of owls and nightjars. The green eyes were probably those of bush-babies, or lemurs. But they were very ghostly and mysterious since nothing further could be seen of the animals to whom they belonged, and it was impossible to tell for certain what they were.

For half an hour the two boys walked along the fringe of the forest, and startled many wild creatures. They heard them rushing through the undergrowth, the peeties always with a shrill whistle of alarm, and the bush-buck barking loudly.

At length they came to an old rotten tree. The sun was just coming up. Vemvan took the hatchet from Michael, and hit the butt against the trunk.

" Listen," he said; and from the inside of the trunk they heard a low, confused and angry hum. " Now here's the entrance," he went on, pointing to a hole in the trunk, " but if you put your ear there, you will find that the hive is near the ground. So I think we must cut a big hole down there."

They began chopping, and soon had cut quite a big hole about twice the size of a slot in a pillar box. The bees began to make an angrier noise but it was still too cold for them to be able to sting fiercely. Vemvan and Michael were careful not to tread on, or to bruise any of the bees which were crawling all over their clothes and even on their faces; and when they received one or two stings they did not touch the bees that stung them.

Michael made a fire of twigs a yard or two away in the direction from which the wind was blowing and threw a

great many dead and mouldy leaves on the top of it. It was a wise precaution. Though the acrid smoke from the leaves made their eyes smart and fill with tears, it completely stupefied the bees, and they ceased altogether from trying to sting.

Vemvan, who had the smaller hands, reached in and broke off the combs, which were joined in shelves, one on top of the other, to the inside of the hollow trunk. Into one bucket he put all the combs which were full of bee-grubs and into the other he put the combs which were full of honey. As he did so he scrutinised each comb, until suddenly he said: " Here's the boss." He meant the Queen Bee.

Michael put her in a match-box, and when they had filled both buckets, they put her back into the hive, where there were still plenty of combs.

They went to a little spring nearby where they dug up about twenty pounds of clay with the aid of their chopper, and they sandwiched this clay very neatly into the hole they had made, so as to try and repair the damage, leaving a tiny hole for the bees to get in and out.

" And now," said Vemvan, " thank you very much, Bees. We had better be making tracks before the sun warms you up, and wakes you properly. Make us some more honey by next year."

Just as they were about to leave, and when the sun was well over the skyline, a bold little bird began to scold them both and flutter in the branches of the tree.

" Go away," cried Vemvan. " I've already paid you for showing me the way to this hive." Then he pulled out four combs of grubs and left them for the bird, and said: " I suppose I had better pay him again, or he might lead me, the next time, to a mamba or a leopard."

" How did you pay him last time? " Michael asked.

" I brought him some honey from another hive which Grandad had taken, and gave it to him for showing me this one, which I didn't want to spoil but to keep for you," said Vemvan.

The bird was a honey-guide; a bird which lives on honey and bees. It calls both human beings and honey badgers, or ratels, and guides them, by flitting noisily from tree to tree, to hives which it has previously discovered and which require to be dug out from difficult places either in the ground or in hollow trees. The ratel encourages the bird to guide it to the honey by answering its twitterings with chuckling noises of its own. It shares its haul with the bird: so do the natives, who believe that if the bird is cheated it will take a terrible revenge on the culprit the next time, and lead him to a black mamba, a leopard, or a rhinoceros.

There are several varieties of honey-guides, which are related to cuckoos, but differ from all other birds in having a scaly second eyelid, like a snake has. This hard transparent scale can cover the eye without blinding it, and is probably intended to protect its eye from bee-stings.

As soon as Michael and Vemvan had gone away, the honey-guide, calling its mate, settled down to breakfast on the bee-grubs that Vemvan had left for them. Then they both flew off to locate new hives to which to guide ratels or natives—and perhaps to find the haunts of cobras and mambas also with which to punish delinquents who refused them their wage of honey.

Michael was back home with a bucketful of fine combs by breakfast time. Mrs. Jackson and Mary spent all morning squeezing honey from the combs and bottling it in jam-jars. They kept six for the family; but Mary begged six from Michael to take to the sick children at the Addington Hospital whom she was always visiting and taking out for drives in her mother's carriage. They collected also a big lump of beeswax, which comes in so useful for mending broken fishing-rods; and they gave some of it to Nyali in case he wanted a new *kethia's* crown to wear on his head.

Nyali and Vemvan made a fine breakfast on honey mixed with maize-porridge and milk, and for a second course they picked the little white milky bee-grubs out of their combs and roasted them—and very good they were, too!

John and Billy got some of the bee-grubs and started shaking them out of their combs on to the ground near the verandah of the cottage. Then they lay and hid near them in the bushes. By and by, a pretty bush-robin came out and began eating them. In a few minutes its mate came, followed by a lovely bush-shrike with a bright green back, a yellow stomach, and a brilliant crimson chest, with a black collar. Very soon there was a whole party of birds hopping about and scrambling for the grubs. John and Billy lay quite still and watched them.

Then up hopped a huge flat toad, at least he was flat when he came: but he could not stop eating and darting out his long sticky tongue to pick up more grubs, so in the end he became quite round.

When all the grubs were finished, John and Billy stood up, and the birds whirled away in a scurry of wings. But the old toad had eaten so much and eaten it so quickly that, though he was as scared as the birds, his hind legs could not get on to the ground firmly enough to kick off when he tried to hop away; so he was left behind with his hind legs free-wheeling in circles, without being able to budge an inch.

" Serves you right for being so greedy," said Billy, who was really very greedy himself. People had often said those very words to him when he had a stomach-ache, so he liked to have the chance of saying them to somebody else even though it was only an old toad.

John and Billy went back to the house, and soon found Michael and Mary, who had just come in from jumping Swap over a hurdle which they had rigged up for him. They told Michael and Mary about the beautiful birds they had tempted out of the forest.

" And now come and see our old toad," said Billy. " If you say I'm greedy, what is he? "

John and Billy led the way, but when they came to the place where the toad had been, there was no toad at all, only a dent in the sand where he had been and a funny couple of zigzag tracks.

" How long ago was it? " said Michael, " that you left him here ? "

" Only half an hour ago," said John.

" Well, go and fetch a walking-stick at once! " ordered Michael.

John brought the walking-stick and Michael started poking about in the grass in the direction of the tracks. " Ah, I thought so! " he said, and brought the stick suddenly down with a thump into the grass. " A puff-adder has swallowed him whole, bee-grubs as well." He gave the snake a couple more thumps on the head to make sure that it was dead and then turfed it out on to the bare sand with the end of his stick. In the middle of the puff-adder's body was a sausage-like bulge.

" That's your toad," said Michael.

" No, it can't be," urged John, " our toad was almost as broad as it was long. And any way, how could it swallow such a big thing when its head is only half the size? "

" All right," said Michael, " we'll see what it is. I'll bet it's your toad. Snake's jaws aren't joined together with bones like ours are; all the skin between their jaws is just like elastic so they can swallow things ten or twenty times the size of their heads, just like the python swallowed Bonsela's mother."

He held the snake's poisonous head in the sand with his stick while he worked the bulge up towards its head with his boot; then he released the head, and with a final squelch—out came the toad! Only it was very much elongated.

" Poor toad," said Billy, " what a pity he ate so much that he couldn't hop away! But now it serves that puff-adder right for being so greedy! "

" Ugh," said Mary, who had long ago turned away, " I don't know how you can look at this. It makes me feel quite funny."

" Well, it is very interesting all the same," said Michael. " If I hadn't noticed the tracks we might have thought that the toad had hopped away; and, who knows? the puff-adder might have come into the kitchen looking for mice, and poor old Moonsammy might have trodden on it in the dark. But when I said it was interesting, I wasn't thinking in particular about this snake, but another one."

" What do you mean? " asked Mary.

" I'll tell you in one month from now," said Michael, who had opened the jaws of the puff-adder with a little sliver of wood and prized up its long and terrible fangs. But he was really studying the short hooked teeth and the texture of the skin at the side of its jaws.

They were just going to leave him at this grisly job, when Mary said: " Well, you look as if you were trying to become a naturalist. You'll get like old Professor Pokenose and have ginger hair growing out of your ears and nostrils, and protruding teeth, and horn-rimmed spectacles if you go on like that."

" It wouldn't be ginger hair, it would be brown, you silly," laughed Michael. " Anyhow I've got an idea, and even if it doesn't come off I'll tell you within a month and then you can laugh at me as much as you like."

Suddenly a shout from John changed the subject— " Look at our toad! "

They all looked. Could it be possible? The toad had got rounder; and very, very faintly you could see two little pulses throbbing on his back.

" Crikey! he's alive," said Billy, " after being swallowed

by a snake! The Sunday-school teacher punished me for not believing in Jonah coming out alive from the tummy of the whale. And now, just look! Why couldn't I have seen this before I went to the Sunday school? It would have saved me from being kept in for two hours, and now it's too late! "

Michael said: " But he must be dying; surely the fangs of the snake must have touched him when he was being swallowed." He looked for the sign of a scratch or a puncture in the toad's back, but there was none. " Well, isn't that wonderful? I believe he may live after all."

The toad answered him with a strange croak, and suddenly gave a little hop; then later, two more; and presently hopped off altogether. He must have been so powerless after his gluttony that the snake had not even needed to bite him before eating him. It had swallowed him down with its fangs folded into their sheathes. That was how Michael explained it.

" So you see," said Billy, " it isn't always a bad thing to eat a very good dinner, and as much as you want. If he hadn't over-eaten he would have struggled and got a poisonous bite. As it was, it saved his life to have eaten so much that he couldn't struggle."

" Rot! " said John, " if he hadn't made such a pig of himself, he could have hopped away as soon as we got up and scared the birds, as he certainly tried to do, and the snake might never have found him at all*. He must have coughed up some of those grubs too while he was being swallowed, and that would have lightened him."

The reason that Michael had been interested in examining the skin on the jaws of the puff-adder was that he meant to work out an elaborate scheme, and a very daring one. If he had told any one about it, they would have

* For corroboration of this see Fitzsimmon's *Snakes of South Africa*, in which the curator of the famous Durban Snake Park records a similar case with a cobra and a toad.

laughed at him, but not only that; his father and mother would have forbidden him ever to try to carry it out under the threat of severe punishment. He had thought out this scheme during the whole term at school. It seemed fantastic, if not mad, simply because no one had ever tried it. But he had heard of a man who had caught a fox on a night-line baited with a herring, by *accident*; and another who had caught an otter on a fish-hook by *accident*; and a negro in America who had caught a deadly cotton-mouth snake on his line by *accident*, so he did not see why he shouldn't try and fish for a snake *on purpose*. In fact Michael's idea was nothing more or less than to trap and to kill the great mamba of the precipice by means of fish-hooks.

The idea had come to him when he was stopping some cruel boys in Durban from catching sea-gulls with fish-hooks; and the more he thought about that deadly old cunning *indhlondlo*, the more he was determined to avenge its ferocity and wanton cruelty.

In examining the surfaces of snakes' jaws and gullets he was sizing up the best method; whether he should use a big hook or a lot of tiny fly-hooks. He found that the snakes' gullets were so smooth that a big hook would only glide along them without penetrating, whereas the small hooks might catch and hold. If you can fish for birds, he reflected, why shouldn't you fish for a snake? Many's the trout-fisherman who has accidentally caught a swift or a swallow on his fly before it touched the water. But of course with a snake it would have to be a live bait and he didn't much like the idea of sacrificing some wretched chicken or other bird. Still, where human lives were concerned, you couldn't be finicky. Well, there was time to think it over.

Michael called Mary and the boys after lunch to go up to the stable and have some fun with Nyali and Vemvan. He had brought a new gramophone out with him, which

he had got for a birthday present, and he was going to play it to the natives. They carried it up in front of Nyali's shack and put it on the grass.

"What have you got in that box?" asked Nyali.

"Oh, only a fellow," said John.

"What do you mean?" said Nyali. "How can you get a fellow into so small a box? All I can say is he must be a dwarf."

"Oh, you think so?" laughed Michael, "what was in those little tins we brought you as a present from Durban?" (he referred to some bully-beef.)

"Why, it was cow, I suppose," said Nyali, "and it is very good too, only a bit salty."

"Well, if you can keep a cow in tins, why can't you keep a fellow in a box?" asked Michael.

"What!" exclaimed Nyali, "have you cut a fellow up and put him in that box, all mashed up, like the cow in my boxes? If so, take him away at once! I don't eat fish —and I don't eat fellows!"

"No, the fellow in this box is very well and happy. He laughs and sings as soon as you ask him. But it needs a bit of magic first!" With that, Michael lifted the lid, wound the handle, and put on the disc of Harry Lauder singing "Stop your tickling, Jock."

It gave Vemvan and Moya such a fright that Moya ran away squealing; but Vemvan roared with laughter though his knees were trembling and he could not be induced to come within ten yards of the gramophone for a long time. Nyali wanted to run away too but he remembered he was a Zulu brave, and stood his ground.

"What is he laughing at?" asked Nyali after it was finished. "Is he laughing at me? Can he see us out of some hole in the box?"

"No, he is only laughing because he's happy," said Mary; "and he can sing in Zulu too."

Then Mary put on the disc of Ntskana's hymn which

had been translated from Xosa to Zulu and recorded at the Inanda mission. The words and the tune were so inspired and beautiful that again and again Nyali asked the man in the box to repeat it, and he did so. Vemvan came and patted the box. And then they all tried to explain to Nyali and Vemvan how it was done. But Nyali could not understand. "It is medicine," he said, "and very strong medicine too!"

CHAPTER FIVE

NIGHT ON THE LAGOON

ONE afternoon when the mullet were known to be rising, Mrs. Jackson and Mary wanted to go for an evening's row on the lagoon, which had been reclosed by the sea with a wide sand-bar.

So that they would not have to come by the bush, Michael brought the boat to the foot of the dunes near the shore and met them as they walked along the beach with John and Billy.

Michael had brought two blankets to put across his mother's and sister's knees in case they felt chilly later on. He had also brought his brilliant acetylene lamp and two or three hurricane lamps: and he had muffled the row-locks by tying them up with sacking and string.

As the ladies and the two smaller boys reached the top of the dunes near the rendezvous, it was just after sunset. They looked towards the mighty hills and table-lands in the distance, and saw the lagoon winding inland with the forest on the left hand and the reed-beds on the right. At the foot of the forest, among the mangroves which dotted the sand-bank, flamingoes came flying low along the water with their great scarlet and black quills extended. Flocks of snow-white egrets, or locust birds, descended and perched among the reeds. All day these egrets follow the herds of cattle as they graze, and even ride on their backs, using them as beaters to disturb the grasshoppers which they hawk and devour. Then at sunset, from leagues around, they all flock back to this one lagoon which is their home and sanctuary.

These beautiful birds are protected by law because of the damage they inflict on locusts and other harmful insects. Several thousands of them used to nest on the reed-beds by the Jacksons' lagoon.

In the summer the reed-beds were even livelier, because myriads of golden weaver birds wove their basket-like nests out of the leaves of the reeds, stripping them almost bare. Nearly every pair of reed-stems served to carry a nest; and with so many flaming golden wings playing around their tips, the white and leafless reeds looked like lighted tapers in some tremendous religious procession. Apart from the golden weaver birds, there were gorgeous scarlet bloodfinks, bishop birds, and widowbirds with long black plumes flying out a foot or two behind them, and scarlet markings.

However, in the winter, as it was now, nearly all the birds of the weaver family had lost their gorgeous colours and long plumes, and looked like ordinary thrushes. These birds all show an extraordinary sense as weather prophets; in the years when there are going to be floods, the weaver birds abandon the reeds and hang their nests in the branches of the forest to be out of reach of the water.

To the forest, on the left bank, flocks of hadadah ibis were flying back to roost and giving their extraordinary cry from which they get their name. It is one of the loudest noises uttered by any bird in Africa, including the ostrich which roars like a lion; it resembles a loud laugh mixed with the bleat of a sheep. The nearest thing in appearance to an ibis in Europe is perhaps a curlew.

It was in this lagoon that the famous wandering hippo, Hubert, stayed, the beast which suddenly turned up from nowhere in the main street in Durban at eleven o'clock at night, just in time to be run into by the people coming out of the pubs! It spent the most peaceful part of its career in this river before it was again overcome with the

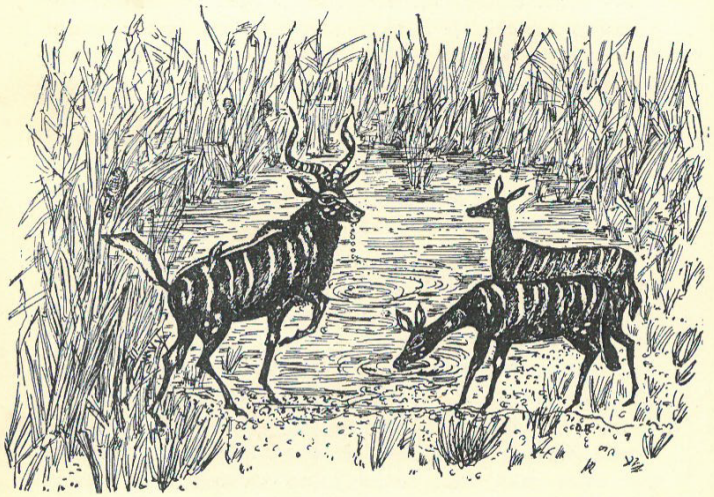
wanderlust and journeyed off once more to explore the more civilised parts of the Cape Province.

This eccentric but harmless animal had returned to a part of the world from which its species had been expelled thirty years before, and had already spent a year on the Jacksons' lagoon. It was almost a pet of theirs; and it was there that evening, making circles in the middle of the lagoon as it rose and sank in the dead-still water, otherwise untroubled except by the splash of a mullet here and there. He was quite used to the Jacksons and the Jacksons were used to him.

Suggesting that they should try to get a glimpse of some buck drinking, Michael pushed off in the boat while it was still daylight, and skirting the fringe of the left bank, rowing as quietly as he could, he enjoined silence. They passed the hippo only twenty yards away and it showed not the slightest trace of alarm.

" Now watch out here, eyes left as soon as we pass this bit of low scrub by the bank," murmured Michael.

The boat glided silently along with a faint helping breeze behind it. As soon as they had passed the scrub, they came on the most majestic and beautiful sight imaginable—a full-grown Inyala bull was drinking at the foot of a bank of red sand; behind him, half-way down the bank, were two beautiful ginger-red Inyala cows with brilliant white stripes which flashed electrically in the evening light. Three more cows with their muzzles in the water were drinking over their own red and white reflections. The bull suddenly raised his great lyre-shaped horns, arched his neck, shook out the white hairs of his mane and tail and uttered a tremendous bark. In contrast to the smooth red and white bodies of the cows, his body was almost pitch-black but with similar brilliant stripes and he had a majestic black beard which flowed from his chin down to between his fore-legs. Flashing their frilly white



INYALAS

tails like ostrich feathers, as a signal of alarm, the five cows bounded off with the bull after them.

Many a naturalist would have given a year of his life for such a close-up view of the rarest and most beautiful of all African antelopes, which only exists in five or six other restricted patches of bush throughout the whole continent. The Inyala is really a larger edition of a bush-buck, in fancy dress.

At the moment when the Inyala bull gave the alarm and bounded up the bank, John, forgetting Michael's injunctions, let out a yell of excitement which startled the thousands of hadadah ibises roosting nearby in the forest. Unloosing a hullabaloo which would have dazed and deafened the crowd at a football match, they suddenly took flight, with their wings crashing against the leaves and boughs of the trees in which they were roosting. Not all the donkeys in Andalusia or Egypt, if they all started braying together, and had all their voices relayed to the same microphone, could have equalled the unholy din of these three or four thousand ibises as they rose and wheeled in furious circles overhead.

This disturbed the beautiful white egrets, which caught the panic and rose from the reeds over the way; they too started wheeling around in rings to discover what was the matter. The rays of the sun, which had sunk low behind the mountains, caught their wings as they soared up into the twilight. Then slowly the alarm subsided and both ibises and egrets began to wheel slowly back to their roosting places, after a wonderful aerial display which was very beautiful while it lasted.

The voices of crickets from the forest, and frogs from the reeds, began to orchestrate in deeper and deeper volume. Some of the frogs had a deafening whistle and others a roaring croak; but as the sound heaved and swayed it was not unmusical and it impressed those who heard it with a kind of awe, as can the roaring of the breakers or the rolling

of thunder, or the voice of the Victoria Falls. The tremendous volume of sound was, however, in very strange contrast to the stillness of the air, in which, once the birds had subsided again to their rest, not a leaf trembled.

It was now twilight and as the boat drifted along by the reeds past the first red bank, the fire-flies began to light up and to twinkle with their pulsing fires, which seemed to be dancing in rhythm to the voices of the crickets. They filled the lagoon with their reflections as if they were the sparks from some enormous forest, or sugar-cane fire. The stems of the reeds seemed to be furred with green rays. They showered on the great black mass of the Hawaan forest and over the water and the reeds and the distant hills of sugar-cane beyond.

Some of them got tangled in Mary's hair which was loose, so John and Billy started putting more and more of them into her hair until she shone like an illuminated picture of a Madonna with a glorious aureole of fire.

" Ah, if only Trooper Tomkinsley could see you now," teased Michael. The trooper was very fond of Mary and always came to visit her from the neighbouring mounted police camp when he had a chance to patrol round the beach cottage. Mary only thought about having to comb the fire-flies out afterwards, but the glare lit up her face and made her look like the queen of that wonderful fairy-land into which the boat was drifting.

Soon they passed out of the swarms of fire-flies and were just under the mamba's precipice, which was quite safe from the boat. Michael could hear fishes jumping in the darkness ahead so he gave John and Billy a hurricane lamp which they wired to the bow of the boat so that it shone over the water. Then he lit up his acetylene bicycle-lamp and swivelled it all round with a brilliant flare.

Hardly were the lamps lit when a couple of silver streaks rose clean over the boat and fell with a splash into the water on the other side.

" Hurrah! they're jumping tonight," said Michael.

Suddenly there was a whole shower of silver projectiles; everybody ducked: there were several thuds in the bottom of the boat and a flapping and fluttering of tails and fins.

Then there was a sudden smack and Michael was holding his jaw: a two-pound mullet struck him a glancing blow and fallen flapping and thudding into the bottom of the boat. Michael saw stars and felt quite giddy.

" Put those blankets round your shoulders and heads," he warned his mother and sister, " and you, John and Billy, put your jackets round your ears and protect yourselves. This last one nearly knocked me out."

The fish continued to leap at the lights until the boat was about a quarter full. They had finally to extinguish the lamps, but even then the fish, who were in a leaping mood, continued to jump at the boat.

It was after midnight when they got back. They left the fish in the boat to be fetched by Moonsammy in the morning, when they would have some for breakfast and let Moonsammy distribute the rest to other Indians who came down to fish on the beach for bait.

CHAPTER SIX

SPRING-TIDE

THE next day the tide went out farther and lower than it had done for years, and left the rock pools full of fishes, crabs, crayfish and catfish which had been taken by surprise by such a rapid fall of the water.

The rocks in front of the house had originally formed great flat ledges separated by sandy bays: but from the look of it, these ledges had been cracked like plates by earthquakes, and battered by the waves until some of the fragments had been pushed about twenty feet upright in the air: and others, though they remained level, were separated by a thousand criss-cross channels and crevasses, which were very deep in places though a child could step over them. There were also many round holes in the rock which varied from the size of a wash-basin to a swimming-bath, though the average size was about that of an ordinary washing-bath.

The sides and bottoms of these holes were coated shaggily with purple, crimson, green, violet, yellow, scarlet and white seaweed, with pink and green anemones which restlessly unfolded and closed their feathery tentacles. It was possible to lie and watch beside one of these little holes or pools for an hour without getting bored; for each of them was like a magic little garden in which the seaweeds were the flowers, ferns and palms, and the tiny fishes were the parrakeets, the humming-birds and the butterflies. The seaweed waved to and fro in the currents which were made by the swishing and darting of the fishes, or came from the sea itself through chinks and fissures in the rocks.

Though the main sea had retired far off, it still sent waves back towards the land which broke into a thousand threads and went zigzagging through the tiny cracks between the rocks, chiming and tinkling into tiny rivulets wherever they could find the smallest opening.

The surface of the rocks was covered with barnacles, corals, limpets, mussels and oysters, and a curious thing called senene, or sea-squirt, or rock-bait. This stuff grew in black masses on the rocks which were generally submerged: it looked as if it were part of the rock itself: but when touched or trodden on, it had the feel of india-rubber and it would squirt high into the air like half a dozen water-pistols. If hacked open with a knife a brilliant orange-coloured pulp would be revealed inside the rubbery covering, and this pulp was the very best bait for fishing on the rocks. In France people eat this senene, and call it *violet* because they make the violet gas, iodine, from it. They consider it a great delicacy, but in Africa it grows too big and coarse and has too strong a taste to be eaten.

When Moonsammy saw how far the sea had gone out, he plucked up courage and took a sack and a crowbar down to the rocks to get oysters, for which he had such a passion. The children were already playing in the rock-holes in their bathing-suits. Mary and Topsy had found a rock-hole which fitted Stephen perfectly. It was lined with soft feathery seaweed all round and had got quite warm in the sun. The water came up to his chest and was full of tiny rainbow-coloured and golden fishes which he tried in vain to grab with his hands; he laughed and chuckled as the cooler wavelets trickled into his bath from the sea, and tickled him all over.

Whenever the spring-tide was on, that is every fortnight, the Indians, who are so fond of fishing, used to journey down to the beach from the inland villages if they could leave their work. On this particular day, Moonsammy's

cousin, Govindar-Sammy, chanced to come to the very rocks where Moonsammy was collecting oysters.

Govindar-Sammy was what is called a Vegetable-Sammy. He had saved up his money when he was a cook like Moonsammy, and also he had had great luck in betting with it at the horse-races in Durban. With this money he had bought some acres of bush-country, which he had cleared, and planted with vegetables and fruit trees. Every day he and his wife and sons would hawk the vegetables and fruit round the nearby township in large baskets, going from door to door of the European houses, and crying out in a loud voice a list of whatever they had to sell.

Mrs. Govindar used to carry one big basket on her head which she balanced without holding. But Govindar and his sons each carried two baskets swinging see-saw fashion, one in front and one behind, from an eight-foot piece of giant bamboo which creaked so loudly that they could be heard coming before they announced themselves at the back doorstep with their normal tradesman's cry. This was intended to be—" Good morning, missus! Nice vegetables, tomato, orange, banana, green peas "—and so on, enumerating what they had to sell. But to a stranger, it sounded like the most blood-curdling yell, for all the words were gabbled as if they were one word, so the effect was something like this—" vegetabletomatobananatangerineavocado pear greenpeaspineapplemangokohlrabishallottartichoke-pawpaw "—and it would go on until the last item was accounted for.

Govindar and his family could carry great weights and they seldom failed to sell their produce: so Govindar became quite a rich man, and, as he was his own master, he could take a day off for fishing whenever he liked. Moreover, he had bought his fishing tackle in the most expensive shop in Durban—and most of it had originally come from Hardy's in Pall Mall, London. He had a

beautiful ten-guinea reel with five hundred yards of the best silk line on it, and lovely " spoons " which had come from England and America and were made of mother-of-pearl, copper and silver. These were for casting into deep water and, when they wound in, they revolved, zigzagging, and twinkling, even more brilliantly and realistically than a real fish. This would tempt the big fishes, no matter if they had just eaten and were not hungry, to dart after them and try to have a bite because they looked so very appetising.

Govindar had brought his two smallest sons with him and so there was already quite a big party on the rocks. Moonsammy recognised him from far away and came and sat beside him while he arranged his tackle.

To each of his sons Govindar gave a small stick, to the end of which a shark-hook had been fixed, with lashings of waxed thread to form a small gaff. With these they poked about in the crannies of the rock-holes catching little cuttlefishes and crayfish, which are excellent either for bait or for food. When they had collected enough of these they started fishing with small bamboos in the deep crevasses of the rocks, using rock-bait which they hacked with a machete from its rubbery casing. They chopped at the crust of barnacles and mussels which fringed the ledges of the rock, too, and this scattered in the water flavouring it and scenting it with shellfish which attracted dozens of fish from all round, and they were soon pulling up delicious blacktails, caranteens and rock-cods every few minutes or so. When they had caught a sackful they immediately started a big fire on the shore and roasted some of them by spitting them on green sticks which they sharpened and pushed through the mouths of the fish. The rest they kept in the sack to take back to Mrs. Govindar and their brothers and sisters at home.

While they feasted, not far from where Govindar was sitting arranging his tackle, a strange party appeared

along the beach. Two Indians dressed in white duck suits and red fezzes and sashes came first, carrying a couple of hampers and a pillow, also a huge folded umbrella, like those that can be seen over tea-tables in fashionable seaside resorts. After them walked a corpulent figure in a white helmet and a white suit, with a very red round face. Behind him came another Indian carrying two enormous fishing creels and three rods, with a gaff across his shoulder. They had walked for two miles along the beach from where the main road ended on the other side of the lagoon.

Mr. Sennacherib Cholmondely, for such was the name or perhaps the alias of the round and red-faced gentleman, was a diamond merchant from Johannesburg, whose doctor had ordered him a fishing trip to the seaside. He had driven out of Durban along the coast till the road ended; he had then parked his Rolls-Royce in the care of his chauffeur; and walked along the beach with the rest of his retinue of servants, till he came to what he thought was a likely spot.

Though the habitués of these rocks, from Govindar to Stephen, from Michael to Topsy, secretly resented the intrusion of strange company, they had no right to do so, since the beach, for a distance of thirty yards from the water-mark, does not belong to anybody except to the Government—or rather the Admiralty.

Govindar and Moonsammy politely salaamed to the quaint procession as it passed them, but they got no response.

Sennacherib marched on about another fifty yards and then signed to his servants to plant his umbrella in the sand, which they did. He then took his pillow and lay in the shade, while one of the Indians began to fix up his fishing tackle: another produced a silver Thermos flask from one of the hampers, with a siphon, three bottles of hock and two bottles of brandy which he ranged in an imposing row, while the third Indian went on to the rocks to collect bait.

Michael, with his fish-spear, was far out near the very

limit of the rocks where they shelved off into the deep sea. He had never been able to go out so far before and he was thinking of plunging into the water and swimming the last ten yards which separated the furthermost rock of all from the ledge on which he was standing. Nobody had ever been on that rock before, except when, five years earlier, a dredger bound for Australia with its crew of six had been dashed upon it, and everybody had been drowned. The channel between this rock and the main rock was generally swirling with foam but on this day it was transparent, and Michael could see the twisted iron plates of the dredger deep down on the bottom.

He laid down his spear, took a good look to right and left, and saw that there was no sign of a shark; then, taking a deep breath, he dived in, and in a few seconds was standing on the rock, which squirted hundreds of fountains as the rock-bait, with which it was covered, first felt the weight of a standing human being.

He shouted out to all the others to look how far he had got out on the rocks; and so low was the tide, that everybody could hear his voice from the shore, for the swell only made a murmur instead of its habitual thunder. He waved to Mary and Topsy and his brothers and was just about to sit down when he caught sight of something moving, about a yard to his right, moving rapidly with a fluid sort of smoothness like a long streak of black quicksilver.

At first he thought it was an eel but as it fell forwards it grew thinner and thinner like a piece of elastic when it is stretched. He looked towards the place from which it started and saw that, where it came out of the water, it was about as thick as his wrist and it was still trickling past him though, there, it was only as thick as a pencil. He looked on the other side of him and there he saw three more of these silent rippling threads sliding past him.

He was still rather puzzled by them when he suddenly smelt a faint odour which made his whole scalp stiffen and

his hair stand upright, though it was only the very faintest hint of a kind of sickly perfume. He did not wait another second but, in sheer panic, rushed for the gap between the rocks, dived into the water and came to himself standing on the ledge of the main rock which he had left only a few moments before.

He sniffed the air but could smell nothing of the strange scent that had so unnerved him; he thought about those funny tendrils that had so puzzled him and wondered if they were some kind of sea-worms which lived farther out to sea. He could not now distinctly remember what that smell was like, and he felt ashamed of himself for getting so frightened at apparently nothing. Still he lost no time in picking up his fish-spear and putting a healthy distance between himself and the lonely rock.

He went back to his brothers who were fishing in a crack of the rocks; he had left his heavy tackle on the sand to be ready for when the tide returned, and he now forgot his recent fright as he sat with Papatom and his small brothers, watching them catch blacktails and other rock fish.

Just then Sennacherib's Indian, who was poised on the side of one of the larger holes in the rocks, began shouting: " I see one berry big one cat-pish: please petch your pish-spear, sahib." This he addressed to Michael, who immediately joined him, followed by his two brothers. Even Sennacherib, lying on the sands, became curious as to what the shouting was about. He got up and started to come out over the rocks.

The Indian put his hand on Michael's shoulder and pointed down into about nine feet of perfectly clear water, where, on the beautiful turkish-rug of seaweed which covered the bottom of the pool, lay what appeared to be a leopard skin—only that it moved very slowly and two round blue eyes gazed up at them from the middle of it. The whole mass of yellowish white was covered with rings of spots like a panther, and as it began to move you

could see that the lidless blue eyes were set in a round, bald, though variegated head, and that what appeared to have been a leopard skin was a great frilly mass of feelers. The eyes, which never winked, were loathsome and cruel and cold.

Michael raised his spear and let fly but was completely cheated by the refraction of the water, which at that depth displaces an object by at least a foot or two. His spear, with five barbed points, struck the rock-bottom and the catfish, or octopus, was off from its mark in a second, jet-propelled from its entrails, with its head first, and its feelers streaming out behind, rhythmically jerking in a strange kind of back stroke. It was moving off to the other side of the shelving pool which was quite shallow at one end.

Michael dived in after his spear, picked it up from the bottom, then came to the surface and made a great splashing so as to drive the catfish farther into the shallow water. The boys and the Indian meanwhile kept their eyes on the catfish and showed Michael where it was by pointing.

When Michael was about four yards from it he took a deep breath and put his head under the water so that he could see properly: for he could see nothing that was under the water when his head was only just above the surface, though if he had stood up he could have seen all right from his own height above it. Now, of course, when his eyes were open under the water, everything was visible.

He started swimming along until he saw something moving in front of him and then he thrust with his spear, but as it was a floating target there was not enough resistance to make the spear penetrate the tough elastic body of the catfish. He then took a shorter grip on his spear and tried to drive the catfish against the wall of the pool so that he could push the spear into it. But the catfish evaded the spear, and Michael pushed right into its feelers with his left arm.

Four of the feelers, studded with about twenty sucking-holes each, closed on his arm: and the head of the catfish was just at his left armpit, while three of its feelers went round his chest and another one went round his neck and down his back. He could now stand up, so he waded into shallow water and started to struggle with the catfish.

Mr. Sennacherib came up just in time to see Michael take its head in his right hand and opening his left armpit so as to stretch its mouth to its widest, start to force the head right through its own mouth and turn it inside out, which is the only way to paralyse a catfish.

The catfish then tried its last trick, a little too late. It squirted about two pints of ink-like fluid out of its mouth all over Michael, and it blackened the whole pool in no time. If it had only done that before, Michael could never have found it in that inky cloud of darkness.

Sennacherib went quite pale, and seemed to reel and grow giddy. When Michael finally forced the beast's head through its mouth and then pulled the hundred suckers of its eight tentacles from his skin, each one of them making a funny noise like a smacking kiss, it was too much for Sennacherib altogether. He felt very sick indeed, and had to sit down. Meanwhile his Indian boy, whose name turned out to be Applesammy, went off and fetched him the bottle of brandy, and he took a big swig and felt better.

" Nebber I see cut-pish so big as zat one," said Applesammy.

" Nor have I," said Michael as he threw the now limp body on to the dry rock and began to wash off the ink. Then suddenly he noticed the smell. It was the same smell as the one he had smelt on the lonely rock!

All the way down his back he felt little pins and needles as it suddenly dawned on him that the strange tendrils he had seen must have belonged to a single big cuttlefish —a very different thing altogether from a catfish from the

point of view of size. Yet even this octopus or catfish had given him quite a tussle though it only weighed a tenth of his weight; but that other creature, out beyond the last rock, might have been anything from one to ten times his weight.

When he had a chance to speak to Papatom by himself he asked him: " Papatom, have you ever seen a catfish bigger than that one? "

" No, not catfish," said Papatom, " but one day, at low tide I see one finger from a *cattlefish* out there by lone-rock: one finger bigger than a python."

" Hm! I see," said Michael, " and I saw it today."

" Then," said Papatom, " please not speak anyone about it. Him Devil, unlucky to speak about."

" All right," promised Michael; he felt ridiculous to bind himself to Papatom's superstition.

" Yes," said Papatom, " I tink Englishmans call him *cattlefish* because he big like bull-cow what you call cattle. The other kind small like cat so you call him cat-fish."

Sennacherib now had completely recovered from his excitement over the catfish and was beginning to enjoy it in retrospect. He offered Michael a cigar from a gold case studded with diamonds and rubies, and also a pull from the brandy bottle, but Michael contented himself with the cigar, which he put aside for Nyali. He cut off four of the feelers of the catfish for bait, and gave the rest of it to Moonsammy to make curry for himself. Michael was none the worse except that some of the suckers had made little marks like mosquito bites.

It was now time to go back to the beach as the tide was beginning to come in. Michael went back with Sennacherib, who had become very friendly, to the shade of his umbrella, and there feasted his eyes on the wonderful fishing rods, reels and tackle which the millionaire had brought. Each reel had three gears, or brakes, and there

went soundly to sleep and did not wake again till next morning.

During the whole of that day and the next day too, neither Tom, nor Nyali, nor Vemvan took much interest in the proceedings on the sea-shore since natives do not like the sea: but they helped to fetch wood, and do the milking, and other odd jobs about the house.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SARDINES

ONE morning, a week or so later, Michael was awakened by Papatom before sunrise. Papatom only just said one word: " Sardines," and Michael leaped out of bed, pulled on a pair of shorts, and followed the old man to the front verandah overlooking the sea.

The sun had lit up some low-hanging clouds over the horizon with violet, orange and crimson: and against them, shimmering and showering like clouds of midges, black against the dawn, were flying myriads and myriads of gannets, with a sprinkling of albatrosses and molly-mawks. As far as the eye could see, for leagues and leagues to the north and south, they appeared like dark patches of smoke in the far distance; nearer, they were like swarms of mosquitoes; nearer still they looked like flights of locusts; but in the foreground you could see they were showers of great big birds and they were falling, as a cascade falls sheer from its cliff, and striking the water with millions of powdery plumes of spray. It was like a Victoria Falls in which every drop of water was a bird the size of a goose. Not only were they falling downwards but, more slowly, they were rising upwards again just as the spray rises up from the Victoria Falls and climbs high above the cliff from which it has fallen.

How the rising birds and the falling birds manage to avoid collision is a mystery. The height from which the gannets dived was a uniform height of about a hundred and fifty feet. Each time they struck the water it was to catch and swallow a fish: then they would rise again into



MYRIADS OF GANNETS WERE FALLING IN A CASCADE

the air and repeat the process. They were frantically greedy, for no sooner were they full up with about twelve or thirteen ten-inch pilchards, than they would bring them up, as the gluttonous Roman Emperors used to, and start feeding again.

Each time they hit the water it was with such velocity that it would have split a man's skull in half: but these birds are so stream-lined and built so perfectly, with shock-absorbing air-cushions, that it did them no harm. They would hover with their wings wide out till they had decided on their target, then they would snap their wings shut with a movement that propelled them headlong on their almost vertical chute.

Michael's breath was taken away by this extraordinary sight of so many millions of birds: and he ran to wake up the rest of the family, who all came out on the verandah and watched, with exclamations of wonder.

Now the rays of the sun were coming through the clouds and one by one they began to touch and illuminate the great clouds of birds, turning them pink, and gold, and white, till they twinkled like showers of coloured confetti in the wind. It seemed that the aurora borealis had been let loose from the Arctic and was celebrating a holiday south of the equator.

As the light grew, shoals of sardines could be seen lying like the shadows of clouds on the sea, and staining it in deep purple patches for acres around. One of these dark patches, about twenty acres in extent, was nearing the fringe of the surf just in front of the house, and out of the midst of it, with a report like a cannon and a terrific splash, flew a huge eagle-ray, or devil-fish, with its wings spread wide like some gigantic bat. It planed for a few yards, struck the water, and disappeared.

Great black fins showed above the surface, and every now and again a big shark's tail would emerge and strike the water. From time to time the devil-fish reappeared,

flew into the air, and again fell flat with its twenty-foot spread of wing, sending forth a loud double report which arrived some time after it had vanished; one sound travelled through the water and arrived first, and the other sound travelled through the air and came second. So one big splash made two different bangs.

Then, appearing suddenly as if from nowhere, about half a mile out, quite a big procession of giant sperm-whales got mixed up in the show, not because they were interested in the sardines, since they live exclusively on the big cuttlefish at the deep sea bottom, but because they come around just by chance. The big bull-whales were playing and showing off to the cows by leaping high into the air, and making clouds of spray and even louder double detonations than the devil-fish made in the foreground.

All this added to the pandemonium. But when two of the little Durban steam-whalers, the *Edda* and the *Odd*, suddenly appeared steaming at full-speed after the whales, and both discharged their harpoon-guns and backed water, while two great whales lashed the sea into a fury of foam in their death agonies—the picture of wholesale destruction and fury seemed to be complete.

Michael went to the bath-room and got the shaving mirror. At school he was sergeant of the Reconnaissance-troop in the cadets, so he knew the morse code. He had been out on the *Edda* several times the year before for week-end cruises because Captain Thorsen, who commanded her, was a grateful patient of his father's and had invited him. He recognised the *Edda*, which was the newest boat in the Durban fishery, by the cut of her bows. In morse flashes from his mirror he signalled: "Good morning, Captain Thorsen."

The boat was now hove-to, and the crew were pumping up the carcase of the whale, so as to keep it from sinking, cutting off its fins and tail-flukes so that they would not interfere with the steering, and preparing to tow it after them.

Michael could see the figure of Thorsen on the bridge. The captain knew who was signalling, because last year Michael had pointed out the cottage to him from the sea. He got the message, and waved his handkerchief before the boats steamed off, towing their whales, back to the slipway in Durban Bay.

The big sardine shoal in front of the house had now been driven in well towards the shore by the hordes of bigger fish which were attacking it. The sardines were close to the breakers, which rolled them ashore in thousands: and the big fish, losing their heads in the eagerness of the pursuit, often came very near to being stranded. A ten-foot shark lay flapping for some moments on the shingle, too dangerous to be approached because of its chopping jaws, with five ranks of razor-sharp teeth, and the force of its flail-like tail, until the backwash of the next wave pulled it back into the sea.

Hundreds of Indians and Creoles, warned by beacon-fires from their scouts that the sardines had arrived, had already congregated on the shore with sacks, buckets and baskets, and were shovelling up the little fish as fast as they could. It did not matter that they all managed to gather about five hundred times more than they could eat fresh; for they would lay the surplus supplies on the roofs of their houses, where the sun would dry them perfectly, though they certainly would smell very strong for some time. But in that way they replenished their larder for weeks to come with kippered sardines. They also manured their gardens with heaps of the rotting fish.

Govindar, Papatom and Michael went down to the shore with their rods, baited them with sardines, and threw out their lines into the boiling and seething mass of the shoal. In half a minute Papatom's reel was fairly shrieking: he tried to brake it with his hand, but it burnt his fingers. He threw his felt hat to Michael and asked him to dip it in the water and then he managed to brake his reel with

the wet hat, but the line kept on running out for another three hundred yards, and then suddenly snapped and went quite limp. Poor Papatom had lost a beauty! When he had reeled in the whole five hundred yards that had been run away with, he found that the hook had been completely straightened by the strength of the fish.

It was now Michael's turn; he had got stuck into something with the speed and horse-power of a brand-new motor-bike, and though he braked his reel as hard as he could with the ox-hide palm that he wore buckled with a strap over the back of his hand, he could make no impression. Six hundred yards of line were run out in no time and snapped off at the farthest knot.

It is lucky for big-game fishermen that the line always snaps at the far end and always at the trace-knot, where it has been most rubbed, strained and exposed to wave and weather. Were it otherwise, the cost of good silk line is so high that only millionaires, like Sennacherib, would be able to indulge in the sport.

When Michael had reeled in the tedious length of his line and was putting on a new wire trace with a new hook and sinker, Govindar suddenly struck something. The line ran out for about fifty yards and then Govindar held it, carefully regulating the strain, for he knew just how much speed to allow the line so that it would not break. Then he started winding in, but again and again he would have to let his line run out.

"Look! it's a springer," cried Michael, as a beautiful white fish leapt from the water flinging the trace and the sinker and the hook away with a great jerk of his head as it somersaulted back, free, into the water.

In a few minutes Papatom had another springer on his line: this time the fish was not too strong or clever for him and the hook was firmly struck home, for though the fish often leaped from the water and shook its head, he gradually tired it out until at last a wave washed it up at his very feet.

Michael gaffed the fish and dragged it up the beach out of the way of the waves, then John and Billy took charge of it. They pulled up some wild vines that grew on the side of the beach and stuck them through the gills of the fish, which they trailed up to the house.

Mary, Mrs. Jackson and Topsy had prepared about fifty big glass jam-jars for preserving and pickling. Outside, under the milk-wood tree, Tom had made two parallel walls of loose bricks two feet high, two feet apart, and ten feet long. On these were five enormous cauldrons and the gap between was filled with firewood. The cauldrons were half-full of vinegar. Moonsammy stood nearby sharpening his knives and looking quite business-like for once.

As soon as Michael resumed fishing, both he and Govindar struck almost simultaneously. Both of them were staggering with the weight that bent their rods almost double, when the two fishes they had hooked crossed over and the lines were in danger of cutting each other, but Govindar dexterously lowered his rod and ran under Michael's rod, and round to the other side. Each had hooked something very big from the looks of it. Michael was drawn slowly along the beach in the direction of the lagoon while Govindar's fish went north, in the opposite direction.

Billy and John both followed Michael with the gaff as he went along, reeling in, then having to let out more line again, and then reeling in once more. After about half an hour the fish seemed suddenly to tire and Michael shouted to his brothers to get ready with the gaff. The fish was now about five yards from where the sand shelves down on the edge of the surf; the next wave brought it over the shelf and whirled it twenty yards up the sloping beach. Then, when the backwash had receded, a lovely great barracuda lay flapping on the sand and John rushed down and hooked the gaff into it, just as the edge of the next

wave swept it safely another three yards higher and drier up the beach.

Michael and the boys were at least six hundred yards down the shore from where they had first hooked the barracuda. They went back to the place from which they started, dragging the big fish along the sand.

Govindar was still fighting with his fish, and lo and behold! Sennacherib had just turned up again with his three Indians in their red fezzes. This time he had found the way by the drift, braved Dr. Jackson's notice about poachers and trespassers, and brought his Rolls-Royce down to the very house itself. He was just preparing to go to sleep when one of his Indians, Applesammy, who had just thrown out his line got stuck into something big.

Sennacherib immediately relieved him of the rod and started playing the fish. Meanwhile his other two Indians almost simultaneously struck with their rods. A great shark suddenly leapt straight out of the water and one of the lines broke. But the other Indian went on playing his fish, which proved to be a fine salmon-bass.

Michael had by this time returned to his basket and, after re-baiting his hook, he passed the struggling Sennacherib, as he went along to throw out his own line. After shouting some words of encouragement to the now almost exhausted diamond merchant, Michael cast again and soon landed a great big salmon-bass which weighed forty pounds but gave him less of a struggle than the other two fish had.

Sennacherib was very soon exhausted and so he gave his rod to the Indian who had had his line broken and bade him carry on playing the fish. Then, very red in the face and panting heavily, Sennacherib went and lay down under his umbrella, took a pull at his bottle, and went fast asleep. The Indian, after a terrific struggle, landed a thirty to forty pound barracuda.

Meanwhile, Govindar, who was a mere dot by now, away down on the beach, was still playing the same big

fish, which had reversed its tactics and was towing him slowly back towards the very place where he had first hooked it. All Govindar's family had turned up again on the beach and all who were too young to handle a big rod had bunched round their father whose muscles must have been aching, since it was nearly an hour since he had first nearly crossed lines with Michael.

Govindar was sorely tempted to put the brake on his line and let the fish break it because he was by no means sure of landing it eventually: and when he saw the stacks of beautiful edible fish which were piling up on the sands beside Michael and Applesammy and the other Indians he began to feel quite envious. However, his wife and children were filling their baskets so full of sardines every time the waves stranded them that he felt some compensation, and the innate sportsmanship that was in him finally determined him to go on playing his big fish.

Govindar's eldest son, Kupersammy, had come down to the beach and was recognised by the fact that he had brought the family mule with panniers, and tied it to a bush on the top of a dune about half a mile beyond the other fishers. He had come through the forest by a buck-path, being of an adventurous and independent disposition.

Most people like keeping near to each other in a flock, but Kupersammy enjoyed himself better when he was on his own. He happened to be at the very most concave point of the wide bay, and the people had gathered most thickly at the jutting extremities where they were nearest to the deepest water. Nevertheless he had just as good luck there at the shallowest part of the bay since the fish had all gone mad that day, and were not keeping to their normal boundaries and thoroughfares. By midday when he loaded his mule with the fish he had caught and came along the beach to compare notes with the others he had caught more fish than anyone else—more than Michael, and more than Papatom.

Michael, in the five or six hours since he had started fishing, had landed something like three hundred pounds of barracuda, springer, garrick, salmon-bass, and kingfish, and a small hammerhead shark, averaging about twenty pounds. It was a thirty-pound kingfish which, though by no means nearly the biggest fish he caught that morning, gave him the biggest fight and the most trouble.

When Michael knocked off fishing for lunch, Govindar, by now nearly exhausted, had been relieved by one of Sennacherib's Indians, Applesammy, who was a good sporting fisherman. His master was by now so fast asleep that he would never discover what had happened, so, without asking permission, he joined four hundred yards of Govindar's line, which was nearly all paid out, to his own. In a slack moment, with a couple of dexterous hitches, the whole of Govindar's line, with the fish at the end, was connected to Applesammy's, and he started to tire the fish properly with his fresh strength and extra line, while Govindar sat back panting and resting on the sand.

After twenty minutes more of hard playing, the fish began to give way and to become exhausted. It is a funny thing to think of a fish getting drowned, when it lives in the water: but that's really what happens: as it tires, its gills find more and more difficulty in separating the air, which is dissolved in the water, from the water itself. So it begins to breathe in water with the air, and that's what gradually drowns it.

Applesammy began to bring the fish nearer and all the neighbouring fishermen stopped fishing to witness the grand finale of the fight—all except Sennacherib, who was snoring loudly under his umbrella.

Papatom picked up a gaff and Applesammy now handed back the rod to Govindar, who had by now had a bit of a breather. Applesammy got hold of another gaff, and Michael, who had just come back down the beach from a hurried lunch, had a third. They all three began to wade

down towards where the water foamed and swirled at the end of Govindar's line.

Suddenly a big wave lifted the fish over the shelf of the shore, a great blue dorsal fin stood out of the shallowing water. Michael and Papatom got their gaffs fixed into the flesh of the monster and hauled against the shallowing backwash. Then Applesammy got his gaff hooked in too and, after a three-man tug of war against the backwash and as it drained away, the huge blue body of a shark emerged from the water and lay flailing its tail like the wheel of an electric fan and snapping helplessly with its savage jaws.

The next wave shot it, helped by the three gaff-pullers, even farther up the shore: and before the backwash could make itself felt again, many of the onlookers had seized hold of the gaff-poles and the whole lot of them, as if they were beaching a lifeboat, trundled the body of the man-eater high up the beach beyond even the reach of the highest tide. It glared malevolently from its lidless eyes and chopped and crunched its jaws with the sound of a huge football-rattle, but it was held on both sides by the gaff-poles, and, though it made furious leaps and lunges, could not come near any of the spectators.

Billy and John ran up to call their mother down to see the terrible but welcome sight—since every shark that was dead made the bathing safer. And then all the children, European, Indian or Malay, executed a kind of war dance round the body of the dying man-eater. The eyes of the horrible brute gradually faded in lustre, but lost nothing of their hideous, loathsome, gloating expression and the huge jaws remained wide open in a jagged and diabolical grin as if it were laughing. They couldn't weigh it, of course, but Papatom judged it to be about seven hundred pounds in weight.

About half an hour after the brute was really dead, John plucked up courage to approach it. He poked it with the

blunt end of a bamboo gaff and it did not even twitch though he touched its eyes. He was going to touch it with his hands when Papatom called him back and warned him not to go near. He waited till Papatom had turned his back again and went right up to the shark: first of all he touched its side fins and then its back with his hand, and he was just going to feel how sharp its teeth were with his finger when Papatom saw him, and coming behind him, pulled him away by the scruff of the neck.

John was furious and tried to kick his shins, but Papatom gave him a smart cuff alongside the ear which made him grunt.

" You watch me shut him mouth," said Papatom, and he flung a handful of sand at the mouth of the shark, but with no result.

" There, you see, you silly Papatom," said John, " it *is* quite dead! and I only want to feel how sharp its teeth are."

" You wait one minute," said Papatom; he picked up a piece of drifted teak log as thick as his arm. " This stick can feel how sharp him teeth," he said, and so saying, he thrust the log into the open mouth of the shark. Nothing happened. Then he rubbed the log along the upper ridge of the horrible-looking fangs. Still nothing happened, and Papatom left the log lying in the mouth of the dead fish.

" You see, you silly old Papatom, that shark is quite dead," cried John, " and you gave me a thick ear for nothing and pulled my neck for nothing, and now I'm going to tell my dad to punish you." He was continuing to grumble at the old man when suddenly—" SNAP "—With the sound of a steel trap, the jaws had shut and the end of the log rolled away.

Papatom picked up the log and looked at it. Then without saying a word he held it in front of John's nose. The iron-hard, sea-seasoned and heavy piece of teak had been bitten through as cleanly as if it had only been a slab of margarine.

John went quite white, almost began to cry, and ran away. He had really been about to pop his whole hand into the dead shark's jaw! He had now learnt the first of the two maxims: " never trust the jaw of a dead shark, nor the hind hoof of a dead buck." The nerves in either case can retain their spring-like action after death, and the slightest stimulus can cause a deadly bite, or a terrible kick from the hoof, long after the animal in either case is apparently dead.

John was now very sorry and ashamed of having tried to kick Papatom's shins, but he was also very shy of saying he was sorry. He came and sat down by Papatom, who was re-baiting his hook, and looked as sorry as he could without losing his dignity. Then in order to bury the hatchet and change the subject, he racked his brains to remember some of the French he had learned in the class during the term.

" Papatom," he said suddenly.

" Yes, Master John," replied Papatom.

" Common voo porty-voo? " said John.

" Très bien, merci," laughed Papatom.

" La plume de mon oncle," continued John.

" Sois bien sage maintenant," said Papatom.

Though John had already exhausted nearly all his French and could not understand what this last sentence of Papatom's meant, he felt it had something to do with recent behaviour and, summoning up all his courage and all his memory, he put his hand on Papatom's sleeve and with his lip quivering managed to say: " Pardonny moi. Merci."

Papatom roared with laughter and slapped him on the back, and so their little quarrel was forgotten. But it was from that moment that John began trying to talk French with Papatom: and though Papatom's French wasn't of a very pure kind, by the end of the holidays John had learned so much French that he could speak it better even than Michael who was in the sixth form: and he fairly

flabbergasted Mademoiselle de Watteville, his French school-teacher, when he went back to school with the fluency of his talk in French.

While the fishing continued on every side and the first French lesson was in somewhat interrupted progress, a sudden yell from Sennacherib startled everybody. He had wakened up suddenly to find himself face to face with the diabolical leer of the dead shark only two yards away and, after drinking so much, fully imagined that he had begun to see things which weren't there. Soon he was reassured by his Indians and got up to admire the enormous piles of fish which were growing up beside them.

All the fish that Michael and Papatom had caught had been taken up to the house to the huge kitchen range which Tom had improvised for Moonsammy out of doors. Mrs. Jackson and Mary had been working very hard, and, while Moonsammy cleaned and scaled the fish, they pickled it in slices between huge discs of sliced onions with curry powder, cloves and vinegar and bayleaves, until it filled dozens and dozens of glass jars. These were then stopped with a film of olive oil on the top, a rubber washer, and a metal lid which screwed on, leaving the jar completely airtight.

Tom, who hadn't had much work to do that day, was told to harness Swap to the pony-trap. All the fish that was left over from the preserving and from the immediate needs of the family was put in four sacks and Tom was instructed to leave one sack at the mill hospital, one at the mounted police barracks, one with the old Breton priest, Father Kerguelen, who had a wonderful poodle that played many tricks and loved eating fish. Father Kerguelen looked after the French Mauritians and Malays, who were all Catholics and ate fish on Fridays—today it was Thursday. The other sack was to be shared out among the Indians at the mill who had been unable to leave their duties to go and fish on their own behalf.

So ended a very happy, useful and strenuous day. By six o'clock that evening everybody had left the beach staggering under sacks and basketfuls of fish—everybody except those two indefatigable fishermen, Govindar and Papatom; but even they paused for an hour or two as the sun went down and they lit a big fire of driftwood.

The huge clouds of diving gannets had almost disappeared to the northward but still in the failing light sometimes a hundred or so of them at a time could be seen flying in long chains northward in a straight line only a yard above the surface of the water.

Michael, with aching muscles, was fast asleep as soon as he had had his supper. Sennacherib and his servants had hummed off in the Rolls-Royce past the precipice of the mamba, which was all flooded with silvery moonlight and looked as idyllic and peaceful a place as the Garden of Eden itself before the serpent was even thought about.

When Sennacherib got back to his hotel in the town he presented the huge catch of fish, only one of which he had helped to play, to the proprietor of the hotel, pretending that he had caught them all. All the other guests made quite a hero of him, and he told them a terrific yarn which he must have dreamed while he was snoring on the beach. But, anyway, he had the fish there to prove it and the Indians, who were in the servants' quarters, couldn't contradict him.

It was eleven o'clock or so that same night when Michael was waked by Papatom: " Sorry to wake you, master, but Govindar, he got hooked one fish last four hours. We join two lines, not enough. This fish biggest one in all the world."

Michael was just going to tell Papatom he could take his rod and reel and leave him in peace to sleep, but curiosity got the better of him because Papatom was not really a man who exaggerated very often. He forced his

aching limbs into a sweater and a pair of khaki slacks, took his rod, and followed Papatom down on to the beach.

They headed south to where Papatom had left Govindar fighting the fish. As they walked their footprints in the damp sand ignited the gems of phosphorus, and each of them left a double spoor of blue fire which followed them for three hundred yards or so till they came up with Govindar's hurricane lamp. They picked it up and went on still farther till they caught up with Govindar himself.

Both Govindar and Papatom were nearly exhausted and had been relieving each other of the rod every half-hour or so. So, after they had switched Govindar's line on to Michael's rod, he played the fish for nearly an hour, but made very little impression on it indeed.

It was such a big fish that unless it was pulling out, when it was irresistible, it felt just as if the hook had caught on a solid rock. The only reason why it had not broken away hours before was that in order to ease the irritation of the hook it had been trying one direction and then another in the hope of getting rid of it; whereas if it had swum off in a straight line, nothing could have stopped it. But now, after four or five hours of rushing to and fro, it was beginning to tire itself. It got angrier and angrier with the tickling sensation of the hook in its jaws and it seemed to notice that it hurt less when it swam in towards the shore though it always had to swim out again to avoid getting stranded.

After it had come in quite close to the shore several times and then rushed out again, Michael seemed to feel that it was really becoming less active.

" But what are we going to do with it in the dark? " he asked. " We can never pull anything the size of this fish out of the way of the tide. We'll just have to trust to luck that it doesn't get washed out again. I think it's really coming in this time; it's heavy, but it seems limp. Get ready the gaffs there, and hold the lamp up high."

With great heaves, which bent the rod nearly double, he started to reel in slowly.

" Here it comes," he cried, as a big wave began to gather just behind where he felt it to be. But to his intense surprise, instead of coming forward with the wave, there was a shriek from his reel which he only just released in time to prevent the line from breaking. It didn't cease to rush out until at least two hundred yards of line had unwound. Then suddenly everything went limp again.

" Curse it, he's bust me," said Michael, who started to reel in disconsolately, apologising as he did so to the almost completely exhausted Govindar.

" No matter, master. In any case not possible catch him. We all too tired."

" Wait a minute," cried Michael, who had now reeled his line taut again, " there is *still* something on the end. I wonder if I've hooked a submerged log or if it's the same fish. It's coming in all right." And slowly but surely he began to reel in some bulky object. It had now got to the shelf of the shore and a wave was bunching behind it.

" Now you take the rod, Govindar," said Michael, " it's your fish and it's stopped fighting. Give me the gaff."

Govindar grabbed the rod and felt the strain give as the wave lifted the bulk over the shelf. " Here it comes! " he yelled.

Papatom held up the lamp, and as the wave withdrew Michael gaffed something that sent up a fan of spray in the receding backwash. It was a dead bulk, but obviously flesh. Papatom also got a gaff into it and they dragged it slowly up the shore. Then, as they turned to inspect it in the light of the lamp—Heavens above!—they could scarcely believe their eyes! It was the head of a shark much bigger than the one that Govindar had caught already that day, but only the head! It had been bitten off just behind the gills, and spat out apparently, in that last rush out to sea, when some other monster had been

tempted to sample the dainty mouthful of some thousand pounds of living sharkflesh.

They all shuddered at the thought of what had taken a fancy to this man-eater, the remainder of which, just jaws and skull alone, must have weighed some three hundred and fifty pounds. The most extraordinary thing about this fish, though, was that in the lamp-light, like hundreds of hoary moustachios and whiskers, were the gleaming wire-traces which had belonged to hundreds of disappointed fishermen in the past, whose tackle he had broken up.

. . . . .

Some days later, the sudden disappearance of the famous shark, known as " Bernard Shaw," from the Durban breakwater, was remarked upon. Hardly anyone had ever caught a glimpse of him, but scarcely an afternoon went by when he didn't break the tackle of one or two fishermen by a special system of his own which he never varied. Whenever he was hooked he always made for the same spot where he apparently knew of some submerged wreck or rock, around which he would pass a couple of twists of the line so as to get the necessary purchase to break the line.

Though he was only glimpsed once on a calm day, he was known quite as well as if he had been seen every day, because of his entirely individual underwater tactics which he never changed, till the day he went after the sardines and died twenty or thirty miles from his usual haunts. But that's how he lived for many years—purely and simply on bait, and little else.

In fact it was said that he preferred whalemeat on the hook to whalemeat on the dead whale. For, when the whales were being towed in between the double breakwater at the narrow entrance to Durban Harbour, the other sharks would follow the dead whales, plugging big red holes in their carcasses, right up to the slipway itself, where

the whales were then reeled up ashore with a steam-winch. But when the whales came abreast of the breakwater, this old shark would always break away from the dead whale, and cruise along the north side of the north breakwater for his daily snack of iron rations, with hooks, sinkers, traces, swivels and spoons, which he broke off in the accustomed manner.

He got his nickname from his personal likeness to Bernard Shaw himself—for when the three fanatical shark-fishing champions, Rocksalmon Johnstone, Bluepointer Wilson, and Musselcracker Finlayson, were one day fishing in a dead calm they had their whisky bottle wrapped in a copy of the *Natal Advertiser*, which had a portrait of Bernard Shaw on the front page on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday. The big fish had just annoyed them both by breaking up past them in the crystal-clear water underneath their noses, and they all swore that the hundreds of glittering wire traces and swivels which trailed from its jaws gave it the bristling hirsute and bewhiskered appearance of the silver-haired English sage.

That was the only time this old shark was ever seen alive, but he was often *felt* alive, and the name stuck.

His sudden absence was immediately noticed with great relief in the column of the *Natal Mercury* and the *Natal Advertiser* which are devoted to the affairs of the " Hiawathas " and other clubs of shark fishermen in Durban. But Govindar couldn't read the papers, and Michael didn't read them at the time, so the story of the fate of this remarkable fish was never made public.

He must have been tempted off his normal beat by the sardines, and then, when hooked, had sought in vain for that submerged wreck or whatever it was that had enabled him to break so many thousands of lines and traces when he was on his own beat.

The way Durbanites fish for such monsters, as the one that bit off Bernard's body and spat out his head, is as

follows: they get a twenty-five gallon petrol drum and net it strongly to a rope with a huge hook and a leg of mutton, or some other tempting morsel. They toss this overboard from a launch and wait for the shark to hook itself: then it has to fight against the buoyancy of the drum, which at greater depths is tremendously strong, and which never tires at all. The fish is really fighting against itself and gets tired by its own strength. In the end the only work the fisherman has is to tow the shark back to town. During the struggle all he has to do is to keep the petrol drum buoy in sight. It disappears for minutes at a time but always comes back to the surface.

This is not a very sportsmanlike way of fishing but it is remunerative, since the oil of the sharks is useful to watch-makers and other manufacturers of delicate instruments, and is therefore very valuable. Besides there is no other way of catching them at all.

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"Bernard Shaw's" jaws were hung on a wire from a mango tree in Govindar's garden, with all the hundreds of hooks and trace-wires still sticking into the bone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DIPPING THE CATTLE

ONE Sunday Mr. Jackson sent his big Cape cart with four mules to fetch them all to church and, after church, to lunch with him. They gave Papatom a lift to church and then dropped him at the mill to yarn with his fellow-Creoles. He had on his grey suit and bowler hat and his one yellow boot.

After the service the Jackson family chatted with Father Kerguelen and saw his wonderful French poodle which looked like a lion and could pretend to read the newspapers. The priest thanked them very much for the fish they had sent him, of which he and his dog, Robinson, had enjoyed a grand meal. He had also given a great deal of it to many of his parishioners who hadn't been able to get away from the mill, on the day the sardines came, to catch any for themselves.

Sunday is the day when the cattle are dipped. They are driven through a tank full of disinfectant, one at a time. The tank lies between two big corrals, or stockades. It is deep enough to ensure that each beast will go in and get completely submerged for a second or two, so that the dip will kill all the ticks which are hidden in its hair and then keep it from infection which is carried by these parasites.

Like many things which are good for one, the dip is unpleasant. Some of the cattle become very troublesome as they object to the dip, which smarts somewhat. So the boys wanted to see the fun when some of the half-wild native cattle started fighting and bucking.

The man who looked after the cattle on Mr. Jackson's

estate was Antonio Bargas Heredia, who used to look after the fighting cattle of the Duke of Veragua in Spain, and what he didn't know about cattle was nobody's business. Heredia had had to flee from Spain for political reasons because he was a Carlist: that is he wanted a different king from the one then reigning. However he had found a good home working for Mr. Jackson.

Michael, John and Billy changed from their Sunday clothes into their oldest rags, which they had brought with them, took some old blankets, and went along leaving their mother, Mary, Topsy and Stephen walking round the garden, with Mr. Jackson, picking armfuls of flowers and basketfuls of tangerines and oranges.

The dip was only five hundred yards away; dust was flying, whips were cracking, cattle were bellowing, and the boys could hear the trampling of hoofs as they approached.

Then suddenly out of the cloud of milling cattle and natives, a huge Afrikander bull charged away from the rough and tumble at the entrance to the corral. Three natives scattered, fleeing for their lives before it. It was the big black and white bull belonging to the native chief, Sikananda. It always gave trouble at the dip and had once killed a herdsman. Its name was Witpens.

It had broken well away from the rest of the herd, when after it, with a long pole couched like a lance, rode Antonio Bargas Heredia. The bull was going at a steady gallop in the way cattle always do, lifting first their hind-quarters and then their shoulders like a see-saw going up and down. This puts them at a considerable disadvantage from the point of view of balance, compared with the horse who gallops level.

Antonio Bargas Heredia gradually overhauled the bull and came up a little on the left of it. Then just as the bull's hind-quarters were rising off the ground he swerved in and struck them with his garrocha, as his blunt lance or pole is named. This took the bull completely off its

balance; it rolled over with its legs in the air. Then it got up bellowing with fury and charged the horse and rider. Antonio rode straight away from it and then with one flick of the rein, having allowed it almost to catch him up, turned his mare in its tracks at an acute angle and the bull went thundering past him.

Again the bull thought of escaping, and dashed on. Then Antonio and his mare, Jaca Torera, sent the bull flying in the same way as before, and it charged again. But this time Antonio didn't ride away from the bull. He leaped from the saddle and gave the mare a slap which sent her trotting in the direction of Michael and the boys, who caught her by the bridle and led her out of harm's way behind some of the wooden rails which framed the entry to the corral. Actually the mare was a trained horse and could have looked after herself well enough.

Antonio was now kneeling on one knee directly in front of the bull, which had stopped in mid-charge because it had never seen such an object as this, into which its mounted adversary, it seemed, had suddenly been changed. Witpens had seen mounted men, walking men, horses, and standing men, but he had never seen a kneeling man before. So he just stopped and stared.

Then Antonio adjusted his garrocha, placing the haft under the sole of his boot and aiming the point straight at the bull's muzzle: " Ha, ha, toro! " he called in his own language—which is also the language of all cattlemen*.

The bull hesitated no more, it recognised Antonio in his new form as the same old enemy. It charged. Half a ton of brute projectile was coming straight at Antonio with its terrible wide horns like a pair of scythes. Half an inch of error, or a degree of misjudgment of the garrocha would have killed the man, or, at least, damaged a valuable bull. The blunt tip of the lance connected with the muzzle

* Almost every word relating to cattle and horses—rodeo, lazo, corral, etc.—derives from the Spanish.

of the bull and the animal ricochetted off as lightly as a heavy stone, if thrown with great enough force, will glance from the surface of a pond. But the lance bent like a fishing rod and the shock of the impact sent the man upright. Before the bull could collect its wits, Antonio was kneeling and facing it again, in the other direction, with the garrocha under his foot.

Three times it charged. Three times it was deflected as effortlessly as if it had been a stone hurled by someone playing ducks and drakes. It stood about twenty yards away from Antonio shaking its head from side to side, licking the blood from its muzzle, and trying to piece together what had happened.

But Antonio did not give the bull time to piece its wits together: he walked straight towards it holding his garrocha level, with his right hand on the haft and the other about a yard along the shaft, and aiming it straight at the nose of the bull. The bull lowered its head: the garrocha followed its nose aiming straight at it. The bull hesitated. Antonio was bluffing: but he knew cattle so well that he knew when you could bluff them. He walked calmly on without hesitating and when the tip of the garrocha was five feet away, the bull sulkily turned round and swinging its tail from side to side, trotted back to join the herd from which it had broken. It was beaten.

The boys had seen a feat of skill such as only the cattlemen of Spain, Portugal and Provence can perform, but which are rarely seen except at festivals in the Spanish countryside and sometimes at the floral games in the great Roman arenas of Arles and Nîmes in the South of France. They met Antonio coming back for his horse and he thanked them for holding it for him.

Antonio was about fifty but he looked younger: his hair was still black and his skin had been burnt to an almost chocolate colour by the sun, he had deep set dark eyes under thick eyebrows, and a glittering white flash of a

smile. Everybody liked him because he was so brave, skilful, happy, and strong. He always sang at his work and he could sing also to the guitar which he played and sometimes carried on his back.

There were two Portuguese friends of Antonio's from Alcazar do Sal in Portugal, twin brothers about thirty years old, called Fernando and Miguel Azevedo, who could ride nearly as well as he could, and who were better than he was at throwing the lasso. But the lasso is an expensive weapon and it often breaks and twists the legs of the cattle, so Mr. Jackson preferred the cattle hands to use the garrocha.

These two brothers had come out as professional equestrian bullfighters to the Portuguese colony of Lorenzo Marques, but had fled across the border into Natal because they were royalists and wanted their king to come back, which was against the law of the old republic.

In Portugal for fifteen years up to that time, 1927, there had been thirty revolutions, so some of the Portuguese plotted to fetch their king back. There had been some kind of political battle in the colony, and the Azevedoes had fled and ridden into Natal along the coast. They had met Antonio on the main road to Durban and as they were out of work, he asked Mr. Jackson to employ them, as he, Antonio, had also been exiled from his country and knew what it was like to be adrift in a foreign land.

"You must please teach me, Señor Antonio, one of these days," pleaded Michael, "how to deal with a bull as you did just now."

"I should be delighted, Michael," said Antonio, "but actually you can teach yourself up to a point. You must become perfect with a pole before I start teaching you: and you can do that down at the beach."

"How?" asked Michael eagerly.

"Well, instead of tent-pegging with a stationary peg, stuck into the hard sand, take a longer and heavier pole,

fix a point to it and get John and Billy to bowl big sweet-potatoes across your path at right angles to the line of your gallop."

" That's a good idea! " exclaimed Michael, and Antonio went on: " When you can jab them and pick them up on your lance three times out of four, going at a hand-gallop, come back to me and I'll start you with a bull and ride shoulder to shoulder with you. Meanwhile let's go and join Miguel and Fernando."

John and Billy went to the kraal where the younger steers were corralled after the dip because the other cattle were too big for them. They sat on the poles of the stockade and watched the little Zulu boys of their own age trying to ride on the steers. Vemvan's cousin Bambata, a boy of about fourteen, was sitting on an eighteen months old steer which first of all bucked him straight off into the air and then went for him, butted him, picked him up, and savaged him.

Billy, without a moment's hesitation, leaped down from the stockade and shook the blanket in front of the steer, so that it left Bambata, who was shamming dead in the deep trampled muck of the kraal, and came for Billy. Billy more or less muffled its eyes with the blanket and the steer swept past him as he shook the blanket to one side, but it turned very quickly, still following the blanket, and before Billy could step aside, picked him up and threw him about three yards so that he fell in the soft mud. He should have lain quite still, but he moved, and the steer pounded him with its head and got one of its horns inside his belt picking him up once more, trying to toss him away, and shaking him up and down as if he were a rat.

Bambata jumped up and got hold of the blanket, calling John to come and help him. He made passes in front of the steer but of course it wouldn't take any notice of the blanket because Billy was dangling from its horn by the belt and it could see little else. Fortunately Fernando Azevedo was

passing just at that moment. He heard Billy shouting to John and Bambata to help him.

John tried to force himself down amongst the cattle but he was frightened and could not move. He began to cry like a baby. Meanwhile Bambata ran round the back of the steer, took the thin part of its tail, bent it double and bit it as hard as he could. This was a desperate remedy. The steer gave such a furious bound into the air that it seemed almost to loop the loop. What Bambata had done is the equivalent of a violent electric shock.

Billy's belt broke, and he fell over the backs of two calves, who immediately separated and let him fall between them into the mud. Here he might have got trampled on but Fernando Azevedo, who had jumped into the corral, pulled him out from between the hoofs of the cattle. Billy looked exactly like a pillar of mud except for one eye which was wide open.

" Here, come out of that," said Fernando, " you've had enough." And he placed Billy on the stockade beside John, who sat there miserable and ashamed at his fear, and wiping his tears. Billy felt glorious and tingling all over though he was somewhat bruised and sore.

Bambata now had the blanket in front of the steer and was making it charge him backwards and forwards with great skill and courage. Fernando stood and watched him till the steer got tired and went and hid its head amongst the rest of the herd.

Meanwhile Michael, Antonio and Miguel were at the other corral amongst the big cattle. There was one very big ox of a ginger colour, called Jamlut, who was a champion buckjumper: his skin was loose and slippery. Michael had mounted him from the rails of the corral and after a thrilling half-minute had been deposited into the very middle of the mud. Everybody was laughing at him. But it is the best way to learn riding. A man who can sit a bucking steer can sit any horse.

The natives had got Witpens goaded to the very edge of the dip, between the corrugated iron fence where he could not turn back, and he was making up his mind to jump into the dip. The cattle that go in most willingly get the least of a ducking by entering gradually and by swimming gently across. The angry ones jump as far out as they can in order to shirk half the distance of the swim; this ducks them right under the dip so that their eyes smart; they taste the fiery disinfectant—and they get even angrier.

Witpens went in with a thundering splash and by the time he reached the other side and rushed into the corral he was really furious again, and dangerous not only to men but to the other cattle. So Antonio and Miguel both took their horse blankets and stood waiting for him.

It was a beautiful sight to see the huge thunderbolt of an animal being steered by such flimsy and delicate materials as these gently waving crimson blankets with which they passed the great bull between them as if they were playing catch with a tennis ball. Yet as they were without arms of any kind a single error might have been fatal.

People have the idea that bulls are more excited by a red blanket than by one of any other colour, but though they can see white at a greater distance, an angry bull will follow whatever is moving nearest to him, regardless of colour. And this is what Fernando proved when he joined the other two, for he did not bring his swell red horse blanket but the same muddy piece of a grey army blanket that Billy had left on the ground.

Although he wasn't as good as Antonio in fighting cattle with the garrocha or in bulldogging them by the horns and throwing them on their sides, Fernando was an artist with any piece of cloth. Up in the Portuguese territory he had often played the enormous buffalo bulls, which are the fiercest and cleverest of all big game, by passing a blanket in front of their eyes and making them follow it

round and round him, while he scarcely moved his body except to face in different directions. He would do this for bets until the great animals were so exhausted, flabbergasted and bewildered, that he could kneel down with his back turned to them and light a cigarette.

With his superior skill he soon took Witpens completely away from Antonio and Miguel and kept him following the blanket as if it were the rim of a cartwheel, until the poor bull was so dizzy and perplexed that it stumbled on to its knees, then got up and walked slowly away. Michael, and the boys who had by then joined him, could scarcely forbear to cheer.

Michael overheard Bambata boasting about what had happened in the other kraal; he also heard him say that John had been frightened and that he had cried. Michael, did not say anything but he felt ashamed of his brother, whom nevertheless he loved very much.

When they got back to the house to change their muddy clothes, Mr. Jackson noticed that John had not a single speck of dust on him and commented on the fact. This made poor John feel miserable, he went very red and did not say anything. For many days after that he sulked. He wondered why he was made a coward and his lucky brothers seemed to be so brave, naturally; and he prayed to God every night and morning to make him brave.

The days passed very happily and quickly after that. The smaller boys generally spent most of their time with Tom and Vemvan rowing and sailing up and down the lagoon. John caught dozens of cane-rats with the trap Vemvan had made him. Michael did a lot of practice-jumping on Swap, and when the tide was out he practised tent-pegging on the beach with a cavalry lance of his father's. He also practised spearing sweet-potatoes which Vemvan and his brothers bowled for him according to Antonio's instructions.

CHAPTER NINE

SENNACHERIB AND THE PYTHON

ONE day one of Sennacherib's Indians, Applesammy, came rushing to the house for Michael.

"Quick, Master," he panted when he found him. "Big snake he make want to scoff my Boss."

"What do you mean?" asked Michael incredulously.

"No time to make talking," cried the Indian desperately, seizing Michael by the arm. "You fetch him gun."

"Which way is he?"

"Other side river, Master, near the beach. Perhaps snake finish eat him if you don't come quick."

Michael took a gun, put some cartridges in his pocket, went out and caught Swap by the headstall. Then, without wasting the time to saddle him, he made the Indian jump up behind and hold him under the armpits. The tide was half out so there was some hard wet sand down near the waves which made fairly easy going; though the Indian, never having ridden before, had a rough time.

Mike learned from the Indian that when Sennacherib had wanted to fish at the mouth of the creek and had been going along in front of his three Indians, a big snake had shot its head out of the reeds and seized him by the thigh with its teeth, and tried to roll round him.

There must have been something very good about Sennacherib since most people would have deserted their best friend in similar circumstances. Not so the devoted and faithful servants of Sennacherib; with great and desperate courage all three had flung themselves on the python before it had got more than a single coil round his

thigh. So far they had succeeded in keeping the rest of its body straight and not letting it get another loop round Sennacherib. Nevertheless it hung on like a bulldog and slavered and hissed like a steam-engine. Applesammy had tried, time and again, after the other two had pulled its body almost straight, to dig his pen-knife into its eyes and make it let go: but every time it let go, it shifted its grip to some other part of Sennacherib's thigh, and hung on all the harder.

The spittle of a python is not venomous but it is a powerful irritant and there's plenty of it; because it has to soap its victims all over with it before swallowing them, after it has squeezed and constricted them into a sausage-shaped mass—such as Sennacherib would have been by that time, if it were not that his Indians were brave lads!

The spittle of a python is even more slippery than soap; it has to be to be able to lubricate such a huge mass as the body of a buck through such a comparatively small head. It is quite unlike the venom of a poisonous snake, such as a mamba. Though it can blind you too, it cannot poison your circulation. The venom of a mamba comes out of an entirely different gland; it is squirted through a fang which is far longer than the other teeth, and sticks out in front of them, unlike an adder's fangs which lie folded like a pen-knife when not in action. The fang is hollow like the needle of a hypodermic syringe and acts entirely in the same way.

The teeth of a python are not hollow: they are curved back like barbless hooks so that it is almost impossible to make them let go when they have seized anything. If the python's jaws are engaged on any very big mouthful, say, a big buck which it is swallowing, it cannot let it go at all. If two snakes started swallowing the same buck from opposite ends and met in the middle, the larger snake would not be able to let go till he had swallowed the buck and the whole of the other snake.

When the struggle of four men with one snake had gone on for ten minutes without any result, and the three Indians and Sennacherib had thumped, twisted and slashed in vain, getting themselves covered with the irritant saliva of the horrible brute, Sennacherib had stopped yelling and collected his wits.

" Applesammy, you are the fastest runner," he had cried, " run to the beach house and ask the young man to bring his gun."

When Michael and Applesammy turned up, Sennacherib, exhausted, was lying on the ground with both hands round a rooted stone. The snake had hold of his right thigh just above the knee, with one thick coil round the knee and calf. One Indian, holding the python by the middle, was pulling at it with all his might so as to keep it straight and not let it begin to form a coil: and the other had it by the very tip of its tail and was also pulling to keep it straight. The straighter a python is the weaker it is.

Michael leaped to the ground, and taking the gun put the muzzle about a foot from the python's skin just where it parted from contact with Sennacherib's heel. He shot through it, completely severing its spine and thus killing twenty feet of it at once.

After that it was easier to detach the head and neck which Sennacherib did himself, but that part of the snake was far from dead and the head went on hissing and snapping till Michael put the muzzle of the gun an inch from it and blew half of it clean away.

Sennacherib was in a terrible mess. They brought the boat across the lagoon for him, and one Indian was sent to tell his Rolls-Royce driver to come round by the other road to fetch him at the boathouse. Meanwhile, Michael had some disinfectant fetched and bandaged his leg. Sennacherib was taken back to Durban. The python had cured him of trespassing—and even of trying to fish.

On going off in his Rolls-Royce, Sennacherib, though

in great pain and suffering from loss of blood, made a present of all his fishing kit to Mike. When later Mike examined it he found five sticks of dynamite with fuses and detonators amongst the kit!

" Phew! " said Mike, " I wondered why he was going to fish at the creek with his rods because there are only mullet there, and they don't take bait on a rod and line. So he was going to blow them up with dynamite, which is against the law! It almost serves him right to have met the python! "

Sennacherib's adventure with the python was in all the South African papers, since it was about the first time anyone had ever heard of a python attacking a man. The skin of the python was a superb one which kept Mrs. Jackson and Mary in shoes, and the boys in belts, for years. The story of the python kept poachers and trespassers away for a long time.

Sennacherib never came back. He was in bed for five months and remained lame till the end of his days, so terribly were his muscles torn. Later on he sent Michael a watch and chain of pure gold with an inscription inside the lid saying:

" *Multum in Parvo* " (Shakespeare)
Thanks Chum!
Should auld Acquaintance B forgot?
Sennacherib B. Cholmondely.

CHAPTER TEN

THE WRECK

ONE evening there was a queer leaden glaze on the water. Enormous clouds began to form, standing low down in the air with vast intervals between them, but towering so high from their bases that their summits were quite lost to view and completely shut out the sky above, darkening everything even before the night had fallen. Then, between them, the lightning began to wriggle as if a hundred grass snakes were playing hide and seek between stooks of corn. There was no sign of any thunder but the strange lightnings fiddled, and flared, and danced more slowly than ordinary lightnings, illuminating the huge corridors, cliffs and canyons in the clouds to an enormous height and distance.

The whole family sat out on the verandah watching and the sight was so grand that nobody thought of saying a word. Then suddenly rain began to fall: the night became chilly and they all retired to the dining room, where a fire was lit. The night got quite black outside. The rain came down in torrents. It made such a roar on the corrugated iron roof that they could hardly hear the thunder which had now begun to follow the more occasional flashes of lightning. But the uproar only made them feel more snug and comfortable in front of the fire.

Everybody slept soundly that night, except Billy: he loved the sound of the storm, the thunder, the sound of the rain on the roof, and the boom of the breakers. The lightning played through the windows on the walls of the room and made the white counterpanes glimmer with blue

light, and the phosphorous of the waves, too, was reflected more faintly on the ceiling between the flashes of lightning. Billy was happy just to stay awake and feel snug while outside the forest was crashing its great antlers together and all the elements seemed to be fighting each other.

He lay for some hours like this, and was just dropping off to sleep when he saw a light reflected on the wall, which stayed there. He jumped out of bed, went to the window, and there he saw a great light rushing up the sky: then it seemed to burst and trail away in a white fume, like a rocket. He went into Michael's room to wake him.

" There is a thing like Guy Fawkes' night out over the sea," he said.

" Go on, you're dreaming. It's only lightning," said Michael.

" Come and see," urged Billy, pulling him.

" Well, look out," threatened Michael angrily, " if you've only been dreaming! "

When they got to Billy's window there was nothing to be seen, and Michael was just about to be really angry with Billy, when a brilliant rocket shot up from just beyond the breakers.

" Glory! Billy, you're right. I'm sorry," cried Michael. " That must be a distress rocket. Let's go and wake the natives. Come along into the store room and help light the hurricane lamps."

They lit three lamps and woke Mary to tell her that they were going down to the beach to see what was the matter.

Soon Tom, and Nyali, and Papatom had stumbled out of bed into the roaring darkness and they all took the path to the shore.

The tide was half out, but the waves were in a mad turmoil: the sea shone wherever it was foamy. In the foreground it was like a great pale blue fleece of phosphorescence and there, rocking out on the sea, were two lights. They could not be more than about three hundred yards

away, but it was pitch black that far out, and the sea was probably rolling them towards the place where the dredger had been wrecked. Black patches appeared and disappeared in the middle of the huge ghostly fleece of blue light as the rocks were covered and uncovered by the foam.

The little group on the shore stood powerless to help, in the glow of their lamps. Then suddenly Billy pointed into the seething withdrawal of a wave at a black object in the shallow water which was sucked back, only to be projected again by the next oncoming wave.

Michael and Tom ran down knee-deep, into the backwash, and in the next wave a heavy soft object knocked Michael headlong, but he grabbed it and stumbled to his feet yelling meanwhile to Tom to give him a hand. It was the limp body of a man with a lifebelt round his waist. They had pulled him clear of the water, when Papatom suddenly noticed that there was a line tied to the lifebelt.

Papatom had been kindling a huge blaze of reeds and driftwood. But he now left the fire to the care of Billy. Extricating the half-drowned man from the lifebelt, he began to apply artificial respiration. Meanwhile he instructed Tom and Michael to make the line fast to the trunk of a neighbouring tree.

" Now you pull this rope," said Papatom, who had not been a sailor for nothing, " and bimeby big rope will come."

Tom and Michael hauled as hard as they could and soon enough the end of a hawser emerged from the sea coupled not only with the rope on which they fished it but with another end of a long rope.

Papatom now left the unconscious man by the fire as he had begun to breathe again and asked Billy to run up to fetch some brandy from the house. Meanwhile he took a hand in hauling up the hawser and with it came a big three-legged stand like an easel, only far bigger and stronger. Papatom erected this on the beach and made the

hawser fast to it at the apex, while its three pointed iron legs stuck firmly into the sand.

The prostrate figure by the fire became conscious and started shouting in a dazed way to the group. Michael only then realised that it was the voice of Captain Thorsen, and that the wrecked ship must be the *Edda*.

" I am sorry I can't help," the Captain kept on repeating deliriously, " because I've got both legs broken apparently."

But by this time the group on the beach were hauling on one of the thinner ropes under the expert advice of Papatom and something was being drawn along the hawser; sometimes the backwash would pull it back and then the advancing wave would aid the haulers again.

Then suddenly a bulk appeared above the foaming breakers as the sling of the breeches buoy came clear of the waves, running along the hawser on a pulley. The buoy consisted of a lifebelt underslung with a pair of canvas shorts through which the rescued man had thrust his legs. This was Mr. Theunissen, the harpoon-gunner, who recognised Michael at once. They showed him Captain Thorsen who was now conscious and in very great pain but who shouted encouragement to them to get the other men ashore.

Theunissen was young and strong and though he had swallowed a lot of water on the way across, was able to help enormously. Those on board the *Edda* hauled the buoy back and another rescue began. Soon the three other Norwegians and three native stokers, with the most precious instruments that could be unscrewed from the wreck, were safely landed.

They carried Captain Thorsen up to the house and laid him in Michael's bed, and it was only in the full light of Michael's bedroom that he recognised Michael's face and realised where he was, for he had been dazed by the shocks he had sustained during his perilous swim ashore.

Mary and Mrs. Jackson did what they could for the injured captain. The other survivors of the *Edda* were now arrayed in blankets and dressing gowns in front of a roaring fire. None of them had been seriously injured, thanks to the buoy which, for the greater part of their journey from the wreck to the shore, had been clear of the waves with only an occasional ducking in a breaker or a dip into the backwash.

Captain Thorsen, who had risked his life to bring the first rope ashore, had been dashed on the rocks and had not only broken both legs but had suffered slight concussion from a blow on the head. It was only by a fluke that he had been washed up.

Michael went immediately to the stable, saddled Swap and galloped off into the night. With some uneasy qualms as he passed the Indian's grave and the mamba's precipice, he was soon well on his way to the sugar-mill, which worked day and night. He arrived there just before dawn and, as there was a telephone line from the mill to Durban, he called up his father and also the Norwegian Consul, Mr. Tillestad, to tell him that the crew were all safe.

It wasn't long before five ambulances and Dr. Jackson were on their way. They passed Michael before he was half-way back to the beach house.

When Michael returned Billy had long been back in his bed. Michael, too, was dead-tired. He arrived just as the ambulances were starting back to Durban. Captain Thorsen, who had had a shot of morphia, was now fast asleep. But Mr. Theunissen had described to Dr. Jackson the part played by Michael in the rescue. It remained for Michael to tell how, without Billy, there could have been no rescue at all.

Billy, from the shore, and Captain Thorsen, from the sea, were the two heroes of the occasion. But Captain Thorsen, the only powerful swimmer on board, would

have been lost entirely had it not been for Billy's seeing the rocket and calling Michael, since he was exhausted, crippled and unconscious when they found him washing about in the waves.

John woke up in the morning after the wreck just after the crew had departed in the ambulance. He couldn't believe what he heard, until the bows and the mast of the *Edda* were pointed out to him sticking out of the water on the lone rock. He felt miserably jealous that he had played no part in this thrilling adventure. But he made up his mind to do something braver than all the rest one day—though he couldn't decide what he was going to do.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ROUGH RIDING

LATER on that month a lorry arrived at the Beach Cottage, and on it was an outboard motor. The mechanic, who drove the lorry, said that it was a gift for Billy for his part in the rescue, from the Whaling Company which had owned the *Edda*.

Billy was speechless with delight and, while he and Michael and John were admiring it, they heard the rumble of a motor bicycle coming down the road, and were very surprised when they saw that Mr. Theunissen was riding it.

"It's for you," he said to Michael, when he had dismounted.

"For *me*!" Michael could scarcely believe his ears.

Mr. Theunissen smiled at his amazement, and asked to see Tom, Nyali and Papatom, to whom he gave ten pounds apiece. And then he told them all how the *Edda* had come to be wrecked.

It appeared that, during the night of the storm, the screw of the whaler had been put out of action by striking against some hard, submerged object and had been torn off. After that they had drifted helplessly through the tempest, until they had struck the rock. They had not known how near land they were until they had seen the blue and white phosphorescence of the surf sweeping away towards the shore. It was into that boiling and seething mass of cold fire that Captain Thorsen had plunged, with the life-line, after they had all said a brief and devout prayer. He said that it had been about twenty minutes after Captain

Thorsen had left the ship, when they first saw the lights of the hurricane lamps bobbing along the shore, and then the fire that Papatom had lit.

All this time Billy had been trying hard to conceal his impatience; he was longing to try his outboard motor. But Mr. Theunissen understood this quite well, so he cut his story short and told the mechanic to drive Billy down to the boathouse, fix the motor, and show him how to work it.

Billy and John scrambled on to the lorry and off they went.

When they had gone, Theunissen turned to Michael and said: "I expect you'd like me to teach you to ride the bike, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, please," breathed Michael.

"When I say ride, I mean really ride," explained Theunissen. "We teach recruits to ride up the sides of fjords, in the Norwegian Army. And the British Army, at Bagshot Heath, teaches its recruits to go over knife-edges, climb the almost perpendicular and jump hurdles."

"Could *I* do that?" asked Michael, thrilled.

"Why not? I've found that, given a certain amount of nerve, a rough-rider can be made in about six weeks, from a man who's never been on a bike before—not even on a push-bike."

"Oh, I can ride a push-bike," said Michael, "and, of course, a horse."

"That should help. It will have given you a sense of balance," Theunissen assured him. "With the tips I shall give you today you will soon be able to do everything I'm going to do on this hillside, and a good deal more, provided you stand on the footrests, with your legs as straight as possible, and with your hands almost as straight on the handlebars." He demonstrated the correct position to Michael, who was drinking in every word.

"Could I really ride up that hill?" Michael asked.

" You'll be able to up hill and down dale, through mud —I'll show you that later—everywhere a horse can go except, *except*, remember this, through loose, dry sand or deep water. Now watch! "

He kicked the starter and went along the road, in low gear. Then he stood on the footrests and swerved off the road up-hill, until he came to the steepest part of all, a gradient of about one in three, while Michael held his breath and thought that the bicycle was going to somersault backwards, on to its own rider.

Suddenly, however, Theunissen leapt off to the left of the machine, simultaneously shutting off the engine, and laid the bicycle down, at an angle of about one o'clock to the course he had just taken. Coming round to the right of the machine, he pulled it, by the front wheel clockwise, until it lay at an angle of five o'clock. He lifted it on to its wheels, braking it with the front-wheel brake. Then he got on to the footrests, holding the exhaust which he released when the bike had begun to move, and this immediately started the engine in low gear. He came downhill looking right over his front wheel as if it were over the side of a precipice. He came chugging down to an easier slope but there was a great red ant-heap on the way, as tall and steep as a big bell-tent but with a double cone, between whose points was a knife-edged ridge.

Theunissen rode straight at the ant-hill, slowed up at the base of it, then up, up, up, opening out his throttle till within half a yard of the top, when he almost switched it off, having allowed it to carry him just as far as was necessary to negotiate the knife-edge. The front wheel gently tilted over the top, while he adjusted his body to the descent and came down as comfortably and smoothly as if he were a pedestrian on a sliding staircase in the subway. Had he not closed down the throttle at the right moment the bike would have leapt high into the air.

Michael stood spellbound at the world of new possibilities and adventures that this splendid new gift had opened up for him. Theunissen explained the starter, the throttle, the clutch and the gears, and kept him all morning riding up and down the road changing gears. Then just before lunch time he instructed him as to how he had performed the first trick he had done on the hillside.

" Do you think you can keep all that in your head? " asked Theunissen.

" Yes," said Michael, " and let me do the ant-heap stunt on the way down. Tell me what you did then."

" One trick at a time," said Theunissen, " you will find the one o'clock trick quite hard enough by itself." And he was right!

Michael, apart from being a born horseman and having perfect reflexes, had a good memory too, but Rome wasn't built in a day. He started off splendidly. He even got the bike lying on its right side at one o'clock without it free-wheeling back, knocking him over, and rolling with him to the bottom of the hill as it does with most beginners. He pulled it round to five o'clock and jumped on but he had revved up the throttle almost to the full and, when he let go the exhaust, the bike came down the hill like a bolting horse.

" Oh my poor bike! " thought Michael, " it will be smashed to bits when we hit the road," so he tried to swerve away diagonally to the left along the slope of the hill while it eased off its fury.

Things would have been all right if the foot-brake had not just at that moment caught in a mole-hill. Michael sailing through the air saw a picture of the half-moon framed between his boots, he then saw his motor-bike standing still on its front wheel about five yards away from him; and the next instant he saw the moon again, and after that the motor-bike once more, about ten yards away.

Then he felt and heard the roar and crash of twigs and leaves as he sailed right through a dense pathla bush and remained swinging to and fro in an inpenetrable mass of wild banana leaves, monkey-ropes, lianas and vines, through which only a dachshund could have penetrated nose-first. This had saved him from breaking a single bone though he had been scratched by twigs and thorns, but the scratches only served to remind him, through his dizzy sort of daze, that he was still alive and kicking.

Theunissen caught him by the ankle and pulled him out of the thicket and they were soon inspecting the damage to the bike. Somehow the clutch handle had been wrenched off and the foot-brake bent, but otherwise the bike was all right. They took it down to the house and soldered on the clutch handle and levered back the brake and were soon ready for more lessons.

There was no better way of learning about the throttle than by sailing through the air as Michael had. A fright can often underline little items in the note-book of memory with a far redder pencil than any that can be bought in a shop. Besides, there is nothing more exhilarating than a fright, if it is obtained without any broken bones: and Michael had two more frights that afternoon.

After lunch he insisted on trying to go over the ant-heap. The first time he shut off the throttle too quickly because he was a bit scared of it; and so he experienced the reverse of the thing that happened to him in the morning. The engine conked out; the bike slid back; and both he and the bike rolled to the bottom of the ant-heap somersaulting over each other, and under each other, but somehow the bike didn't manage to fall on top of Michael, and he ended sitting on the prostrate machine.

"Phew," he gasped.

"I think you've had enough for one day," said Theunissen.

"Oh, no, no," Michael cried, and jumping on the

bike, chugged round in a circle and went again for the ant-heap.

This time he didn't shut off in time, the bike left the edge of the ant-heap and rose straight up in the air like a bronco. It seemed to try to wobble in the air, but Michael threw all his weight forward so as not to come down on his hind wheel. The bike came down front-wheel first, about three yards from the base of the ant-heap, wobbled and righted itself while Theunissen, now with the wind-up properly for the first time, shouted to Michael to dismount, but Michael was already riding round back up the hillside for another go at the ant-heap.

"Just one more! I think I've got the hang of it now," he shouted—and then up, up, up and over he went, timing it almost as perfectly as Theunissen had, on the first occasion.

Four times he repeated the circle and went over the top of the ant-heap.

"You'll do," said Theunissen. "Now there's only the mud. I've got to pick up our lorry at your boat-house where our mechanic is fixing the outboard for the kids. So let's go and look for some nice thick mud."

They didn't have far to go for there was a pretty marshy patch down near the boat-house, and here with only a couple of spills in the warm, comfortable mud, Michael learned how to navigate mud using only the clutch and choosing always the deepest wheel-rut.

"Take it easy from now on, Mike," counselled Theunissen. "You know enough now to be able to add to your knowledge a little day by day: and when I get my leave at the end of the whaling season I'll take you with me, if you are free, up to Portuguese East Africa to course giraffes, lions, buffaloes and zebras with motor-bikes. It is a sport I invented myself and one of the most exciting, including that of my own profession as a harpooner of whales."

They found at the boat-house that the children had been out with Mary and Topsy and the mechanic for a long spin with the outboard motor. They were quite as thrilled with it as Michael was with his bike.

Theunissen and the mechanic then bade them goodbye. Michael and Billy thanked them for their superb presents.

Michael spent the next few days in a dream of petrol, sparking-plugs, gears and brakes. He went into a different world altogether, riding round and round the country on his beloved bike and forgetting all about his brothers and sister, his mother, his fishing, his hunting and even about the great mamba which he planned to destroy.

As for Swap, it was Billy's and John's turn to take possession of him, and they started going for long rides sitting both together, one on the saddle and one behind.

On about the fourth day Michael took his bike and rode away inland, after taking an extra supply of petrol on the carrier. He left the main road and made off straight across country up the great grassy ridges that, separated by vast canyons full of thick forests, converged upwards to the table-like crest of a big mountain, which ended in a steep precipice to the west. From this high mountain he could see the sea glittering far away to the east and then inland to the west he saw, over a hundred and fifty miles away, the great snowy tops of the peaks of the Drakensberg rising into the blue sky. In between the mountain and the Drakensberg he could see the myriad corrugations of the " Valley of a Thousand Hills " with a sea of other mountains rising beyond in saw-backed ridges or bulking in table-formations, till they terminated in the great snow-bound ranges of the " Berg."

Michael left his bike and began to make his way on foot between the boulders towards the abrupt krantz which, on the western side of the mountain, dropped sheer for a thousand feet. Hundreds of huge white-necked ravens which nested in the cliffs began to fly out and croak at

him, as they received warnings from their sentries of the approach of a stranger.

" Boorhoom! " He suddenly heard the alarm cry of the sentry of a troop of baboons and saw it, on the skyline, rising up on its hind legs to get a better view of him. All round him he saw recently upturned stones and boulders where the baboons had been searching for the scorpions, which they know how to disarm by flicking off the poisonous gland and the sting at the end of the tail, and the other insects that live under the stones, which form a considerable part of their diet.

Then all of a sudden between him and the sentinel baboon he heard a chorus of savage barks, saw a scurry of hairy bodies, and not forty yards from where he stood, from behind a big rock there rose the old father and Chief of the whole troop of baboons with his hair all standing on end, showing his huge razor-like fangs which could have ripped a man to ribbons. The baboon, though shivering with a mixture of rage and fright, was determined to safeguard the retreat of the rest of the troop.

Michael, too, was terrified for he had not even a stick. He was afraid to turn his back so he just stayed and did a Don Tancred.* He saw the female baboons in the background picking up their youngsters, passing them over the ledges, and fetching them an occasional clout if through curiosity they tried to loiter or look back. The old man baboon stood glaring at Michael till he knew the others had made their getaway: then he, too, retired shambling backwards and letting forth an occasional bark of defiance, till he disappeared after the rest in a cleft in the rocks.

Michael lost no time in returning through the boulders to the grassy slopes where he had left his bike. He swore he would never come out unarmed so far from home again, and when he got to his bike he thought of an idea to get his own back on the baboons and frighten them;

* Standing or lying dead-still, pretending to be inanimate.

he started pressing the klaxon-button on his bike for at least half a minute. The diabolical din loosed a babel of raven-croaks and baboon-barks in reply—but he felt he had the last word, or rather noise.

On his way down the grassy slopes, with a magnificent vista of foothills and the sea in front of him, and virgin forest filling the canyons and ravines on either side of the broad, bare, smooth ridge, down the centre of which he rode, Michael began to feel thirsty.

He left his bike where he saw a buck-tunnel disappearing into the verdure down to his left. He could hear the song of falling water and followed it into the twilight of the tree-ferns and yellow-woods till he came to some green mossy boulders, with waving fronds of watercress between them, and crystal-clear ice-cold water spouting down through clefts and tunnels in the boulders. Myriads of maidenhair ferns swayed in the mist that rose from the splashing cascades. Enormous mother-of-pearl, tortoise-shell, and golden-mooned purple butterflies with swallow tails played around him, and sucked the flowers of a kind of scarlet polianthus which from hundreds of hair-like tendrils rayed out their transparent blossoms, or hung from the cream-white waxen orchids which festooned the yellow-woods like tiny cataracts of stars.

This upland forest was quite different from the tropical bush round the beach house. It was much more beautiful, greener, more fragrant—and less snaky. As Michael rested there without moving, the rock-rabbits, as they are called in Natal, began to pop out from between the rocks. These little animals are really more related to the elephants and rhinoceroses than to the rabbits; they also go by the name of hyrax or dassie.

The lories hopped about in the branches overhead with their white crests, green bodies and crimson wings; every time they flapped a wing it was like an explosion of fire. One of them came and bathed in a tiny pool beside

Michael and, lo and behold! the pool became crimson with the pigment that was washed off the wings, as if with its life blood. The lory is the only bird known whose dye actually " runs in the wash," most of its pigment being in the form of scales of copper. Though it washes out in the stream, it is completely restored in a few minutes when the feathers dry.

Very soon a whole flock of wood-hoopoes with scarlet beaks and silk-shot, glossy, green and purple feathers were raising the most amazing din in the tree above his head, fanning out white spotted feathers from their long blue tails, and scolding and chuckling as they sought their food up and down the moss-grown branches. These are sometimes called monkey-birds because of the chuckling and gossiping. But the natives have the best name for them—*thlebabafazi*, rowdy old women. It is the best name that could be given to these beautiful but comical birds, as native women are talkative and noisy and generally very merry.

Michael was entranced by all these sights and sounds which were so different from those on the coast some three thousand feet or so lower down. He lay back motionless on his mossy bed watching the lories and wood-hoopoes.

Then, suddenly describing a beautiful arc like a fly-catcher, the shyest and most retiring of all the birds of the African forest, a trogon, flew out of the undergrowth, hawked at an insect and settled noiselessly on a bough six feet from him. Michael held his breath as he gazed at its exquisite plumage, its crimson chest and belly, and the silken fern-like green feathers of its back and tail all burnished with golden lights. It vanished like a rocket of red and golden fire into the dark shade of the undergrowth.

Shortly afterwards Michael heard the four-note whistle of an emerald cuckoo. He whistled back, imitating perfectly the pitch and scale of the four notes. The bird answered

him each time from nearer and nearer, till it came and perched on the very bough where the trogon had sat and let him examine it for nearly a minute. It was covered with burnished electric feathers, each overlapping the other like the brilliant green scales of a parrot-fish.

Every bird Michael had seen seemed more beautiful than the last. It seemed that, with the emerald cuckoo, the spirit of the forest had offered him her supreme masterpiece and most glittering jewel. It looked round for its fancied mate, called again and vanished. But a few minutes later a malachite sunbird with its long swallow-tails hung like a moth in front of a gorgeous aloe flower: and it seemed to be to the flower what the flower was to its own leaves.

Presently half a dozen other varieties of sunbirds twinkled green, bronze, scarlet and sapphire. A four-coloured shrike then came flitting past, hovered for an instant over the toe of Michael's boot as if to settle on it, thought better of it, and moved on to settle on a dead stump. This bird was like green and black velvet, with such a flash of orange for its throat and scarlet for its chest that its feathers seemed literally to hum with electric fire.

Michael had seen many a dazzling garden of flamboyant trees, jacarandas and kaffirbooms with, beneath them, ground flowers literally fusillading colour on every side. But this wild garden, in which the birds were really the flowers for brightness, and the flowers were merely like the shadows of the birds, seemed to him the most beautiful he had ever seen.

It was late in the afternoon when Michael tore himself away from that mountain paradise. He picked two superb white orchids for his mother and Mary, packed them in wet moss in the tool-case of his bike, and started once more on his downward journey.

He arrived back intoxicated with his ride and quite exhausted. The grandeur of the view, the beauty of the

mountain stream, the yelling of the baboons, the croaking of the crows, the non-stop downward bumping and bucking of the bike, all shaken up in his brain together, left it whirling like a top. But, after a hearty supper, the second that his head hit the pillow he slept the deepest and most refreshing sleep that a sudden lift into the mountain air and a plunge back into the heavier sea air can induce in a healthily tired body.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TROOPER SPIVEL-TOMKINSLEY OF SPIVEL CASTLE, WORCS

MICHAEL'S school friend Willem Van Rooyen rode down one day to visit him from the distant estate in the mountains where his father worked partly for Mr. Jackson and partly on his own sisal works. He was coming along at a fast trot just under the mamba's precipice when his horse, Strayshot, shied, as a peetie-buck suddenly dashed through the scrub whistling.

Some pebbles rattled down the rocks on to the road and Willem, having steadied Strayshot, looked up in the direction whence the stones had fallen. Suddenly he felt the inexplicable certainty that somebody very close at hand was looking at him very hard—or, if it wasn't somebody, it was some*thing*. He halted his horse which seemed very uneasy and laid its ears back. Willem could see the white of the horse's eye as it turned its head every now and again to question him. He had almost grown up with Strayshot, who was a solid, sensible horse whom he had never seen uneasy before.

Whether the horse sensed his own uneasiness and was infected by that, or whether it had smelt or seen or heard something on its own, there was no doubt that it knew something was the matter. Willem was a very brave boy. The only two things that he was afraid of were the old overgrown cemetery by the ruined church near the original old mill, and then only at night: and the Indian's grave down by the boat-house, and then only at night also. There was nothing he was afraid of in broad daylight.

The natives called him *Inyati*, the buffalo, and he was the only schoolboy who had ever played for the Province of Natal in the Rugby XV.

He was just seventeen on the day when he rode down to see Michael. He had pitch-black hair, dark eyes, and a pleasantly ugly bruiser's face covered with freckles. In the local rodeos he had beaten most of the grown-ups at throwing down full-grown steers and oxen. His chief failing was that he was not very clever. He was only in the second form at school though he was in the first fifteen, not only of the school but of the whole province.

So he sat there on his horse with a puzzled expression, staring into the undergrowth, examining the cliff-side leaf by leaf, and stick by stick and stone by stone. From the long leather gun-bucket at his left knee he slowly pulled the shotgun and laid it across his left wrist with his right thumb on the safety catch, his index finger on the trigger and the rest of his right hand on the pistol-grip of the gun. His horse was quite accustomed to people firing from the saddle and knew when to expect it.

Willem felt certain he was being looked at not by a buck or a bird but either by the great mamba itself, or by a man, or a leopard, or something hostile. He still was not frightened but the feeling that he was being stared at grew more and more intense: the horse began to tremble: and, whether or not it was the air coming up from the river fifteen feet below him to the right, but Willem began to feel colder. He wondered if the dead Indian's ghost had come back to visit the pump-station at which he used to work: and if a ghost would be faintly visible in broad daylight.

He stared round him, looking for anything that resembled a piece of filmy mist or cigarette smoke. But except for one rather big spider's web which glistened faintly in a sunbeam, there was nothing in the phantasmal line which he could see. He shouted, and his voice went like a pebble

skimming across a pool, jumping from the precipice over the water and back again four or five times.

"Show yourself and I'll blow your brains out!" he roared. "Blow . . . blow . . . brains . . . out . . . out . . . blow . . . bra . . . blow . . . bra . . . out . . . out . . . out . . . out . . ." The echoes, multiplying themselves, roared back at him, and then died away over the rustling reed-beds and the reaches of the lagoon, till they ricocheted away up the great forested hill of the Hawaan, a mile across the river. The effect was very ghostly though it was broad daylight. Nothing moved except the ears of his horse. The air got colder. He began to feel as if a million microscopic and death-cold ants were crawling up his backbone. He grew angry with himself for beginning to feel frightened and immediately he was angry he felt brave again, and went on peering into the undergrowth.

He was now sweating and so was his horse in spite of its being so cold down there by the river. So, after a quarter of an hour of fruitless staring, he decided to make a note of the place exactly, and ride on into the hot sunlight again.

"It is about sixty yards this side of the ruined pump-house," he decided, looking back "and just abreast of that white bush-cabbage stem with the old hornet's nest on the top of it, between the monkey-apple tree and those two aloes with red flowers." It would be easy to find the spot again and pleasanter to reconnoitre it in company than alone.

Even as he left the place he still felt certain that he was under the scrutiny of some malignant eye. It wasn't a feeling which had been suggested by the mamba's precipice. It was the other way round: he had only remembered it was the mamba's precipice when he had begun to feel that he was being watched.

However that may be, he slid the shotgun back into the gun-bucket and rode on to the beach house. When he got there he found a fine bay horse tied to a branch of the

old milk-wood tree, with a government brand on its hind-quarters, a smart regimental saddle, and a smart-looking service Lee-Enfield rifle in the gun-bucket. He was very annoyed at this because he knew it belonged to the Mounted Policeman, Trooper the Honourable Piers de Spivel-Tomkinsley from England, who had come to have tea, and to talk about poetry with Mary.

Mary had passed her Matric: and all poor Willem could talk about was rugby football, horses, cattle, sisal and mealies. But he wanted to marry Mary when he was old enough because she was the sister of his best friend, because she could cook and worked hard in the house, because she would be well off probably, and also because she was very pretty.

He didn't like to see the Honourable Piers hanging around with books, smart leggings, a silk shirt, gold sleeve-links, and tiny little spurs of silver. The Honourable Piers had a handsome white and pink face and Willem's was spotted with freckles. Piers was the heir to Spivel Castle, Worcs, England. Willem had often obligingly ridden to the railway station to post home letters for the trooper. He didn't know that Worcs was short for Worcestershire, but had always imagined that it must be the English way of spelling Works, and he pictured Spivel Castle *Works* as a huge factory which would one day come to Piers. While the only works which he himself would inherit were the sisal works, where his granddad made rope. There would, of course, also be his father's house and about two hundred scraggy Afrikander cattle, but this seemed pretty meagre compared to Piers' lordly inheritance.

Willem could play rugby all right, but Piers could not only play rugby fairly well, but the piano, the ukulele, and the church organ. He could also play polo excellently, and the number of cups he had won in the military tournaments at tent-pegging, quintain and fencing were the pride

of the barracks mess. Even his hair-brushes and his shaving tackle, silver, mother-of-pearl and ivory, had all been won at various sports such as golf, tennis and squash. He had also all kinds of mugs and egg-cups which he had won for sprinting and jumping at Eton and Oxford.

Trooper Piers had gone out that morning on patrol, whistling with sheer delight that for once the path of duty was also the path of pleasure. He had locked the door of his rondavel* which contained all his treasures, taken his horse from the native corporal, mounted it, and had soon covered the ten miles that lay between him and the beach house which was in the direct line of his patrol.

When Willem came alongside the verandah he saw that he hadn't a hope. The Hon. Piers was sitting with a book of Oliver Gogarty's poems on his knees, and with a highly justifiable look of " two's company " on his face. So Willem took it like a man, saluted the couple with resignation and slipped out of sight round the corner of the house, where he found Michael filling cartridges at the table.

" Hullo, Mike, how's it? " he said. " I just came down to tell you that on the Saturday after next we are branding all the new calves and some big cattle too that your uncle has bought from the chief Sikananda. A lot of them are half wild and we'll have some fun because the Azevedos and Antonio Bargas Heredia are coming out with their horses from Mathlanga. How about coming along? "

" Fine," said Michael. " Yes, I'll come like a shot. Thanks awfully."

" Oh, by the way, Mike," Willem went on, " there was something funny about the mamba's precipice on the way down. Strayshot seemed to feel it too. I could swear it was the mamba, or something else, *but it was looking at us.* I am sure of that."

" Did you have your gun with you? " asked Mike.

* Thatched concrete or wattle and daub hut.

" Yes, I had the shotgun, and I pulled it out of the bucket and kept it ready. I looked at every leaf and stick for about a quarter of an hour yet I could make out nothing."

" Well, I don't think it could be the mamba," said Mike. " You know why? Nobody carrying a shotgun has ever got near the mamba. It seems to know a gun as well as a monkey does: it even seems to know the difference between a rifle and a shotgun: and it just keeps out of the way of a shotgun. But seeing you're here and we've both got guns, let's go and have a look. Wait while I saddle Swap."

Soon they approached the precipice: this time they left the horses tethered and did the last three hundred yards on foot watching the road in front of them and the scrub. The flutter of every bird in the scrub or any rustle of the wind in the dry leaves keyed up their senses and drew the muzzles of their guns. Willem went in front to find the exact place. He was looking for the white bush-cabbage stem, between the aloes and the monkey-apples, but he had got nearly to the pump-house before he turned.

" No, that stem was at least sixty yards from the pump-house," he said, as they retraced their steps. " There, back yonder: see those two aloes and the monkey-apples? Well, a yard or so on the other side of the aloes and this side of the apples."

" But we've just passed those," objected Michael.

" I know. I thought they must be the wrong aloes and the wrong monkey-apples because I didn't see the great white stem, with a hornet's nest on the top of it. Here now, here is where it should be." Willem added, when they reached the spot—then he gasped: his eyes gradually sought those of Michael.

" It's gone, eh? " whispered Michael. " What was the bush-cabbage stem like? "

" Well, it was as high as you," said Willem, " but there were no leaves. The green top had been broken off, but it

was thicker at the top than the bottom, and it was white with notches every half-inch all the way up. On the top of it there was an old white hornet's nest. The stem was no thicker than my wrist."

"Why," almost sobbed Michael, "that was the mamba himself playing Don Tancred, with his head swelled up like a football and the white frill of old dead skin round his neck, looked like a hornet's nest."

"But the thing was all white, not black," protested Willem.

"Well, all snakes are white underneath; even the blackest mamba is white or yellow."

"Of course, I never thought of that. He must have been reared up facing me," breathed Willem.

"Yes. And those notches were the big scales on his tummy. You could have killed him stone dead as easy as winking."

Poor Willem, when he realised that Michael was right, could have kicked himself. The only sound he could utter was: "Phew!" and a slightly sickly feeling came over him too; to think that he had been only four yards from the mamba for a quarter of an hour!

"I wonder why I didn't notice its eyes," he reflected. "I suppose it must have covered them with that funny sort of transparent eyelid which snakes have, like a film or a scale. It stops their eyes from glittering, you know, but they can see through it."

"Yes," Mike said, and the professorial part of his character showed itself for a moment—"that eyelid is what is called a nictitating membrane in my book about snakes."

"Oh, you are always using long words," scoffed Willem.

. . . . .

On their way back to the house they passed the trooper, who was making up for the time that he had spent with Mary and was continuing his patrol at a fast trippel.

"Goodbye, Mike: and goodbye, Willem! I'll be seeing you soon," he called gaily; for he was feeling pretty happy.

Willem felt terribly jealous of the handsome Englishman but he knew that the latter meant him no harm: so he tried to smile back at him.

"Look out, Trooper Tomkinsley," he shouted. "Don't go on the road under the krantz, the mamba is out today and you've only got your rifle. Take the road that goes round by the bamboos."

"Why shouldn't a rifle be any good?" asked the trooper seriously, reining in his horse. He was a crack shot, among all his other brilliant accomplishments, and he was in the habit of throwing up cigarette tins and putting holes through them with a revolver which he was wearing on his belt at that moment. "And what about this?" he said, tapping it.

"We don't use those things much in this country," said Mike. "But nothing that fires just one bullet is reliable against a mamba, however good a shot you may be. Only birdshot in a big bore is any use."

"Well, thanks for warning me," the trooper said, looking frankly at Willem, whom he knew to be his rival though a somewhat defeated one; yet he recognised the generosity and chivalry of Willem's thought for his safety.

Then he rode on and the boys rode back to the beach house. That was the last time anyone ever saw Trooper Piers de Spivel-Tomkinsley of Spivel Castle, Worcs, alive.

But as they went back to the beach house Mike and Willem were discussing him. Willem said, "I wonder why such a smart man with a castle in England has to come out here and work as an ordinary Mountie."

"What I heard my father say," said Michael, "was that his father sent him out here because, when he was at Oxford, he and some friends caught a policeman and took off his clothes and put him in some tar and then rolled him in some feathers."

Willem grinned. " Rather funny, I should think."

" Lord Spivel, that's his father, didn't think so. He said Tomkinsley would have to serve as a policeman himself just to see what it was like—so Piers enlisted in the mounted police."

" What kind of works do they have at his castle? " asked Willem.

" Why none," replied Michael.

" Well, why does he have works, written on that card with his name that he leaves whenever he visits anyone. He left one with Kwambazana, our cook, when he came to visit Dad and Mum and they were out—" said Willem.

Michael could hardly keep from laughing at his friend. " Silly ass! " he exclaimed. " It's not works, its Worcs: short for Worcestershire, the county in England."

" Oh, I see," said Willem. " I thought it must be a sausage works because on the top of the card there was a crown, and on one side of the crown there was a wildebeeste with only one horn and on the other side a dog, like that French dog belonging to the priest at the mill, and they were standing on their hind legs."

" Well, what on earth has a crown got to do with a sausage works, let alone a French dog and a wildebeeste with one horn! "

" Why," Willem snorted. " Don't all the tins of sausages have crowns on them, and isn't it called the 'Crown' sausage factory at Ladysmith, and everywhere else where they make sausages? "

It was true that this was the trade mark on the tinned sausages.

" As for the wildebeeste and the French dog," Willem continued, " they are put inside the sausages, I suppose."

" Look here," said Michael. " That one-horned wildebeeste and the French dog are a *unicorn* and a *lion*: and they are not for putting into sausages. They are supposed to

be fighting for the crown and the whole picture is supposed to represent the de Spivel-Tomkinsley coat-of-arms."

This heraldic argument was fortunately brought to an end by their meeting with Tom, Billy, John and Vemvan, who were all coming back from a row on the lagoon. Willem took Billy up behind him on the horse and Mike took John and Vemvan one in front and one behind. Then they rode on.

" Willem," said Billy. " Vemvan says nobody is brave enough to pass by the Indian's grave in the night-time—he says not even you, *Inyati*, would go past it at night."

" Well," faltered Willem. " I don't know anything about Indians after they're dead. Everybody says that they're better left alone. I wouldn't mind fighting with a hundred living ones. But they seem to be more difficult when they're dead."

" I should have thought they'd be easier when they're dead," said the literal Billy.

" Oh, no they're not. A bullet will go right through a ghost without hurting it, and a ghost can go right through a wall without making a hole in it."

" Huh! " said Billy, scornfully, " no one could go through a wall."

" Ghosts can. They're a kind of smoke or steam. Or perhaps they're like the poison of a rhingals cobra when it sprays it out in the air," Willem added, drawing on his imagination. " If it touches your eyes it burns and blinds them. I would always wear dark glasses if I had to pass a ghost's place at night."

" Personally," said Michael, " I don't believe in ghosts, but I'm blowed if I'd pass the Indian's grave in the dark. I had to go pretty close, the night I rode off to tell them about the wreck at the mill, but I went by at a hand gallop and tried to think of something else. I didn't mind passing the old cemetery, somehow, because our own ghosts just lie quiet till Judgment Day. But the Indians are always



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feeding their ghosts, and leaving pots of curry and rice on their graves—"

"Yes," interrupted John, "they left a big new pot today full of rice and another full of curry, and the chooks, tinkies, flops and finks are stealing all the rice. If the little birds aren't afraid, I'm not afraid of the ghost, and I would go past the grave at night, only mother won't let me go out."

Michael was really annoyed at this boastfulness on the part of John, who had nearly always cried when frightened and who had never done anything plucky, so he was a little rough on him.

"Boastful little beast! You know you're a funk," he said. But after he had said it he was sorry because John looked so miserable.

They were only a hundred yards from the house and Mike was going to take Willem down to the beach to point out the wreck to him, when Mary and Topsy came running with Stephen out of a little glade quite near the house. This glade was known as the Monkeys' Garden; it was a circle of lovely lawn-like grass about fifteen yards in diameter. Nothing but grass had grown there for centuries from the look of it and it made a lovely playground. It was completely surrounded by dense undergrowth and over-towered by giant milk-wood trees. Mary and Topsy had started a little corner where they had planted some wild flame-lilies which Tom had dug up in the forest. Here they had cleared some of the grass; and when, after Trooper Piers had gone, Mary came back with Topsy to look at their garden, there, printed in the loose soil they had cleared, was the footmark of a strange animal. It was bigger than the spoor of a wild cat or a red lynx and it was certainly not that of a buck.

"Come here quick," cried Mary as she saw the boys, "there is a big spoor here in the Monkeys' Garden."

They dismounted and ran into the Monkeys' Garden, which was entered by a narrow buck path, and they all

started looking at the strange spoor. Unfortunately the soil was absolutely dry and crumbly so there was no shape to the spoor though it was wide and long.

" I should say with a paw that size it must be an ant-bear," said Willem.

" Yes, it could be," agreed Vemvan, " but there would be a groove where its tail had dragged."

" What about a ratel, or an otter? " suggested Michael.

" No! no! " cried Vemvan, " I don't want it to be a ratel! "

Once he had had a terrible experience with a ratel. He had upset it, when he was following a honey-guide not knowing that the ratel was already following it. This had so infuriated the ratel that it forgot all about the honey, killed Vemvan's dog with one crunch of its jaws, and rushed at the terrified child, who had shinned up a tree in the nick of time. The terrible little animal had stayed there foaming with rage all night trying to bite and scratch through the stem of the tree: and it was only because it was a tree with bitter poisonous sap, which kept the ratel spitting most of the time, that it didn't gnaw it through. But next morning the honey-guide came back for the ratel and called it: and this time it was so hungry that it followed the bird and left Vemvan.

For its size the ratel is the bravest, almost the most ferocious and the toughest animal in Africa; it lives on snakes, which cannot bite it because its skin is so thick, and on honey which it shares with the honey-guide: for the latter reason it is sometimes known as the honey badger.

The dog that Vemvan's ratel had killed was the father of Vemvan's present dog, Moya. No wonder that Vemvan cried out: " I don't want it to be a ratel! "

Michael told Vemvan to fetch Moya and, when the dog came and was made to sniff the spoor, she let out a long-drawn howl and put her tail between her legs and bristled up her hair.

" Well, what do you make of that? " said Willem. " I tell you it's a *tiger** for sure and not a ratel, nor an otter, nor an ant-bear. That's just what our dog did when he smelt the spoor of the *tiger* that came after our calves—the one Dad killed."

They could find no other spoor because all the rest of the ground that was not covered with grass was completely covered with leaves.

Vemvan, after watching the dog, said: " I agree with *Inyati* it is either a *tiger* or a cheetah."

" You can't tell unless you get the spoor in mud or damp soil," said Mike. " The cheetah's spoor has claw-marks like a dog's spoor, but the *tiger's* spoor is all pads like a cat, because he pulls in his claws when he is walking. Well, anyway, it is too late to do anything about it and the sun's going down."

" It's five years since the last *tiger* was killed here," Vemvan said thoughtfully. " Don't let your little peetie-buck go far from the house, Miss Mary."

Willem and Mike stabled their horses and went down to the shore. Part of the wreck was visible above the waves but till the next spring tides it wouldn't be possible to get anywhere near it.

Michael said: " Look here, Willem, why not stay over a couple of nights and let's try to get that *tiger* tomorrow. I'll send for as many natives as we can get and we'll drive the piece of bush between here and the lagoon."

" How can we get enough natives to drive the bush by tomorrow morning? " asked Willem.

" We can ride along after supper to Mpathla's kraal about two miles up the beach," said Michael. " We only need tell them that they'll get a share of the meat, and we'll have twenty men and boys here at dawn with all their dogs, spears and knobkerries. Besides we've got Vemvan and Tom, too, and that piece of bush is full of buck."

* " Tiger " is the common South African word for a leopard.

" You don't mind if I ask, do you," said Willem, " but Mpathla's kraal, is it on the way past the Indian's grave? "

" No, it's the other way," laughed Michael.

" Oh, well, that's O.K.," said Willem with relief. " We shall need all our nerve for the *tiger*."

They rode out and found Mpathla's people were still awake: the two boys said nothing about the *tiger* in case it should discourage the natives. They merely invited them to the hunt and said that they would give them some of the meat and all the intestines of the buck they killed. The natives thanked them very much and promised to be at the cottage at dawn. Michael and Willem then rode back home and went to bed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE SKEBENGA*

ON the day that Trooper Piers de Spivel-Tomkinsley rode out on his last patrol from the police camp to visit the Jacksons, a Zulu convict named Mahakaan, who had been head of the Ninevite gang of murderers and was also a witch-doctor, a man of prodigious courage, strength, cunning and wickedness, escaped from his prison where he was in solitary confinement, by strangling a native warder, putting the corpse in his bed, donning the warder's uniform and coolly walking out as if nothing had happened. In fact the crime and the escape were not detected for some time.

When he was passing near the police camp he saw Trooper Tomkinsley locking the door of his hut and riding off, all spick and span, on his bay horse along the main road. He slipped into the shrubs at the back of the camp, climbed a mango tree, one thick length of which drooped over the thatch of the trooper's hut, on the side that was farthest away from the rest of the camp, and dropped on to the thatch. He started at once hacking a hole through it with the murdered warder's clasp-knife. He could hear the police, who are more like soldiers in South Africa, drilling on the barrack square quite near him. People were walking along the road and could see him quite easily. But he sat there so boldly on the thatch digging away with his knife that if any of the passers-by gave it a thought they must have mistaken him for someone repairing the thatch.

Having made a hole big enough for his body, he slipped

* Skebenga means foot-pad or bandit.

through it and landed on the trooper's bed. As soon as his eyes got accustomed to the semi-darkness he was delighted by the wonderful show of silver cups and trophies which he saw, and he lost no time in sweeping them all into a large empty kitbag which lay in a corner. He then poured himself out a double whiskey and soda from the trooper's decanter and siphon. He wrapped a spare bottle of whiskey in a swell-looking pullover and popped it into the kitbag.

Next he took some cigarettes and a packet of matches, a ·45 revolver with a holster and some ammunition. He took to pieces a fine looking shotgun, Lord Spivel's parting gift to his son, with a box of 100 cartridges, and dropped these into the kitbag. He took off the warder's uniform and put on some slacks and a silk khaki shirt of the trooper's. Then, unscrewing the lock on the inside of the hut, he opened the door just a crack, and peeped outside. The police were still drilling. He grabbed the kitbag, slipped round the back of the hut and vanished. He wasn't a second too soon: for, ten minutes after, the alarm came from the prison, and the remaining mounted police galloped out in search of the escaped criminal.

It was only after they had gone that Trooper Tomkinsley's personal servant returning to the hut, to which he had a spare key, noticed that the door was open and the place had been plundered. He shouted to the other natives: "That very same *skebenga*, Mahakaan, that you are all talking about, must have been here two minutes ago."

One white trooper, Blake, had been left in the camp to answer the telephone and keep order. He telephoned to the gaol, to which the bloodhounds had been sent, to have them brought back at once. But, before he had finished speaking, he heard them returning already in full cry. Straight to the foot of the mango tree they went.

Sergeant Bekker, who was with the bloodhounds, held a hasty consultation with Trooper Blake and ordered him

to remain still in camp, while he himself went with the dogs on the new track leading from the door of the hut.

"Look out," called Blake, "he's armed with Tomkinsley's shotgun and revolver."

"I'll try to keep out of range and let him have it with this," said the sergeant, slapping his rifle.

Mahakaan knew that they would put the hounds on his trail. Loaded as he was with the treasures, ammunition and arms in his kitbag, he had had a quarter of an hour's start. He reached a small stream and ran through it for some distance to put the dogs off the scent. He then loaded the ·45 and hitched the holster to his belt. He also fitted the shotgun together and loaded it. He noticed that the wind was blowing strongly towards the camp from where he was.

He rushed into a sugar-cane field between two rows of cane stems, and, with his head down, barged along through the crackling cane-trash, making a terrific uproar, until he came to some open fallow-land about five hundred yards farther on from where he entered the cane. The cane was full-grown; between the rows in which it was planted it was cluttered with the dried, inflammable leaves of five or six summers which still hung from the stems.

Mahakaan waited and listened, there was no sound for a long time. Then a long-drawn howl told him that the dogs had picked up his scent again. In a minute or so, they would be entering the cane. Mahakaan dropped his shotgun and kitbag, pulled out a match-box, and ran along the side of the cane-field setting fire to the under-trash, at intervals of about ten yards. Then he came back, picked up his kitbag and shotgun and began to run away across the fallow ground which separated him from another bush-skirted stream. He ran down this stream again to make the dogs lose his scent once more.

Sergeant Bekker's horse was with difficulty forcing its way between the cane-rows through the accumulated dead

cane-leaves. The sergeant's head was a little above the cane, through the crashing and roaring of which he could faintly hear the cry of the dogs a hundred yards on in advance.

Suddenly he saw ten or twelve puffs of smoke on ahead, and then some great whips of flame lashing the sky. He yelled hopelessly to the hounds, turned his horse, and put the spurs into its sides. He reached the edge of the cane just in time and was driven back some hundreds of yards or so from it, by the heat. The whole two hundred acres went up in a few minutes.

The dogs didn't manage to escape; they were either stifled by the smoke or burnt alive.

The fire roared through the cane at the rate of an express train, making the noise of several thousand machine guns, and lashing out with sixty-foot flames that doubled in the air and cracked like gigantic stock-whips.

As soon as the smoke was seen by the fire-sentries, the syren at the mill began to hoot the alarm. Lorries full of Indians were rushed to the spot armed with cane-knives to cut a break in the cane if necessary, in order to stop the fire from spreading to other parts of the estate. Twenty or thirty European overseers had galloped to the spot in a few minutes.

The fire burned some of the surrounding scrub but soon died out after it had consumed the cane. In sugar-cane even the juice burns, being made of sugar, and it is perhaps the most inflammable crop that can be grown.

Hours later Mahakaan was looking back with intense satisfaction, from a high hillside of grass and scrub, on to the distant scene of desolation which he had caused, when suddenly he heard the clop of hooves coming along the track. He dropped his kitbag, cocked his shotgun, and waited in ambush under the shade of a thick pathla shrub which encircled him with its boughs, leaving him almost invisible. But this was no hostile rider in search of him.

It was a riderless bay horse, saddled, covered with foam, and bearing a beautiful Lee-Enfield rifle in a gun-bucket, and ammunition in the saddlebags.

Mahakaan seized it at once by the bridle, mounted it and rode it off. It was a god-send to him, or perhaps a devil-send! He was now a one-man travelling fortress, far more dangerous than the mamba. He was doomed to be hanged if he were caught, and he could only be hanged once, no matter how many people he killed. Also it was to his interest to kill everybody he saw, in case anyone should bring the tidings of his whereabouts to the police, and start them on a new trail.

He felt almost certain he had burned the bloodhounds, and whatever police had followed him into the cane. He knew that he had burned his scent and he hoped the surviving police would think that he also had been burnt in the cane-fire. Anyhow it would take a long time to fetch more bloodhounds and by then he was determined there would be no trails to follow.

He decided to visit his cousin who was a female witch-doctor and lived in a cave near the deserted house, Meadow Bank, where once a millionaire had built a lovely pleasure garden with English woods and fruit trees.

When he reached his cousin's cave he found that she was away and had left no food or water there. Only bundles of medicine and charms, which even Mahakaan was afraid to touch. He waited for several hours but she didn't return though it was late at night, so he determined to settle for the time being at Meadow Bank.

The millionaire's house had a tower, and a courtyard open to the sky, with a fountain, like a Spanish house. Whatever curse there was on this place nobody knew, for it still remained the property of the millionaire who had returned to England. The doors were locked and all the windows boarded up. The flowers grew wild and ran riot. Monkeys lived on the beautiful lychees and loquats which

the millionaire had brought from China to plant in this distant paradise. Great big fir trees and pine trees from Europe had grown up round the house. It was out of the way from all other Europeans, Indian or native habitations and nobody ever visited it except the Jackson children once or twice a year to collect lychees. It would be a wonderful place to hide both man and horse for there was a well and plenty of grazing.

Mahakaan made for Meadow Bank and got there at midnight, but when he had broken open one of the doors, he found there was no rope to the well and he decided to ride down to the beach bush to cut a monkey-rope and give the horse a drink at the lagoon which, if brackish, was at least wet enough to quench thirst. He was terribly thirsty and so was the horse, and it was so late that he thought he ran no risk of discovery. He was terribly hungry too: but that must wait. The police would naturally think he had made for the town where it was easier to hide.

He dumped, at Meadow Bank, his kitbag of silver trophies, the rifle and the revolver, with everything else he had stolen, except the loaded shotgun, and rode down towards the Indian's grave and the boat-house.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE INDIAN'S GRAVE

AT midnight that same night, when the half-moon was about to rise, only John was awake at the Beach Cottage. John had made up his mind to cure himself of cowardice or perish in the attempt. He was going to walk clean round the strip of bush between the lagoon and the cottage and not only to pass the Indian's grave but to put some rice on it! He had written his name on a paper bag and filled it with rice, and he would leave it on the grave to prove he had been there.

He crept into his mother's room and stole her sun-glasses, because he remembered what Willem had speculated about the hurtfulness to the eyes of the vapour of which ghosts were made. He put the rice in his pocket, then he sneaked along to the gun cupboard and took out one of the three twelve-bore shotguns, loading both barrels with heavy SSG buckshot. He stole along the verandah which creaked horribly under him but waked nobody. He tried to comfort himself with the thought that the rice might disarm the hostility of the ghost, if it actually existed.

He went out under the milk-wood tree and listened. There was only a faint wind in the branches. He walked about fifty yards farther. A whole countryside of crickets and skwanshaws was croaking away evenly, keeping time with the twinkle of the stars overhead; and from far away he could hear the distant hooting of frogs from the lagoon, as the wind was blowing from that direction.

He decided to walk along by the side of the bush and then between the bush and the sugar-cane. Now and again

he heard the chirr of the nightjar and then it seemed that there was a little child sobbing in a tree to his left. It sounded almost human but he knew it must be a bush-baby or lemur, and he forced himself to go beyond it. By now his teeth were fairly chattering.

There was a completely dark patch ahead, where the forest overhung the path, and he did not want to go through it, but he heard something squeak in the undergrowth behind him and he thought it might be a bushpig, so he was afraid to retrace his steps. He stood there for a long time trying to decide to see it through. Now there came several more squeaks and squeals from different places behind him, whether it was from pigs or mongooses he did not know, but the squeakings shifted him a bit farther on his way, and he was scared to return past them.

He was now well into the dark tunnel where the bush overhung one side of the path and the sugar-cane the other.

Suddenly his hair rose on end and he raised his gun to his shoulder. In front of him were two luminous eyes of greenish lustre which seemed to stare with malignant hatred into his very soul. His thumb pressed the safety catch but it would not shift so he remained frozen with terror pointing his gun uselessly at the horrible apparition. "The *tiger*!" he thought, and he wished to yell out for help but his voice wouldn't come at all.

Then the most extraordinary thing happened: one of the eyes winked about six times and began sailing away from the other right up into the branches. What had terrified him so much had only been a couple of fire-flies! They had both been sitting about four inches apart at the same level, on two separate leaves of sugar-cane which drooped over the path and which, moving ever so gently in the faint wind, gave the impression of living eyes.

With a gasp of relief John devoutly thanked heaven. But he was taking no further risks about the safety catch

and, as he emerged from the overhanging tunnel into the light of a rising half-moon, he pushed up the safety catch with the help of a stone which he picked up from the ground. The sweat had fairly poured off him, but the relief was so great that he felt new courage.

There is no kind of grass, leaf or tree which makes so much noise as sugar-cane. It is always rustling even when there is no wind. Nothing can move through it without making a hundred times more noise than if it were moving through ordinary scrub. Even the living leaves of sugar-cane crackle like paper when anything brushes past them, and the dead leaves, which hang down and clutter up the intervening space between the stems, make even more noise. So that a man or a buck moving through sugar-cane makes a crackling sort of roar like a big fire makes blazing through dry reeds.

John had scarcely recovered his composure when something startled a whole herd of Javan deer, which have somehow run wild and multiplied in the Natal cane-fields, like the rabbits in Australia. Forty of these great beasts, which seldom come so near to the coast, suddenly stampeded away through the cane, leaving John to puzzle out the reason of the uproar. He had been so thoroughly frightened before by the "eyes" that whatever happened now seemed less frightening.

He had nearly reached the Indian's grave when he heard a husky cough just in front of him. "Oh, my goodness me," thought poor John, "what a fool I was to try to be brave. Here it comes at last—the old Indian's ghost!"

He was torn between the idea of offering it the rice to get on the right side of it, or of letting it have both barrels at once, if it showed itself. It might not like the rice, especially as it wasn't cooked and had no curry with it: so in the end he decided to give it both barrels. He peered ahead along the silvery glistening fringe of the sugar-field and there, in the moonlight, a silvery looking shape

separated itself from the shadow of the trees and threw a shadow of its own on the ground. It gave another cough and turned sideways. Sure enough that must be the Indian's ghost on all fours crawling out from the grave, although the grave was some forty yards beyond.

" Babang! " John pulled both triggers simultaneously. The double kick of the two barrels sent him sprawling on his back, and the gun leaped into the air from his chest. He lay for some seconds paralysed with fear; then he sat up and rubbed his shoulder. Presently he picked up the gun and reloaded it with two more cartridges from his pocket. He was still alive and the ghost hadn't hurt him. He was so infinitely less frightened than he had been at any other moment since he had left the house, that he really felt quite brave. He wondered even if anyone had been wakened by the shot at the house since, though there was a slight hill between him and it, the wind was blowing in that direction.

He then went forward to where the ghost had been and to his utter amazement three yards from the path lay the huge dead body of a deer: he felt it and it was still warm. Dark patches of blood glistened in the moonlight on the path. He was certain he had fired at no such object; it had been something lighter in colour, but he had given up trying to puzzle out things.

The boat-house was only a few yards away and a little farther on was the Indian's grave, with nothing stirring. He felt sorry now for having given both barrels to the ghost, and couldn't believe he had shot the deer. He covered the grave with his shotgun, as he approached, but nothing happened. He pulled out the packet of rice and put it on the grave of the Indian: and he was amazed to hear himself saying in quite a normal voice: " Well, that's that! "

The frogs began making the din of a hundred locomotive whistles, then suddenly stopped. Something splashed in the lagoon, probably a mullet jumping.

" Well, now it's only a matter of getting back," thought John. " I don't want any more bush-frights so I'll go back along the beach."

He only had a hundred yards to go through the bush along a wide buck path which led to the shore, then everything would be quite plain sailing. But he had not gone fifty yards towards the shore when immediately above his head the branches crashed, a white shape rose for a second into the moonlight, and the most piercing and desolating cry, like that of a lost soul being flung down into the bottomless pit of damnation, thrilled through the night.

John ran for the beach and when he got there, he made for home. Somehow in his panic he did not throw the gun away but instinctively hung on to it, and arrived back still carrying it. He had seen and heard the ghost all right, or so he believed, not knowing that the cry he had heard had really come from the rarest of African birds, the great white fishing-owl which is almost as big as a vulture.

On reaching home he replaced the gun, crept back to his bed and was soon fast asleep. The only thing he'd forgotten were his mother's glasses, which had fallen off when the kick of the gun had knocked him backwards.

The next morning was to clear up some of the mysteries of the preceding night: but there were many more queer happenings that night, and everything seemed to centre round the Indian's grave.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE INSANGOMA OR WITCH-WOMAN

IT was only half an hour after John had placed his paper bag of rice on the grave and had rushed off in a panic, brought on by the screeching of the fishing-owl, that Mahakaan came along.

The moon was high; he and his horse had drunk at the brink of the lagoon, but he was still very hungry.

As he was passing the Indian's grave, he noticed the pots of curry and rice, which had been freshly filled the day before though, as the children had noticed, the birds had had a good snack at the rice. He tied his horse where it could crop some of the cane-tips and, taking his shotgun and glowering around to make sure that he was unobserved, he went to the grave. There he put his hand into the pots and felt that they were half-full.

With the moonlight glinting on the shotgun, which he leaned beside him on the mound, the murderer, his hunger overcoming his fear, sat on the Indian's grave holding a bronze pot between his knees, and wolfed the ghost's dinner with silent satisfaction. When he had finished the pot of rice he started on the pot of curry, and did not put it down until he had wiped it clean. He did not notice John's paper bag, which was brown.

If only John had been half an hour later, he would have seen this phantom-like shape sitting on the grave at his grisly meal, and he couldn't have helped mistaking it for the Indian's ghost! Perhaps he would have let fly both barrels again and saved the police a great deal of trouble.

Mahakaan, having satisfied his hunger, walked to the

edge of the bush and began to cut several monkey-ropes. In doing so, he shook the loftiest branches of one of the tallest trees from which he was pulling down the monkey-rope. This disturbed the great white fishing-owl. Again the devilish yell was heard: the ghost's dinner almost turned in Mahakaan's stomach: and though he had, till that day, feared neither God, Man, Devil, nor Ghost, he truly believed that it was the expostulation of the ghost at being cheated of its dinner.

He backed away to his horse with his shotgun pointed defensively towards the devilish outcry. His hair was bristling and his teeth chattering: but he kept his head enough to pull the four monkey-ropes after him. The horse was rearing and plunging with fright, at the outcry of the fishing-owl, but now all was suddenly silent again, and Mahakaan was able to calm it.

He twisted the ropes into a great coil and strapped them to his saddle with one of the loose straps which had held the gun-bucket. He mounted and, with the butt of the shotgun on his right thigh, the barrel in his right hand, and the reins in his left, he cantered along the path, by which he had come, back to Meadow Bank. This path, luckily for him, was strewn with cane-trash and left no tracks.

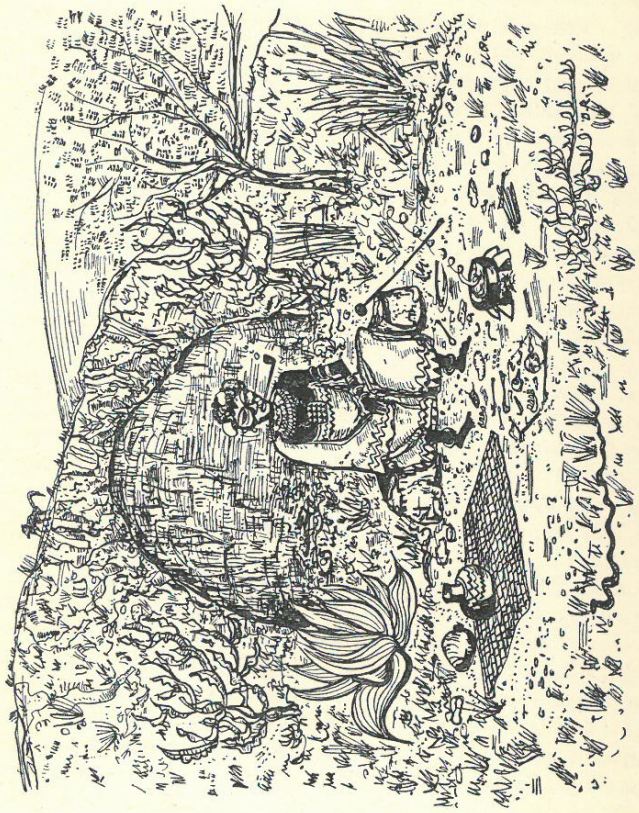
When he was passing by the cave he saw a faint light and knew that his cousin the *Insangoma* was back. He rode up to the mouth of the cave. " Greetings, *Insangoma*," he cried.

" Hullo, Mahakaan, whom have you been killing now? " she responded, coming out into the moonlight.

" Only a warder, and two or three police dogs, and perhaps some white policemen who followed me in to the cane-field that I burned," he replied.

" Oh, was that you who lit that fire? I saw it in the distance," she said, leading him by the wrists into the cave.

The firelight showed her to be a middle-aged woman, slightly emaciated, yet handsome, had her face not been disfigured with hideous daubs of white clay so that the



INSANGOMA—THE WITCH

sockets of her eyes appeared to look from a white skull. On her head she wore a cluster of blown-up dried bladders from the intestines of baboons and other beasts.

"Where were you tonight?" Mahakaan enquired. "I have some presents for you. I came here and you were away."

"Yes," she said, "I am making some strong medicine to kill the white man's sugar-cane, I am trying to make a big thunderstorm and a flood. By the way, my little pet killed a policeman today," she added.

"What! the mamba? Was that how I got my horse? I found a policeman's horse making its way back to camp, it was all in a sweat when I caught it," said Mahakaan, "and this is it here."

"Yes, I found the policeman's body half in the water at the foot of the cliff. The mamba had struck him high up in the neck while he was in the saddle: and he must have swooned and fallen off his saddle down the steep bank into the water. The horse would have panicked at once. I pulled the body into the reeds. The fishes will finish it off before it can be found."

"Well," said the *skebenga*. "I am going to hide in the rich man's empty house. While he is away, this is nobody's land. They say he will never come back."

"If you are going to hide around here, you are not to use any fire-arms," stipulated the *Insangoma*. "They would call attention not only to your presence—but perhaps to mine. I encourage that mamba because he keeps people away from this district. This land does not belong to anybody until the rich man returns, except to me and the mamba. I leave him some of the chickens that my consulting patients bring me for a fee. I tie them up with a thread and he comes and eats them. Now if you're going to hang around here you will have to be very quiet indeed. You must not shoot your food."

"But I must eat," protested Mahakaan.

" I will feed you every night—silently. I hate the Europeans as much as you—but we must be careful. Why! did not the white doctor, the brother of the sugar-cane boss, make better three children that I had made sick and intended should die? It's no use pretending that they haven't got good magic, as strong as ours, maybe. Also you are going to get rid of that horse! I don't want him leaving his tracks around here."

Mahakaan, who was also a witch-doctor, but not such a high-brow one, seemed to cringe before the *Insangoma*. She let him untie the monkey-ropes; he fished a hot *madumbi*, or native potato,* out of the pot, went to the horse, stroked it, then suddenly clapped the hot *madumbi* under the animal's tail.

The poor horse, feeling something burning him, slapped his tail all the tighter to his hindquarters and got burnt even worse—so that he bolted as hard as he could, holding the potato well in place, till it was cool again. He galloped through bush, sugar-cane, scrub and rivers, and did not stop until he was tired, about fifteen miles away. Some natives found him on the main road next morning and restored him to the police.

" That's that," said the *Insangoma*. " Now you'd better fetch me all your fire-arms."

Mahakaan went off quite obediently but he only fetched the rifle and the revolver. He kept back the shotgun in case of emergency.

" I'll give you these back when you finally clear off from here," the *Insangoma* said, as she took the rifle and revolver. " By the way," she added, " a pair of leopards have had some cubs down there by the mamba's precipice. I don't know where they've turned up from but they've been about here three weeks or so. So don't go mixing yourself up with any trouble. Bring me the treasures you told me of, and I'll hide them for you."

* Taro or yam.

Mahakaan brought the kitbag full of silver things.

" By and by we shall sell them," said the *Insangoma*, " to a Suluman that I know in the town."

Mahakaan was forced to obey the *Insangoma* meekly. All day long he hid in the bush and ate a few mushrooms, and at night he could only get a little " mealy meal "* from her. He was very hungry for meat but he stayed like that for several days on low diet. Then he found the fresh kill of one of the leopards, a duiker ewe, and cut a leg off it.

He took to following the she-leopard's tracks and eating from the fresh carcasses she killed, when she returned to her young. He was too much afraid of the *Insangoma* ever to use his shotgun to kill game or guinea-fowl, but he kept it loaded for fear of the police.

*Maize or indian corn.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE HUNT

MICHAEL and Willem were awake before daybreak after the night when John went to the Indian's grave. Michael went to wake John and Billy, but John only mumbled and rolled over. Billy got up at once. Michael looked at John and said, shaking his head: " Fancy being such a milksop! He will never make a hunter or a soldier. Come on, Billy, perhaps today you will get your first buck: and perhaps Willem or I will kill our first *tiger*."

Suddenly, while they were drinking some hot tea, they heard a horse's hooves outside. It was Trooper Blake.

" Say, you fellows," he asked. " Did any of you see Trooper Tomkinsley here yesterday? "

" Yes," said Michael, " he went off about five in the afternoon."

" But he never came back to camp! " exclaimed Blake, " and there hasn't been any sign of him or his horse since he left."

" Oh, I expect he'll turn up all right," said Michael, casually, " come along with us. We think there's a *tiger* in this strip of bush, and we need an extra rifle. Anyway just wait for half an hour or so. It won't take longer to beat the bush between the lagoon and here. They'll have to start beating from the lagoon end because the wind is blowing from there."

Just then the natives turned up from Mpathla's place, about sixteen of them, all fully armed, with one or two assegais and knobkerries apiece. They were singing, dancing and leaping into the air and their dogs too had

caught their excitement. They were followed by their women bearing calabashes full of beer.

" Well, I suppose I may as well come along," said Trooper Blake. " I'm not only looking for Tomkinsley but also the alarm is out for Mahakaan, the *skebanga* who murdered the two cousins of Mpathla here to get medicine out of their bodies. He was chief of the Ninevite gang of ritual murderers."

" A murderer loose about! " exclaimed Willem.

" Yes, he escaped from the condemned cell yesterday and stole half of Tomkinsley's belongings, and then made off into the cane, which he set on fire. The bloodhounds that we had out after him were burnt alive, and the Sergeant had a narrow escape."

" Do you think he's round here? " asked Michael.

" There's no saying where he may be hiding. He's armed, too, with Tomkinsley's revolver and shotgun. There is going to be a hundred pounds reward for his capture, dead or alive."

Blake did not know, of course, of the curious coincidence whereby Mahakaan had walked into further property belonging to Tomkinsley.

" Well, we're all ready," said Michael. " If you like to profit by our beating the bush to see if your criminal is hiding here, you're welcome, Trooper Blake."

" It's a good excuse to come hunting anyway," laughed the trooper.

" Come on, then. I shall take Billy and Vemvan and wait at the fork of the two big buckpaths—the one going through the middle and the one that crosses the bush from the cane to the sea. We shall sit at the top of the hill, so that we can see everything that crosses the path on both sides."

" Shall I come with you? " asked Willem.

" No. Quite as many, if not more buck will try to cross from the bush into the cane, so you might as well go with the beaters and walk along just ahead of them."

"And where do you want me?" enquired Trooper Blake, amused by Michael's seriousness.

"I think you should go right to the back of the beaters and come along behind them on the central path, because a lot of buck will be lying still and doubling back after the beaters have passed them. Also it will be the best place for dealing with your runaway criminal if the beaters unearth him. They'll want you on the spot."

Michael explained to the natives that it might be a man-hunt as well as a buck-hunt: and when they heard that it was Mahakaan, the deadly enemy of their tribe and the killer of Mpathla's two cousins, who had escaped, it re-doubled their keenness—especially Mpathla's.

The women retired with their pots of beer to Nyali's quarters to await the outcome of the hunt. Tom remained to guard the house. Michael, Billy and Vemvan went along the beach to take up their post. Vemvan had Moya on a leash, it was his idea to bring Billy this way because it was where the big buck browsed.

They soon came to the opening of the buck path. Michael gave Billy the shotgun and kept the rifle; he pushed Billy in front and whispered: "Keep your eyes skinned, this is where Vemvan says the big one feeds. We are just as likely to see anything now as when they are beating the bush."

They hadn't gone ten yards into the bush when Mike touched Billy's shoulder and pointed over it into the thick jungle. Billy was looking for a buck, that is, for something horizontal with a head and horns rising from it. But all he could see was a lot of undergrowth and what seemed to be two tree trunks rising up into their own leaves which hid them about six feet from the earth. Then there was just the faintest flicker of a movement from one of the seeming tree trunks: and Billy suddenly saw that it was a magnificent bush-buck ram.

Such is the magic of the protective colouring of most

animals of the bush and the veld that, as long as it is immobile, it is virtually invisible.

As soon as Billy saw the flicker of the buck's skin shaking the flies off, he saw the whole buck complete. It was standing up on its hind legs, with its feet against the trunk of a tree of the same thickness and colour as its own body, and browsing on the lower leaves. It was this unfamiliar position and its likeness to the trunk that had helped to camouflage it so perfectly.

Billy, who was shorter than the gun itself, had quite a job to push the safety catch and pull the gun up to his shoulder. When he did so the buck, already suspicious, was both sniffing the air and listening. Billy pulled the trigger; the gun kicked him over and the buck disappeared in a crash and a crackle of twigs. Mike picked up Billy and put the shotgun back in his hand.

"Hard luck, Billy," he said "but you may have hit it. Let's go and see if there's any blood."

Michael had been nine when he shot his first buck but he remembered that he had often missed previously and that the gun used to kick him over too; so he did not laugh at his brother, who was white and trembling with excitement.

Billy reloaded his right barrel, and they went to examine the spot where the buck had been and there, sure enough, were splashes of blood on some of the twigs.

"We shall have to wait till the beaters come," said Michael, "before we go after it. Otherwise we may miss the *tiger*."

He was just saying this when with its mane bristling like a great white fan, out of the undergrowth where it had disappeared, the wounded bush-buck, the bravest and, for its size, the most dangerous of all African antelopes, came charging at them with the speed of a tennis ball. Vemvan unleashed his dog, who rushed at the buck. Michael could not use his rifle as Billy was in the way.

Billy raised his gun again and fired while the buck was about twenty yards away but it was either a clean miss or made no impression on a vulnerable part. Michael finally succeeded in getting in front of Billy when the buck was barely three yards from him with its stiletto sharp horns lowered. The bullet from his rifle—he had filed the points of his bullets to make them expand—hit the buck in the forehead lifting off its two horns on a shield of bone, passed through the skull and the neck and the chest and, finally striking a rib, emerged leaving a hole the size of an orange. The buck crumpled directly at their feet. Vemvan somewhat redundantly threw his assegai too. But with a bush-buck one should take no chances. It was Billy's buck, since he had drawn first blood. Mike picked up the horns and a lovely pair they were too; they had been blown about ten yards away.

"Come on! we must get into our place. Leave everything here," ordered Michael, "for the beaters to carry." With that Michael, Billy and Vemvan went on to the crossing of the paths, where they hid behind a bush with a good two-way view on each side of the broad path, which was lateral to the strip of bush.

As they led the beaters along towards the lagoon Willem noticed the fresh tracks of a little boy's sandshoes on the path between the cane and the bush. Pointing them out to Trooper Blake he said:

"That's queer. Can't be from this morning because John's in bed and Billy went round by the beach with Mike. Yet it looks only an hour or two old."

A little farther on he picked up Mrs. Jackson's dark spectacles, where John had been kicked over by the shotgun.

"More mysteries, eh?" remarked Trooper Blake. "But what's this?" he cried pointing twenty yards farther on to the dead deer.

They examined the body.

"This wasn't shot," said Trooper Blake. "Neck broken: and those are tooth-marks. That's your *tiger* all right, but this deer was killed some hours ago, its joints are stiff and yet none of it has been eaten."

"Look, there's more blood over there," cried Willem, stepping into the long grass, "and here, heaven's above! here's the *tiger* we're hunting, as dead as a doornail!"

"And here's the kid's sandshoe-spoor," said Blake, "going straight past the deer and printed in the deer's blood on the sand. So the kid was here since the *tiger* killed the deer, not before! But what killed the *tiger*?"

"Why, buckshot. Look!" shouted Willem, excitedly, "it's peppered all over. It was standing there when it was shot. It was standing over the dead deer. And when it was shot—look at its tracks—it kicked off with one terrific leap and fell dead there in the long grass five yards away. Did you say Mahakaan stole a shotgun? He may be mixed up in this."

"The only human spoor that's been here since the last rain is that kid's sandshoes," said Blake, "and they're fresher than the leopard's tracks, because they go right over them; look. It beats me!"

The natives by this time had all gathered round and were completely astounded. "*Mame Ngaulano*!" they shouted; this was their local cry of triumph whenever meat was killed in a hunt. But Willem silenced them angrily.

"Don't spoil the hunt by shouting before you've got into your proper places, or you probably won't get any more meat at all. You'll frighten it all the wrong way. Leave the deer and the *tiger* and we'll come back for them after. The *tiger's* mate may be in this bush."

It was at this moment that Billy's first shot rang out, followed by the second, and then by Michael's. This reminded them all that they had work in hand and they hurried on after Willem and Blake.

They had now come to the path down which Mahakaan had ridden and Willem saw the spoor of the horse. "Aren't those Government horse-shoes?" he asked Blake. "Looks as if Tomkinsley came back here after he passed us last night. He may have been chasing the *tiger*."

"I don't know; it's a headache to me," said Blake, "I can't make out anything. Let's see if he dismounted."

"Here's where the horse was tethered and browsed these cane-tops," said Willem, "but that's a native's track."

A yell from Mpathla almost chilled their marrow. "*Masondo ga* Mahakaan!" (Mahakaan's tracks) he cried.

"How do you know?" asked Willem.

"Mahakaan has lost the second toe on his left foot," said Mpathla.

The tracks of the bare feet, with the gap of the missing toe, were now mingled with those of the child's shoes. They followed both tracks down to the Indian's grave and there Willem saw a little brown paper bag with rice in it and some writing on it. He read:

"Rice for Indian's Ghost
from
John Jackson"

Willem said: "I know something about this, but I'll tell you after. First let's spoor Mahakaan."

Though Mahakaan's and the horse's spoor were clear enough on the sand, there was absolutely no indication of the way they had finally taken either through the grass, the cane, or the cane-trash, which littered the path by which Mahakaan had come to join the path John had taken, and by which Mahakaan had also returned.

They decided to go on with the hunt.

"If you see Mahakaan," said Blake, "shoot to kill."

"And you shoot anything you see, except a bush-buck

ewe or an Inyala," said Willem. "We shall want plenty of meat to pay these good natives for helping us. And Michael must be getting impatient."

The natives made a line through the bush from the boat-house to the sea and they advanced chanting rhythmically while they smashed at the undergrowth with their sticks. Their dogs yelped and howled so that wild things of the forest either fled as before a fire, or else lay numb with fright in the undergrowth, and when the beaters had passed them, ran back in the other direction.

A huge boar rushed past Willem trying to get into the sugar-cane and heading five smaller bush-pigs. Willem killed it stone dead with a running shot and the other five pigs turned back into the bush once more.

Two bush-buck doubled back to Trooper Blake. The one he daren't shoot because it was in the direction of the beaters, but he got the other one with the third of three shots from his rifle, which traversed its body as it ran from him, tail-on, killing it instantly.

More and more shots began to ring out and mix with the savage rhythm of the beaters' chants. A troop of monkeys followed by another troop of mongooses scurried past Michael, Billy and Vemvan. A half-grown bush-buck ram flashed past which Michael missed with his rifle. Then a beautiful green mamba shot like an arrow from one tree to another slipping along through the boughs at a prodigious speed till Michael, grabbing the shotgun from Billy, brought it to the ground slashing in its death-agony at its own wound and filling it with venom as deadly to itself as it would have been to others.

By the time the beater had reached the transverse path where Michael waited, hunters and beaters had killed five bush-buck between them, one bush-pig, a big green mamba nine feet long, and seven peeties.

After that of the unknown killer of the *tiger*, the natives



"THE NATIVES WERE DANCING WAR DANCES . . ."

sang Billy's praise the loudest. Michael called a stop to the hunt, and then was informed of the finding of the dead *tiger* and the deer, of the strange puzzle of the tracks, Mrs. Jackson's spectacles, and finally, the packet of rice on the grave.

"If you ask me," said Willem, "if you ask me why John was so sleepy this morning it was because he had been doing a spot of tiger-shooting last night and also hunting ghosts—otherwise why did he take the goggles if not to protect his eyes?"

"What!" exclaimed Michael astounded.

"Yes. Don't you remember scolding him for saying he wasn't scared? And if you ask me any more, well, I think John came within two inches of lagging the famous tiger-man, Mahakaan, too, if there is any truth in tracks. That John of yours will win the V.C. one of these days."

Michael could scarcely believe his ears. They went back home and found John drinking his morning coffee.

"John, did you kill a *tiger* last night?" Michael asked. "And did you go to the Indian's grave?"

"I went to the grave," said John, "and I fired at the Indian's ghost but I only killed a deer."

"No, it was a *tiger* that killed the deer," said Willem, "and you killed the *tiger*!"

"Come and see it," said Billy, "and come and see my fine buck. It's the big one we saw the day we came here."

They then explained to John how the *tiger* had jumped into the tall grass when he shot it, so that he only saw the deer. Michael clapped John on the shoulder. "Sorry I called you a funk," he said. "You're the bravest of the lot of us, even braver than Willem."

"That's true," said Willem, shaking his hand." Come and hear what the natives are singing about you."

Vemvan had to return to the herding of the cattle and left the party at that moment. They went up to Nyali's hut and found the natives skinning the *tiger* and the bucks. They were all rejoicing, drinking beer and dancing war-dances. They had the dead Javan deer roasting whole over a huge fire and they were singing about John whom they had given a new name, *Dubulingwe*, or tiger-killer. Nyali sang his praises: and so did all the men and women from Mpathla's kraal.

Trooper Blake rode off almost at once to search for Mahakaan and the missing trooper. Native police were sent down to protect Mrs. Jackson and the children while Mahakaan was at large, so Michael was as free as before.

Later in the day Trooper Blake discovered Trooper Tomkinsley's body. Though the *Insangoma* had tried to hide it under the water, some permangate of potash which he carried in his riding breeches pocket, ironically enough as a remedy for snake-bite, on being thrust into the water had turned red and stained it for many yards around. Trooper Blake had mistaken the stain for blood and poking among the reeds had discovered his dead comrade's body. Thus, accidentally, the wiles of the *Insangoma* were thwarted.

The body was removed to the camp. The inquest proved that Tomkinsley must have died almost immediately as the result of a bite, in a vein in the neck, from a mamba. He had gone black as a result of the venom of which he had received enough to kill sixty men. No foul play was suspected. It was thought that the trooper must have rolled into the water in convulsions and landed of his own accord where they found him. His death was soon known down at the beach cottage, from the native police who came to relieve those on duty.

Nothing more was heard of Mahakaan for a few days and it was presumed he had escaped into the town. The

rest of that day was spent by the natives feasting, carousing and dancing, and by Mrs. Jackson and Mary curing and smoking the venison of which they had a large store.

Mary worked hard, trying to keep her mind off Tomkinsley's sad end.

Willem rode home taking a fine bush-buck over the front of his saddle to his father and mother.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE DISCOVERY

VERY soon Mahakaan began to regret having given up, so tamely, the silver cups and the rifle and revolver to the *Insangoma*. Also for having obeyed her command and sent the trooper's horse away. He missed the horse especially, because he had a poisoned foot from having trodden on a thorn.

He thought that the *Insangoma* might mean to keep the silver cups, and she had him completely in her power. He was hungry, too; the leopard had killed no more meat, and Mahakaan was sick of mealy-meal.

He sat in the empty room at Meadow Bank, and began thinking over all his woes. This made him very miserable, when he suddenly remembered the bottle of whiskey, wrapped in the pullover, which he hadn't handed over to the *Insangoma*. It was stowed away, with the shotgun, which he had also kept back, under a loose board in the corner of the room.

Now he lifted the board and got out both shotgun and whiskey.

He drank the whiskey neat, straight out of the bottle. Soon he began to feel rather more cheerful but, after he had drunk about half the bottle, the sense of his wrongs came down on him and he grew angry—his anger being directed, of course, towards his cousin, the *Insangoma*.

" Why," he asked the empty room, " when I have taken all these risks and been so clever, should she, who has done nothing, benefit? "

He looked round him at the yellowing walls and blackened fireplace but, as neither made any response, he took another drink or two. Now he was not only angry, but full of courage.

" If my cousin," he told the fireplace, " were as great a witch as she thinks she is, she would know that I had kept back this shotgun and this whiskey. But she doesn't know," he informed the discoloured walls, and went off into a paroxysm of triumphant laughter. " Ha, ha! Ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha! " And, this time the room responded, repeating his mirth in ghostly echoes.

It encouraged Mahakaan to feel that he had an ally, or rather a whole host of allies, so he finished the whiskey, whirled the bottle round his head and flung it into the fireplace, where it broke into several pieces. " I'm not afraid," he said, addressing the broken bottle. " You needn't think I am," and, as the bottle kept its thoughts to itself, " I shall go now and deal with the *Insangoma*."

He picked up the shotgun, left the house and started striding purposefully, if a little unsteadily, towards the cave. But, when he drew near, some of his courage ebbed away, and he stopped and hid the shotgun in a thick pathla bush, making sure that the warder's knife was safely in his pocket.

The *Insangoma* met him at the entrance to the cave and, at that moment, a honey-guide flew over their heads, calling loudly.

" Be off with you," cried the *Insangoma*, and started cursing the bird.

" Oh, don't curse the honey-guide," implored Mahakaan, feeling suddenly frightened, in spite of all the spirit he had swallowed.

" Be off with you," again cried the *Insangoma*, this time hurling a stone at the bird.

" I don't like this at all," moaned Mahakaan. " You must be mad to insult a honey-guide."

But the *Insangoma* only laughed. " My medicine is too strong," she boasted, " no honey-guide can harm me."

" Oh, can't it," sneered Mahakaan, with an evil glint in his eyes. He had just remembered the things he had told the empty room about his disbelief in his cousin's magic powers, and it heartened him.

But what neither of them knew was that the harm had been done, even before the *Insangoma* had insulted the bird, perhaps because she had treated it with scorn before—who knows? For, following that honey-guide was Vemvan, and he was now on the rock, thirty feet above the *Insangoma's* cave.

Vemvan heard the voices below him and, crawling to the edge of the rock, he peered over. He didn't see Mahakaan, who was hidden from him by a piece of overhanging scrub, but what he did see held him spell-bound.

The clay-painted face, with the bladder-covered head above it, was indeed a terrifying sight, and Vemvan dared not move, in case she should see him and put a curse on him.

He lay rigid, trying to keep his teeth from chattering, knowing that the slightest movement would betray him. And certainly, if either of the two below became aware of his presence, his life would not be worth much.

" What do you want? " asked the *Insangoma* in a threatening voice, and Vemvan, thinking that, being a witch, she knew he was there and was addressing him, was about to rise up and implore her not to curse him, when Mahakaan answered.

" I want my guns and some of the little shining buckets," he said. " I'm going away now."

" Go back to Meadow Bank and I will decide what you are to do," commanded the *Insangoma*.

" Give me my buckets," growled Mahakaan, his anger rising again.

" You would dare to disobey me! " shrilled the *Insangoma*,

taking a step towards the man, which took her out of Vemvan's sight.

Immediately Vemvan slithered back along the rock. The sweat was pouring off him in rivers and he hardly dared to breathe. He reached the hillside and crept away as fast as he could, making a wide détour. He took no notice of the honey-guide, which was still calling him, but which he now thought must be a bad kind of bird, believing that it had led him deliberately to the witch.

He had not understood much of what had been said, because he had been too terrified to listen properly, but he had gathered a blurred impression that the man was a native, who possessed guns and lived at Meadow Bank, and he put him down, in his mind, as a policeman.

He was going to tell Nyali all about his adventure, when he got back to the Beach Cottage, but first he had to attend to his herd, and there he discovered that a *tiger* had taken one of the calves and he found traces where it had been dragged towards the mamba's precipice. He dared not track it any farther, in case he should come on the *tiger*, but he rushed straight back and reported it to Michael.

" So, our *tiger has* got a mate! I thought so," said Michael. " I must deal with her as soon as possible."

" You will take me with you, *Inkosasan*?* " implored Vemvan.

" Of course. You found the tracks; besides, I shall need you."

This made Vemvan feel very excited and important, and it put the incident at the *Insangoma's* cave right out of his head.

But that evening, sitting safely by the fire with Nayli, Tom and the native police boys, who were guarding the cottage, he remembered it again and, having got over his fright, mentioned, quite casually, that another police boy, with guns, was at the rich man's house.

* Master.

" That's the first I've heard of it," said one of the police boys.

They questioned Vemvan as to how he knew this, and Vemvan, rather reluctantly, unfolded the story of his adventure of that morning. He didn't like speaking of it to so many people, because it involved the witch, of whom he was so much afraid. It would have been different whispering it to Nyali, when they were alone. But they got it all out of him and, when he had finished, Tom said:

" That sounds like Mahakaan."

" Mahakaan! The murderer! " gasped Vemvan, and shuddered as he realised in what double peril he had been. " That *must* have been an evil honey-guide! "

One of the native police rode straight back to camp to report, and Tom and Vemvan went to tell Michael.

Michael was sitting at his desk, looking rather like a witch-doctor himself. He had a jumble of wires and tiny fly-hooks on his left side. On his right was a tin of strychnine and, tied to the leg of the desk, was a spring chicken which was picking at a plateful of maize.

They told Michael the story, but Michael didn't seem very much impressed with it. All he said was: " Oh, well, the police will probably surround Meadow Bank tomorrow and, if Mahakaan is really there, they'll get him."

" I hope they do," said Tom fervently.

" Yes," murmured Michael absently. His mind was on his great experiment for getting the mamba, which he meant to put into practice next day, when he and Vemvan went after the leopard. " I shall want you early, Vemvan," he said. " We must leave before dawn, and I'm taking all this medicine with me." He swept his hand over the desk.

" You go after *tiger*, Master Michael? " asked Tom.

" Yes, and perhaps I shall get something else as well," Michael chuckled.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

AT THE PRECIPICE

WHAT happened between Mahakaan and the *Insangoma* was never known except that the police passing by the cave found the *Insangoma* lying dead with a couple of knife wounds in her back. In her cave they only found some smoky " charms," a bottle of hippo's fat, bladders, dead men's teeth, dried kingfisher's hearts, lories' feathers, the dried tongues of pythons, the gizzard of a turkey buzzard, and other medicinal, or supposedly magical, charms.

They surrounded the big empty house, closed in on it, searched it and found nothing, except traces of some one having broken in and lived there. Then they started searching the gardens, the wells and the outhouses, which took all the morning. But Mahakaan had already moved.

Michael left long before sunrise, early in the morning, on his horse Swap, with the herdboy hanging on behind him clutching the chicken in a sack.

They came to the mamba's precipice before the sun was up, and they walked round the top of it, between the sugar-cane and the bush which crowned it, where there was a buck-path of almost bare ground. Michael tethered Swap inside the sugar-cane. The wind was making such a noise through the cane, that any movements Swap made could not be heard. Then Michael took the shotgun and the sacks, and they soon found a place where something had been dragged across the buck-path leaving a few spots of blood. They followed it down the side of the precipice and there they found the carcase of the calf hanging in the



" MAHAKAAN—THE SKEBENGA "

low fork of a tree. A small portion of the hind leg had been eaten.

Michael made several incisions in the carcase and rubbed in the strychnine and then they both went on farther down the precipice clinging by the stems of aloes and monkey-ropes. All the time they had been climbing down, " Cheep, cheep, cheep, cheep," kept on crying the chicken in the sack.

When they got to the part where the precipice fell sheer, Michael said : " This will do," and they tied the chicken to an aloe stem with the long trace of tiny hooks wound under the feathers. Having done this, they climbed down along the ridge of the precipice sideways to where they had left Swap. They sat down just inside the cane and waited. It was still frosty and the mamba would not yet be stirring.

Then suddenly they thought they heard another horse approaching; there was a silvery jingling sound, but no clop of hooves. Michael and Vemvan stayed dead-still listening, and Michael, laying his hand on Swap, gave him the touch with which he had trained him to keep motionless.

It was a pedestrian who passed them carrying a huge sack with a rifle slung over his shoulder and a shotgun in one hand. It was the things in the sack that were jingling. There was no horse. When he came to the track where something had been dragged across the road, he stopped and unslung his rifle and his sack; laying them down, he followed the track, taking only his shotgun.

He returned a few minutes later eating some bits of meat which he had cut from the calf. He was still cautious about using fire-arms as was shown by his knifing the *Insangoma* instead of shooting her, even though he was drunk at the time; and now he was still playing the jackal to the leopard, rather than make any unnecessary noise by shooting his own food and calling the attention of those

who might hear to the fact that there was a roving gun in the neighbourhood of Meadow Bank and the precipice. A shot could have been heard easily at the native huts on the other side of the lagoon and would have caused gossip.

Michael, realising that this was the runaway murderer, was trying to make up his mind whether to risk holding him up, for he could not shoot at a man in cold blood as if he were a mere buck or a leopard, and yet Mahakaan was too well armed to justify the risk, and would certainly shoot things out if it came to the point.

While Michael was still trying to decide what to do, Mahakaan took up his belongings, stood listening and then made straight for the road where a horse could now be heard approaching far off. A horse was all he wanted now to make a new getaway and he was ready to risk firing for the means of completely and quickly changing his whereabouts.

Michael was about to follow Mahakaan in case he attacked the rider but, hardly had Mahakaan gone forty yards, when he staggered and sat down and moaned and seemed to begin wrestling with himself. He unslung and dropped his rifle; then he let go the shotgun, and rolled away in paroxysms. Soon he lay quite still, with his spine bent back and all the muscles of his face contracted into a terrible grin—the symptom of strychnine poisoning.

Michael ran down to where he was and pulled the rifle and shotgun well out of his reach. The revolver, apparently, was in the sack, which Mahakaan had dropped first, before unslinging the rifle and letting go the shotgun.

"Run, Vemvan," Michael called, "see who that is coming on the horse, and ask him to come here."

In two minutes the boy returned with Sergeant Bekker who had been reconnoitring on his own, and but for the poison, would probably have ridden into a fatal ambush.

Like a trapped wolf, the *skebenga* died, knowing he was caught, but growling curses at the *Insangoma* who, he fully

believed, had bewitched the calf's meat in revenge for her death on the day before. He did not look once either at Sergeant Bekker or Michael nor say one word to them.

Sergeant Bekker despatched Vemvan to call the other police. Meanwhile Michael, explaining that he had business on hand, went back up the buck-path which skirts the top of the cliff.

The sun was now shining brightly and as he came down to where the carcase of the calf was hanging in the forked tree, he heard a low growl.

The leopard resented the interference with her kill, which she had just sensed on examining the carcase; she had refused to eat it and had thwarted Michael's idea of poisoning her because of the suspicions that both the scent of white man and native had aroused. But she was furiously angry at having her breakfast spoilt since it meant that, now she had lost her mate, she had to leave her young unprotected and go another marauding expedition: so she growled in order to scare the intruder from the neighbourhood of her young ones.

Michael pushed up the safety catch and waited. Then he took another step. Another growl came from the undergrowth: then the leopard switched the end of her tail. Michael caught the movement and in a second had focussed the crouching form of the leopard, so perfectly coloured to match her surroundings.

At the distance of forty yards a head-on shot was not to be relied on. He had loaded one barrel for the leopard with heavy buckshot, and the other, for the mamba, with birdshot, since buckshot scattered too loosely to make sure of hitting the spine of the snake; yet birdshot would only tickle a leopard unless it was quite close.

As the leopard was looking nasty and was apparently held in a cul-de-sac by the edge of the precipice beyond, Michael could not decide what to do for some moments. It was certainly too risky to reload and now that the *tiger*

was snarling and lashing her sides with her tail, he realised that she was cornered. So he began to advance once more, in order to make surer of the first shot.

He climbed slowly down to within twenty yards of the leopard and she stood facing him whichever way he approached so he could not get a shot at the heart. Even if mortally wounded, he knew that unless he succeeded in breaking a leg or splitting open the skull of the beast, she would charge uphill like a tennis ball from a racket. The fabulous toughness of all African wild animals has to be reckoned with at moments like these.

He fired and the leopard recoiled from the impact of the heavy slugs, which penetrated her lungs but glanced off the low forehead and did not break a leg. She then came at him uphill as fast as she could scramble. He kept the birdshot ready until it would have almost the full force of a ball shot, before it could separate. At two yards range it took the beast in the throat just under the chin, jolted its spine, and tore out its jugular vein.

The leopard rolled down the slope, colliding with tree-stems and aloes and, somersaulting backwards, disappeared clean over the precipice. Michael was trembling so that he had to sit down: he forgot even to reload. He stayed there for some minutes.

Then suddenly there was a rustling sound in the tops of the small trees just above his head and a long shadow ran like a rivulet over the tilted flat rock on which he was sitting. Across his knees ran the shadow and, looking up, he was frozen with horror as he saw the great mamba, whom his shot had apparently disturbed, rippling majestically through the tree-tops back to its refuge in the shrubs and aloes that grew from the perpendicular face of the cliff where no one could get at it.

Michael could only see about half of its body but it seemed as if it would never end, as it crossed from one tree to the other directly over his head. Whether it saw him or not he

was not going to risk attracting its attention more closely by moving to reload as it passed so near to him. When he did reload, it was out of sight.

It was time for Michael to clear out till his nerves were better. He went and fetched Swap and rode round on to the road beneath the cliff where he found his *tiger* lying dead. He skinned it there and then, and rode home to fetch Tom, for he noticed from the carcase that the *tiger* was suckling cubs and he needed some moral support, if he were to return to see if the mamba had taken the bait, and to try to catch the cubs.

After a speedy lunch Michael returned with Tom and they went slowly down to that part of the precipice where Michael had tied the chicken that morning. They could see nothing at first, but hundreds of birds were there making an excited noise. Then Michael threw a stone to the spot and all the grass began to shake for several feet around. Michael caught a glimpse of coils revolving and showing not only the black upper-side of the great mamba, but also its white under-side as if it had been wreathing itself into a hundred contortions to try to pull the bait and the hooks out of its gullet. Its digestive juices hadn't yet dissolved the thin wire by which the chicken was held so, though the monster writhed and tried to rear its once terrible head, it was a prisoner—far easier to kill than the smaller green mamba had been.

Michael blew its head clean off with the shotgun.

They found the leopard's cubs in a cleft in the rock. One of them tried to scratch and bite, but the other two were quite tame. They took them back and, for a joke, gave them to Mary: but the strange thing was to see them drinking milk out of the same bowl as the peetie-buck. Eventually, when they grew big enough to be dangerous they were sent to the Zoo, in Durban.

Michael and Tom skinned the mamba, and pegged the skin out with slivers of wood to dry in the sun. Without

its head it measured twelve feet eleven inches. Later it was to be pinned up on the verandah of the Beach Cottage.

Natives came from miles round, bringing fowls as tokens of gratitude to the ace who had delivered the country of two such pests—the one so deadly dangerous, and the other so expensive in the killing of stock. They brought tremendous quantities of beer with them, camped out under the milk-wood trees for days, and composed wonderful songs and dances in honour of Michael, who became for some time a sort of minor patron saint of the countryside, a kind of St. George the Dragon-killer.

Alas! The holidays were drawing to a close. John and Billy had to pack away their outboard motor, after using it for only a short time, so as to keep it safe for next holidays.

Michael could not go to the rodeo at Van Rooyen's place, because he had to attend the enquiry about the deaths of Mahakaan and the *Insangoma*. But his friend, Willem, did wonders at the rodeo, and so did Heredia and Azevedos.

At the enquiry Michael was complimented for his courage in getting rid of the terrible old mamba so cleverly, and the leopard, too. Also for having, accidentally, accounted for so dangerous a customer as Mahakaan. The police said that the hundred pounds, offered for the apprehension of the murderer, was Michael's, but he gave half to be held in trust for Vemvan, so that later he could start a herd of cattle, with his own money.

Michael took his motor bicycle back into town, and rode to school on it every day. He could ride almost anywhere, after a few weeks, except up a precipice or the wall of a house!

Billy was a little sad because he couldn't take the outboard motor with him.

Mary took Bonsela, the peetie-buck, back to Durban, and he was quite as happy in the safe town garden as he had ever been in the python-haunted bush.

John was never frightened again—or at least he never showed it, if he was—after the night when he had braved the ghost and killed the leopard.

Mrs. Jackson was the only one who really welcomed the return to town. It was the start of *her* holidays. She was free from all anxiety about snakes, leopards, sharks, bucking cattle, backwash, and all the other things that worry mothers during holidays in the bush.

The rest of the family were already busy, happily planning all the things they were going to do, when they next went to the Beach Cottage.