

The Hand of Chance

by William Murray Graydon

Exciting episodes attending Neil Danvers' quest for his missing partner—A rhinoceros hunt that came to be a cart before the horse affair and a trap that caught.

“CAN you tell me where I can find a man named Muller?”

The person addressed, a grizzled, red shirted digger, looked up for a moment, and then, dropping his shovel, held up both his grimy hands.

“Gracious, man, is it you or your ghost?” he exclaimed. “Neil Danvers, as sure as I’m a livin’ sinner, an’ thin an’ pale as a broom handle, too. Waal, waal, whar hev you bin?”

“Yes, it’s me, and no wonder I look bad, after the time I’ve had;” and Neil Danvers smiled a weary little smile as he looked down at his ragged, travel stained garments.

“But tell me, Smithers,” he continued, “where is Muller?”

“Oh, yes, you mean that Dutch partner of yourn. Waal, you see, when you didn’t come back we rather suspected the worst, an’ then that scamp of a Kaffir came stragglin’ in one day an’ give us ter understand you was lost in the bush. It was no airthly use in goin’ after you, so we kinder hung the camp in mournin’; didn’t drink nor play cards for two hull days. As fur Muller, he felt mighty bad. He talked about goin’ ter look fur you for a while. Then he finally gave up workin’, an’ sold out the claim to Skinny Dave an’ his chum.

“He got a fair price, I reckon, for it was a fine piece of diggin’s. He didn’t waste no time here arter that. He bought a horse an’ a span of oxen, and then give us

good by. He said he was bound for home, wherever that is. Somewhere in the Transvaal, I reckon, for if ever I seed a genuine Boer, Muller was one.”

“Gone! You say he’s gone,” cried Danvers; “an’ no one knows where?”

“That’s just the size of it,” replied Smithers. “He didn’t leave no address whatsoever. Clean furgot ter even set ’em up for the boys. Not that I ever knew a Boer as would do it fur that matter, an’ then—”

The worthy Smithers sprang forward just in time to catch Neil’s slender form as it swayed backward, and dragging him out of the burning glare of the hot African sun into his tent, he proceeded to force a few drops of brandy down his throat.

It was a very doleful situation, indeed, that faced Neil when he recovered sufficiently to sit up against the tent pole.

It was two years since he had set foot on African soil, allured by the tales of gold; and starting at Natal, he had worked his way far up into the colony till he reached the diggings. Here he was strangely fortunate, for he ran across a friendly young Boer, and the two located a claim which turned out to be quite a little bonanza.

They had saved a precious pile of dust and nuggets when a fever of unrest came over Neil, and he joined an English hunter who was going up the country after

big game.

Much against his friends' wishes all was left in Muller's care, Neil agreeing to come back and get his share, for he trusted his friend implicitly. The hunting party went up into the Kalahari Desert, where the Englishman was killed by a lion, and Neil himself was captured by a wandering party of Bechuanas, who wanted his arms and tent.

The Kaffir servant, Batze, escaped, but Neil was held a prisoner, though finally, after enduring much suffering and a long spell of sickness, released. And now, through great obstacles, he had made his way back, only to find Muller gone, with all the gold, the claim sold, and no trace of his missing partner to be discovered.

Strange to say, he had never known his first name, and Muller was as common throughout the Transvaal as Smith or Jones is in America. So to hunt for him would clearly be a difficult undertaking, and besides, he was utterly destitute of means.

The large hearted Smithers promptly came to the rescue, and after the first rejoicing at his unexpected return was over, and the camp had settled down to its normal condition, Neil helped him to work his claim, receiving board and lodging for his pay.

The Kaffir Batze was an inmate of the camp, doing odd bits of work for the men and sleeping at night in a little hovel on the outskirts.

Shaking with excitement, he presented himself to Neil one day when Smithers was off on a prospecting trip.

"Baars!" he said eagerly. "White hunter come; much oxen, much guns."

Neil dropped his pick and scrambled up out of the hole.

"Where, Batze?" he asked eagerly.

The Kaffir pointed across the hills toward the river, and then, as Neil started

off at once in that direction, he danced along behind with many grotesque manifestations of delight.

In the wooded hollow by the river Captain Paulet was encamped, with three span of oxen and half a dozen servants. He received Neil cordially, but instead of being on his way to the coast it turned out that he was bound on a hunting tour through the Transvaal.

Neil, despairing of finding his friend and his money, had hoped to join some hunter and get back to the coast, where he might work a passage home.

But now hope sprang up anew. This was a chance not to be neglected—a trip through the Transvaal—so he offered his services, which were promptly accepted.

Batze's were at first refused, but he indulged in such abject and heartbreaking manifestations of grief, that Captain Paulet finally relented, and appointed him his private gun bearer.

Neil gave his friends a hasty farewell, and early the following morning they struck off across the veldt towards the Transvaal.

Time was no object to Captain Paulet, so they moved at a leisurely pace, camping often for days at a time in some favored locality, and giving Neil plenty of opportunity for his search.

But Muller seemed to be the generic title for half the occupants of the Transvaal. Every settlement had its quota, and after numerous weary searches and interviews with dozens of Boers of the name, Neil at last gave up his quest in despair and turned his attention to sport.

They were now drawing near the upper border of the Transvaal, and finally they came in sight of the Limpopo River, and made a permanent camp on the left bank. Game of all kinds, and big game especially, was plentiful. For two months

they hunted to their hearts' content, and Captain Paulet collected quite a heap of trophies.

They now had some thoughts of starting coastward, for the captain was beginning to yearn a little for civilized life again; and as for Neil, he was desperately homesick, and eagerly welcomed the captain's proposal to start.

They intended making one more expedition, however, for Batze, who spent his time in roaming about the country, had reported traces of buffalo along the base of a hilly ridge that lay some miles to the westward, farther down the river. Neil and the captain started at dawn on horseback, and Batze accompanied them on foot.

It was farther away than they had supposed, and it was high noon before they reached the plain, which bordered on the slope of the hills. This plain terminated at a thicket of low bushes and young trees, and here a herd of buffalo were soon discovered to be feeding.

Leaving Batze with the horses they proceeded to stalk the animals, and Captain Paulet succeeded in getting a shot at one which was half concealed in the bushes.

Unfortunately he only wounded it, and the infuriated brute charged down the hill straight toward the captain and Neil.

A wounded African buffalo is a most dangerous animal, and a catastrophe would have surely occurred had not Neil planted a bullet in his brain at barely ten yards' distance, and the beast, with a fearful bellowing, struggled a yard or two and fell dead.

A feverish excitement was on Neil now, and running back for his horse, he mounted in haste, and dashed away in pursuit of the herd, which were galloping in panic and fright around the base of the hill, their frowning heads showing at intervals above the waving scrub.

It was a long and stern chase. The buffaloes were on their mettle, and never slackened for an instant in their headlong rush, while Neil thundered on behind, forgetful of everything in his excitement. Mile after mile vanished under the flying hoofs, and then, with bitter chagrin, he saw that his horse was giving out.

The noble, animal strained every effort, but the long morning ride had been too much for him, and finally he staggered and came to a halt with steaming nostrils and perspiring flanks. In the distance could be heard the faint tramp of the frightened buffaloes, as they galloped on with undiminished speed.

Neil was standing on the crest of a slight ridge, and beneath him, shut in by two ranges of sloping hills, lay a beautiful and fertile valley. The center of it was rich with high, waving grass, dotted with irregular clumps of granite, while a silvery gleam here and there marked the site of running water.

Dismounting and taking his horse's bridle, Neil led the way down the slope, and soon was drinking eagerly from a stream at the bottom, while his weary steed snuffed up the water with feverish haste.

Neil rose and looked about him. Over the summit of the hills the sun was sinking slowly, but surely. Two hours more and darkness would be on him. He was a little uncertain whether he could find his way back again.

Should he follow the stream, which, no doubt led to the Limpopo, and then follow the river to camp, or should he attempt to trace back the path by which he had come?

Uncertain which course to pursue, he stood looking about him, and as his eyes wandered down the valley he thought he detected a mile away the motionless form of a buffalo. This decided him, and

mounting his horse, who had now recovered his strength, he rode slowly down stream.

The grass and young timber were dense and high, and at times rose above his head, so that he was obliged to take to the bed of the stream.

He had gone probably half a mile when a startling interruption came.

The stillness of the valley was broken by the sudden report of a gun, which seemed to come from a point on the slope and only a short distance ahead.

“What on earth can that mean?” exclaimed Neil, and then, as a loud outcry was heard, he spurred his horse forward, holding his gun ready for instant use.

Some twenty yards before him the valley widened, and the dense vegetation gave way to low, rolling turf.

As Neil burst from the bushes right into this open glade a sight met his eyes that for an instant sent his heart to his mouth, and made the gun tremble in his hands.

Down the slope of the hills came a man, a short, stumpy little fellow, with a heavy yellow beard. He was bareheaded, and his disordered locks were waving in the breeze, while with marvelous leaps, that cleared from eight to ten feet every time, he sprang over big stones and patches of thorn bushes, uttering all the while loud cries for help.

And no wonder, for very close behind him came that most dreaded of beasts, the South African rhinoceros. The wicked muzzle and the short, curved horns were bent downwards, and the great clumsy hoofs trod the ground with marvelous swiftness, while he snorted all the while in his rage like the spasmodic puffings of a freight locomotive.

No power could save the man, Neil decided at a glance. He raised his gun,

however, to fire, when the brute blindly collided with an unseen tree and took a header, bringing tree and all down in his fall.

He was up in an instant, though, with a savage snort, and rushing on in mad pursuit.

This slight interval, however, had given the man a chance, and the space between them had widened. Like a lightning flash an inspiration came to Neil. He braced himself in the saddle, seized the lines firmly, and as the frightened man bounded across the stream, and made for the opposite slope, which was heavily wooded, he dug the spurs into his terrified horse and galloped at top speed straight between the man and the pursuing rhinoceros.

For a moment a collision seemed inevitable, but the great brute lumbered past the rear of the horse at scarcely a hair's breadth, and then, pulling himself up short and giving one glance out of his wicked eye at the fleeing figure shooting up the slope, he turned about, and with a defiant blast galloped down the valley in pursuit of Neil.

Deeper and deeper Neil drove the spurs, and faster went the horse, but the wild charge of the rhinoceros was still swifter, and his angry snorting came closer and closer.

Soon the hot, fiery breath actually fanned Neil's neck; a moment more and all would be over. With a last desperate hope, he dug in the spurs and leaned forward in the saddle. He felt the horse leap forward; then came a cracking sound, and the earth seemed to sink beneath him.

Neil tossed up his hands, grasped a slippery precipice that seemed to slide away from him, then caught a clump of tough grass and roots, and with a struggle pulled himself up to the firm ground, while

behind him horse and rhinoceros plunged headlong into the pit.

A shrill, terrible neigh of agony, a succession of angry snorts, and then came silence.

When the rescued man hurried up, panting and winded, Neil was sitting on the ground looking very dazed and bewildered.

“Ach, ach, mine brave friend!” cried the stumpy little man, grasping Neil’s hand vigorously. “You safe mine life, vot a brafe deed.”

Then running over to the pit he exclaimed in raptures:

“Ach! that is goot, that is goot. But the poor horse!”

By this time three or four other men appeared, and explanations were soon made.

The little man was a Boer hunter, who had a farm some twenty miles across the Limpopo. He made a specialty of trapping wild animals to sell, and it was while attempting to drive the rhinoceros toward the pit that he had got into his perilous situation.

His camp was close at hand over the ridge, and he insisted on Neil going with him, promising to provide him with a new horse, for the latter’s own poor beast was only a trampled mass at the bottom of the pit. The rhinoceros was very tamely snuffing at the sides of his prison, and leaving a couple of men to guard him, they started for the camp.

It was a tiresome climb over the hills, but at last they crossed the ridge, and beneath them, bright in the setting sun, lay

the white tents and the motionless figures of the feeding oxen. A campfire was blazing merrily, and as they drew near, a tall young fellow rose and advanced to meet them.

Under his light beard his bronzed skin flushed a deeper red as his glance singled out Neil. He stopped in momentary astonishment, passed his hand across his forehead once or twice, and then, with a glad cry, he rushed forward and seized Neil in his muscular arms.

“Muller!” “Neil!” they cried with one voice, and embraced with vigor, while the old Boer looked on in mute astonishment.

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Around the campfire Neil related all his strange adventures, while father and son listened in rapt attention. In the morning a guide accompanied Neil back to his friends, and two days later they all met at the hospitable Boer’s farmhouse.

Neil’s new found partner insisted on paying over to him a full share of the gold, and when they resumed their journey to the coast after a two weeks’ visit, he felt himself a rich man.

Strange to relate, the same vessel that carried Neil home had on board his friend the rhinoceros, which had been sold by Mr. Muller to an American dealer, and every time Neil visits New York he goes to call on his old acquaintance at his snug quarters in Central Park.