

CHAPTER V. THE SHOOTING MATCH

My journey back to the Mission Station was a strange contrast to that which I had made thence a few days before. Then, the darkness, the swift mare beneath me rushing through it like a bird, the awful terror in my heart lest I should be too late, as with wild eyes I watched the paling stars and the first gathering grey of dawn. Now, the creaking of the ox-cart, the familiar veld, the bright glow of the peaceful sunlight, and in my heart a great thankfulness, and yet a new terror lest the pure and holy love which I had won should be stolen away from me by force or fraud.

Well, as the one matter had been in the hand of God, so was the other, and with that knowledge I must be content. The first trial had ended in death and victory. How would the second end? I wondered, and those words seemed to jumble themselves up in my mind and shape a sentence that it did not conceive. It was: "In the victory that is death," which, when I came to think of it, of course, meant nothing. How victory could be death I did not understand--at any rate, at that time, I who was but a lad of small experience.

As we trekked along comfortably enough, for the road was good and the cart, being on springs, gave my leg no pain, I asked my father what he thought that the Heer Marais had meant when he told us that the Boers had business at Maraisfontein, during which our presence as Englishmen

would not be agreeable to them.

"Meant, Allan? He meant that these traitorous Dutchmen are plotting against their sovereign, and are afraid lest we should report their treason. Either they intend to rebel because of that most righteous act, the freeing of the slaves, and because we will not kill out all the Kaffirs with whom they chance to quarrel, or to trek from the Colony. For my part I think it will be the latter, for, as you have heard, some parties have already gone; and, unless I am mistaken, many more mean to follow, Marais and Retief and that plotter, Pereira, among them. Let them go; I say, the sooner the better, for I have no doubt that the English flag will follow them in due course."

"I hope that they won't," I answered with a nervous laugh; "at any rate, until I have won back my mare." (I had left her in Retief's care as stakeholder, until the match should be shot off.)

For the rest of that two and a half hours' trek my father, looking very dignified and patriotic, declaimed to me loudly about the bad behaviour of the Boers, who hated and traduced missionaries, loathed and abominated British rule and permanent officials, loved slavery and killed Kaffirs whenever they got the chance. I listened to him politely, for it was not wise to cross my parent when he was in that humour. Also, having mixed a great deal with the Dutch, I knew that there was another side to the question, namely, that the missionaries sometimes traduced them (as, in fact, they did), and that British rule, or rather,

party government, played strange tricks with the interests of distant dependencies. That permanent officials and im-permanent ones too--such as governors full of a little brief authority--often misrepresented and oppressed them. That Kaffirs, encouraged by the variegated policy of these party governments and their servants, frequently stole their stock; and if they found a chance, murdered them with their women and children, as they had tried to do at Maraisfontein; though there, it is true, they had some provocation. That British virtue had liberated the slaves without paying their owners a fair price for them, and so forth.

But, to tell the truth, it was not of these matters of high policy, which were far enough away from a humble youth like myself, that I was thinking. What appealed to me and made my heart sick was the reflection that if Henri Marais and his friends trekked, Marie Marais must perforce trek with them; and that whereas I, an Englishman, could not be of that adventurous company, Hernando Pereira both could and would.

On the day following our arrival home, what between the fresh air, plenty of good food, for which I found I had an appetite, and liberal doses of Pontac--a generous Cape wine that is a kind of cross between port and Burgundy--I found myself so much better that I was able to hop about the place upon a pair of crutches which Hans improvised for me out of Kaffir sticks. Next morning, my improvement continuing at a rapid rate, I turned my attention seriously to the shooting match, for which I had but five days to prepare.

Now it chanced that some months before a young Englishman of good family--he was named the Honourable Vavasour Smyth--who had accompanied an official relative to the Cape Colony, came our way in search of sport, of which I was able to show him a good deal of a humble kind. He had brought with him, amongst other weapons, what in those days was considered a very beautiful hair-triggered small-bore rifle fitted with a nipple for percussion caps, then quite a new invention. It was by a maker of the name of J. Purdey, of London, and had cost quite a large sum because of the perfection of its workmanship. When the Honourable V. Smyth--of whom I have never heard since--took his leave of us on his departure for England, being a generous-hearted young fellow, as a souvenir of himself, he kindly presented me with this rifle,* which I still have.

[*--This single-barrelled percussion-cap rifle described by Allan Quatermain, which figures so prominently in the history of this epoch of his life, has been sent to me by Mr. Curtis, and is before me as I write. It was made in the year 1835 by J. Purdey, of 314 1/2, Oxford Street, London, and is a beautiful piece of workmanship of its kind. Without the ramrod, which is now missing, it weighs only 5 lbs. 3 3/4 oz. The barrel is octagonal, and the rifled bore, designed to take a spherical bullet, is 1/2 in. in diameter. The hammer can be set to safety on the half-cock by means of a catch behind it.

Another peculiarity of the weapon, one that I have never seen before, is that by pressing on the back of the trigger the ordinary light pull of the piece is so reduced that the merest touch suffices to fire it, thus rendering it hair-triggered in the fullest sense of the word.

It has two flap-sights marked for 150 and 200 yards, in addition to the fixed sight designed for firing at 100 yards.

On the lock are engraved a stag and a doe, the first lying down and the second standing.

Of its sort and period, it is an extraordinarily well-made and handy gun, finished with horn at the end of what is now called the tongue, and with the stock cut away so as to leave a raised cushion against which the cheek of the shooter rests.

What charge it took I do not know, but I should imagine from 2 1/2 to 3 drachms of powder. It is easy to understand that in the hands of Allan Quatermain this weapon, obsolete as it is to-day, was capable of great things within the limits of its range, and that the faith he put in it at the trial of skill at the Groote Kloof, and afterwards in the fearful

ordeal of the shooting of the vultures on the wing, upon the Mount of Slaughter, when the lives of many hung upon his marksmanship, was well justified. This, indeed, is shown by the results in both cases.

In writing of this rifle, Messrs. Purdey informed me that copper percussion caps were experimented with by Colonel Forsyth in 1820, and that their firm sold them in 1824, at a cost of £1 15s. per 1,000, although their use did not become general until some years later.--THE EDITOR.]

That was about six months earlier than the time of which I write, and during those months I had often used this rifle for the shooting of game, such as blesbuck and also of bustards. I found it to be a weapon of the most extraordinary accuracy up to a range of about two hundred yards, though when I rode off in that desperate hurry for Maraisfontein I did not take it with me because it was a single barrel and too small in the bore to load with loopers at a pinch. Still, in challenging Pereira, it was this gun and no other that I determined to use; indeed, had I not owned it I do not think that I should have ventured on the match.

As it happened, Mr. Smyth had left me with the rifle a large supply of specially cast bullets and of the new percussion caps, to say nothing of some very fine imported powder. Therefore, having ammunition in plenty, I set to work to practise. Seating myself upon a chair in a deep kloof

near the station, across which rock pigeons and turtle doves were wont to fly in numbers at a considerable height, I began to fire at them as they flashed over me.

Now, in my age, I may say without fear of being set down a boaster, that I have one gift, that of marksmanship, which, I suppose, I owe to some curious combination of judgment, quickness of eye, and steadiness of hand. I can declare honestly that in my best days I never knew a man who could beat me in shooting at a living object; I say nothing of target work, of which I have little experience. Oddly enough, also, I believe that at this art, although then I lacked the practice which since has come to me in such plenty, I was as good as a youth as I have ever been in later days, and, of course, far better than I am now. This I soon proved upon the present occasion, for seated there in that kloof, after a few trials, I found that I could bring down quite a number of even the swift, straight-flying rock pigeons as they sped over me, and this, be it remembered, not with shot, but with a single bullet, a feat that many would hold to be incredible.

So the days passed, and I practised, every evening finding me a little better at this terribly difficult sport. For always I learned more as to the exact capacities of my rifle and the allowance that must be made according to the speed of the bird, its distance, and the complications of the wind and of the light. During those days, also, I recovered so rapidly that at the end of them I was almost in my normal condition, and could walk well with the aid of a single stick.

At length the eventful Thursday came, and about midday--for I lay in bed late that morning and did not shoot--I drove, or, rather, was driven, in a Cape cart with two horses to the place known as Groote Kloof or Great Gully. Over this gorge the wild geese flighted from their "pans" or feeding grounds on the high lands above, to other pans that lay some miles below, and thence, I suppose, straight out to the sea coast, whence they returned at dawn.

On arriving at the mouth of Groote Kloof about four o'clock in the afternoon, my father and I were astonished to see a great number of Boers assembled there, and among them a certain sprinkling of their younger womankind, who had come on horseback or in carts.

"Good gracious!" I said to my father; "if I had known there was to be such a fuss as this about a shooting match, I don't think I could have faced it."

"Hum," he answered; "I think there is more in the wind than your match. Unless I am much mistaken, it has been made the excuse of a public meeting in a secluded spot, so as to throw the Authorities off the scent."

As a matter of fact, my father was quite right. Before we arrived there that day the majority of those Boers, after full and long discussion, had arranged to shake the dust of the Colony off their feet, and find a

home in new lands to the north.

Presently we were among them, and I noticed that, one and all, their faces were anxious and preoccupied. Pieter Retief caught sight of me being helped out of the cart by my father and Hans, whom I had brought to load, and for a moment looked puzzled. Evidently his thoughts were far away. Then he remembered and exclaimed in his jolly voice:

"Why! here is our little Englishman come to shoot off his match like a man of his word. Friend Marais, stop talking about your losses"--this in a warning voice--"and give him good day."

So Marais came, and with him Marie, who blushed and smiled, but to my mind looked more of a grown woman than ever before; one who had left girlhood behind her and found herself face to face with real life and all its troubles. Following her close, very close, as I was quick to notice, was Hernan Pereira. He was even more finely dressed than usual and carried in his hand a beautiful new, single-barrelled rifle, also fitted to take percussion caps, but, as I thought, of a very large bore for the purpose of goose shooting.

"So you have got well again," he said in a genial voice that yet did not ring true. Indeed, it suggested to me that he wished I had done nothing of the sort. "Well, Mynheer Allan, here you find me quite ready to shoot your head off." (He didn't mean that, though I dare say he was.) "I tell you that the mare is as good as mine, for I have been practising,

haven't I, Marie? as the 'aasvogels'" (that is, vultures) "round the
stead know to their cost."

"Yes, Cousin Hernan," said Marie, "you have been practising, but so,
perhaps, has Allan."

By this time all the company of Boers had collected round us, and began
to evince a great interest in the pending contest, as was natural among
people who rarely had a gun out of their hands, and thought that fine
shooting was the divinest of the arts. However, they were not allowed
to stay long, as the Kaffirs said that the geese would begin their
afternoon flight within about half an hour. So the spectators were all
requested to arrange themselves under the sheer cliff of the kloof,
where they could not be seen by the birds coming over them from behind,
and there to keep silence. Then Pereira and I--I attended by my loader,
but he alone, as he said a man at his elbow would bother him--and with
us Retief, the referee, took our stations about a hundred and fifty
yards from this face of cliff. Here we screened ourselves as well as
we could from the keen sight of the birds behind some tall bushes which
grew at this spot.

I seated myself on a camp-stool, which I had brought with me, for my
leg was still too weak to allow me to stand long, and waited. Presently
Pereira said through Retief that he had a favour to ask, namely, that
I would allow him to take the first six shots, as the strain of waiting
made him nervous. I answered, "Certainly," although I knew well that

the object of the request was that he believed that the outpost geese--"spy-geese" we called them--which would be the first to arrive, would probably come over low down and slow, whereas those that followed, scenting danger, might fly high and fast. This, in fact, proved to be the case, for there is no bird more clever than the misnamed goose.

When we had waited about a quarter of an hour Hans said:

"Hist! Goose comes."

As he spoke, though as yet I could not see the bird, I heard its cry of "Honk, honk" and the swish of its strong wings.

Then it appeared, an old spur-winged gander, probably the king of the flock, flying so low that it only cleared the cliff edge by about twenty feet, and passed over not more than thirty yards up, an easy shot. Pereira fired, and down it came rather slowly, falling a hundred yards or so behind him, while Retief said:

"One for our side."

Pereira loaded again, and just as he had capped his rifle three more geese, also flying low, came over, preceded by a number of ducks, passing straight above us, as they must do owing to the shape of the gap between the land waves of the veld above through which they flighted. Pereira shot, and to my surprise, the second, not the first, bird fell,

also a good way behind him.

"Did you shoot at that goose, or the other, nephew?" asked Retief.

"At that one for sure," he answered with a laugh.

"He lies," muttered the Hottentot; "he shot at the first and killed the second."

"Be silent," I answered. "Who would lie about such a thing?"

Again Pereira loaded. By the time that he was ready more geese were approaching, this time in a triangle of seven birds, their leader being at the point of the triangle, which was flying higher than those that had gone before. He fired, and down came not one bird, but two, namely, the captain and the goose to the right of and a little behind it.

"Ah! uncle," exclaimed Pereira, "did you see those birds cross each other as I pulled? That was a lucky one for me, but I won't count the second if the Heer Allan objects."

"No, I did not, nephew," answered Retief, "but doubtless they must have done so, or the same bullet could not have pierced both."

Both Hans and I only looked at each other and laughed. Still we said nothing.

From the spectators under the cliff there came a murmur of congratulation not unmixed with astonishment. Again Pereira loaded, aimed, and loosed at a rather high goose--it may have been about seventy yards in the air. He struck it right enough, for the feathers flew from its breast; but to my astonishment the bird, after swooping down as though it were going to fall, recovered itself and flew away straight out of sight.

"Tough birds, these geese!" exclaimed Pereira. "They can carry as much lead as a sea-cow."

"Very tough indeed," answered Retief doubtfully. "Never before did I see a bird fly away with an ounce ball through its middle."

"Oh! he will drop dead somewhere," replied Pereira as he rammed his powder down.

Within four minutes more Pereira had fired his two remaining shots, selecting, as he was entitled to do, low and easy young geese that came over him slowly. He killed them both, although the last of them, after falling, waddled along the ground into a tuft of high grass.

Now murmurs of stifled applause broke from the audience, to which Pereira bowed in acknowledgment.

"You will have to shoot very well, Mynheer Allan," said Retief to me, "if you want to beat that. Even if I rule out one of the two birds that fell to a single shot, as I think I shall, Hernan has killed five out of six, which can scarcely be bettered."

"Yes," I answered; "but, mynheer, be so good as to have those geese collected and put upon one side. I don't want them mixed up with mine, if I am lucky enough to bring any down."

He nodded, and some Kaffirs were sent to bring in the geese. Several of these, I noted, were still flapping and had to have their necks twisted, but at the time I did not go to look at them. While this was being done I called to Retief, and begged him to examine the powder and bullets I was about to use.

"What's the good?" he asked, looking at me curiously. "Powder is powder, and a bullet is a bullet."

"None, I dare say. Still, oblige me by looking at them, my uncle."

Then at my bidding Hans took six bullets and placed them in his hand, begging him to return them to us as they were wanted.

"They must be a great deal smaller than Hernan's," said Retief, "who, being stronger, uses a heavier gun."

"Yes," I answered briefly, as Hans put the charge of powder into the rifle, and drove home the wad. Then, taking a bullet from Retief's hand, he rammed that down on to the top of it, capped the gun, and handed it to me.

By now the geese were coming thick, for the flight was at its full. Only, either because some of those that had already passed had sighted the Kaffirs collecting the fallen birds and risen--an example which the others noted from afar and followed--or because in an unknown way warning of their danger had been conveyed to them, they were flying higher and faster than the first arrivals.

"You will have the worst of it, Allan," said Retief. "It should have been shot and shot about."

"Perhaps," I answered, "but that can't be helped now."

Then I rose from my stool, the rifle in my hand. I had not long to wait, for presently over came a wedge of geese nearly a hundred yards up. I aimed at the first fellow, holding about eight yards ahead of him to allow for his pace, and pressed. Next second I heard the clap of the bullet, but alas! it had only struck the outstretched beak, of which a small portion fell to the ground. The bird itself, after wavering a second, resumed its place as leader of the squad and passed away apparently unharmed.

"Baas, baas," whispered Hans as he seized the rifle and began to re-load, "you were too far in front. These big water-birds do not travel as fast as the rock pigeons."

I nodded, wishing to save my breath. Then, quivering with excitement, for if I missed the next shot the match appeared to be lost, presently I took the rifle from his hand.

Scarcely had I done so when a single goose came over quite as high as the others and travelling "as though the black devil had kicked it," as Retief said. This time I allowed the same space to compensate for the object's increased speed and pressed.

Down it came like a stone, falling but a little way behind me with its head knocked off.

"Baas, baas," whispered Hans, "still too far in front. Why aim at the eye when you have the whole body?"

Again I nodded, and at the same time heaved a sigh of relief. At least the match was still alive. Soon a large flight came over, mixed up with mallard and widgeon. I took the right-hand angle bird, so that it could not be supposed I had "brownd the lot," as here in England they say of one who fires at a covey and not at a particular partridge. Down he came, shot straight through the breast. Then I knew that I had got my nerve, and felt no more fear.

To cut a long story short, although two of them were extremely difficult and high, one being, I should say, quite a hundred and twenty yards above me, and the other by no means easy, I killed the next three birds one after the other, and I verily believe could have killed a dozen more without a miss, for now I was shooting as I had never shot before.

"Say, nephew Allan," asked Retief curiously in the pause between the fifth and sixth shots, "why do your geese fall so differently to Hernan's?"

"Ask him! don't talk to me," I answered, and next instant brought down number five, the finest shot of the lot.

A sound of wonder and applause came from all the audience, and I saw Marie wave a white handkerchief.

"That's the end," said the referee.

"One minute before you stir," I answered. "I want to shoot at something else that is not in the match, just to see if I can kill two birds with one bullet like the Heer Pereira."

He granted my request with a nod, holding up his hand to prevent the audience from moving, and bidding Pereira, who tried to interrupt, to be silent.

Now, while the match was in progress I had noticed two falcons about the size of the British peregrine wheeling round and round high over the kloof, in which doubtless they bred, apparently quite undisturbed by the shooting. Or, perhaps, they had their eyes upon some of the fallen geese. I took the rifle and waited for a long while, till at last my opportunity came. I saw that the larger hen falcon was about to cross directly over the circle of its mate, there being perhaps a distance of ten yards between them. I aimed; I judged--for a second my mind was a kind of calculating machine--the different arcs and speeds of the birds must be allowed for, and the lowest was ninety yards away. Then, with something like a prayer upon my lips, I pressed while every eye stared upwards.

Down came the lower falcon; a pause of half a second, and down came the higher one also, falling dead upon its dead mate!

Now, even from those Boers, who did not love to see an Englishman excel, there broke a shout of acclamation. Never had they beheld such a shot as this; nor in truth had I.

"Mynheer Retief," I said, "I gave you notice that I intended to try to kill both of them, did I not?"

"You did. Allemachte! you did! But tell me, Allan Quatermain, are your eye and hand quite human?"

"You must ask my father," I answered with a shrug as I sat myself down upon my stool and mopped my brow.

The Boers came up with a rush, Marie flying ahead of them like a swallow, and their stout womenfolk waddling behind, and formed a circle round us, all talking at once. I did not listen to their conversation, till I heard Pereira, who was engaged in some eye-play with Marie, say in a loud voice:

"Yes, it was pretty, very pretty, but all the same, Uncle Retief, I claim the match, as I shot six geese against five."

"Hans," I said, "bring my geese," and they were brought, each with a neat hole through it, and laid down near those that Pereira had shot. "Now," I said to Retief, "examine the wounds in these birds, and then that on the second bird which the Heer Pereira killed when he brought down two at once. I think it will be found that his bullet must have splintered."

Retief went and studied all the birds, taking them up one by one. Then he threw down the last with a curse and cried in a great voice:

"Mynheer Pereira, why do you bring shame on us before these two Englishmen? I say that you have been using loopers, or else bullets that were sawn in quarters and glued or tied with thread. Look, look!" and he

pointed to the wounds, of which in one case there were as many as three on a single bird.

"Why not?" answered Pereira coolly. "The bargain was that we were to use bullets, but it was never said that they should not be cut. Doubtless the Heer Allan's were treated in the same way."

"No," I answered, "when I said that I would shoot with a bullet I meant a whole bullet, not one that had been sawn in pieces and fixed together again, so that after it left the muzzle it might spread out like shot. But I do not wish to talk about the matter. It is in the hands of the Heer Pieter Retief, who will give judgment as it pleases him."

Now, much excited argument ensued among the Boers, in the midst of which Marie managed to whisper to me unheard:

"Oh! I am glad, Allan, for whatever they may decide, you won, and the omen is good."

"I don't see what geese have to do with omens, sweetheart," I answered--"that is, since the time of the ancient Romans. Anyhow, I should say that the omens are bad, for there is going to be a row presently."

Just then Retief put up his hand, calling out:

"Silence! I have decided. The writing of the match did not say that the bullets were not to be cut, and therefore Hernan Pereira's birds must count. But that writing does say that any bird accidentally killed should not count, and therefore one goose must be subtracted from Pereira's total, which leaves the two shooters equal. So either the match is dead or, since the geese have ceased to come, it must be shot off another day."

"Oh! if there is any question," said Pereira, who felt that public opinion was much against him, "let the Englishman take the money. I dare say that he needs it, as the sons of missionaries are not rich."

"There is no question," I said, "since, rich or poor, not for a thousand pounds would I shoot again against one who plays such tricks. Keep your money, Mynheer Pereira, and I will keep my mare. The umpire has said that the match is dead, so everything is finished."

"Not quite," interrupted Retief, "for I have a word to say. Friend Allan, you have played fair, and I believe that there is no one who can shoot like you in Africa."

"That is so," said the audience of Boers.

"Mynheer Pereira," went on Retief, "although you, too, are a fine shot, as is well known, I believe that had you played fair also you would have been beaten, but as it is you have saved your hundred pounds. Mynheer

Pereira," he added in a great voice, "you are a cheat, who have brought disgrace upon us Boers, and for my part I never want to shake your hand again."

Now, at these outspoken words, for when his indignation was aroused Retief was no measurer of language, Pereira's high-coloured face went white as a sheet.

"Mein Gott, mynheer," he said, "I am minded to make you answer for such talk," and his hand went to the knife at his girdle.

"What!" shouted Retief, "do you want another shooting match? Well, if so I am ready with whole bullets or with split ones. None shall say that Pieter Retief was afraid of any man, and, least of all, of one who is not ashamed to try to steal a prize as a hyena steals a bone from a lion. Come on, Hernan Pereira, come on!"

Now, I am sure I cannot say what would have happened, although I am quite certain that Pereira had no stomach for a duel with the redoubtable Retief, a man whose courage was as proverbial throughout the land as was his perfect uprightness of character. At any rate, seeing that things looked very black, Henri Marais, who had been listening to this altercation with evident annoyance, stepped forward and said:

"Mynheer Retief and nephew Hernan, you are both my guests, and I will not permit quarrelling over this foolishness, especially as I am sure

that Hernan never intended to cheat, but only to do what he thought was allowed. Why should he, who is one of the finest shots in the Colony, though it may be that young Allan Quatermain here is even better? Will you not say so, too, friend Retief, especially just now when it is necessary that we should all be as brothers?" he added pleadingly.

"No," thundered Retief, "I will not tell a lie to please you or anyone."

Then, seeing that the commandant was utterly uncompromising, Marais went up to his nephew and whispered to him for a while. What he said I do not know. The result of it was, however, that after favouring both Retief and myself with an angry scowl, Pereira turned and walked to where his horse stood, mounted it, and rode off, followed by two Hottentot after-riders.

That was the last I saw of Hernan Pereira for a long while to come, and heartily do I wish that it had been the last I ever saw of him. But this was not to be.