

CHAPTER V

DREAMS ARE FOOLISHNESS

When, at the approach of Frank Muller, John Niel left Bessie on the verandah, he had taken his gun, and, having whistled to the pointer dog Pontac, he mounted his shooting pony and started in quest of partridges. On the warm slopes of the hills round Wakkerstroom a large species of partridge is very abundant, particularly in the patches of red grass with which the slopes are sometimes clothed. It is a merry sound to hear these birds calling from all directions just after daybreak, and one to make the heart of every true sportsman rejoice exceedingly. On leaving the house John proceeded up the side of the hill behind it--his pony picking its way carefully between the stones, and the dog Pontac ranging about two or three hundred yards off, for in this sort of country it is necessary to have a dog with a wide range. Presently seeing him stop under a mimosa thorn and suddenly stiffen out as if he had been petrified, John made the best of his way towards him. Pontac stood still for a few seconds, and then slowly and deliberately veered his head round as though it worked on a hinge to see if his master was coming. John knew his ways. Three times would that remarkable old dog look round thus, and if the gun had not then arrived he would to a certainty run in and flush the birds. This was a rule that he never broke, for his patience had a fixed limit. On this occasion, however, John arrived before it was reached, and, jumping off his pony, cocked his gun and marched slowly up, full of happy expectation. On drew the dog, his eye

cold and fixed, saliva dropping from his mouth, and his head, on which was frozen an extraordinary expression of instinctive ferocity, outstretched to its utmost limit.

Pontac was under the mimosa thorn now and up to his belly in the warm red grass. Where could the birds be? Whirr! and a great feathered shell seemed to have burst at his very feet. What a covey! twelve brace if there was a bird, and they had all been lying beak to beak in a space no bigger than a cart wheel. Up went John's gun and off too, a little sooner than it should have done.

"Missed him clean! Now then for the left barrel." Same result. We will draw a veil over the profanity that ensued. A minute later and it was all over, and John and Pontac were regarding each other with mutual contempt and disgust.

"It was all you, you brute," said John to Pontac. "I thought you were going to run in, and you hurried me."

"Ugh!" said Pontac to John, or at least he looked it. "Ugh! you disgusting bad shot. What is the good of pointing for you? It's enough to make a dog sick."

The covey--or rather the collection of old birds, for this kind of partridge sometimes "packs" just before the breeding season--had scattered all about the place. It was not long before Pontac found some

of them, and this time John got one bird--a beautiful great partridge he was too, with yellow legs--and missed another. Again Pontac pointed, and a brace rose. Bang! down goes one; bang with the other barrel. Caught him, by Jove, just as he topped the stone. Hullo! Pontac is still on the point. Slip in two more cartridges. Oh, a leash this time! bang! bang! and down come a brace of them--two brace of partridges without moving a yard.

Life has joys for all men, but, I verily believe, it has no joy to compare to that of the moderate shot and earnest sportsman when he has just killed half a dozen driven partridges without a miss, or ten rocketing pheasants with eleven cartridges, or, better still, a couple of woodcock right and left. Sweet to the politician are the cheers that announce the triumph of his cause and of himself; sweet to the desponding writer is the unexpected public recognition by reviewers of talents with which previously nobody had been much impressed; sweet to all men are the light of women's eyes and the touch of women's lips. But though he have experienced all these things, to the true sportsman and the moderate shot, sweeter far is it to see the arched wings of the driven bird bent like Cupid's bow come flashing fast towards him, to feel the touch of the stock as it fits itself against his shoulder, and the kindly give of the trigger, and then, oh thrilling sight! to perceive the wonderful and yet awful change from life to death, the puff of feathers, and the hurtling passage of the dull mass borne onward by its own force to fall twenty yards from where the pellets struck it. Next session the politician will be hooted down, next year perhaps

the reviewers will cut the happy writer to ribbons and decorate their journals with his fragments, next week you will have wearied of those dear smiles, or, more likely still, they will be bestowed elsewhere.

Vanity of vanities, my son, each and all of them! But if you are a true sportsman (yes, even though you be but a moderate shot), it will always be a glorious thing to go out shooting, and when you chance to shoot well earth holds no such joy as that which will glow in your honest breast (for all sportsmen are honest), and it remains to be proved if heaven does either. It is a grand sport, though the pity of it is that it should be a cruel one.

Such was the paeon that John sang in his heart as he contemplated those fine partridges before lovingly transferring them to his bag. But his luck to-day was not destined to stop at partridges, for hardly had he ridden over the edge of the boulder-strewn side, and on to the flat table-top of the great hill which covered some five hundred acres of land, before he perceived, emerging from the shelter of a tuft of grass about a hundred and seventy yards away, nothing less than the tall neck and whiskered head of a large pauw or bustard.

Now it is quite useless to try and ride straight up to a bustard, and this he knew. The only thing to do is to excite his curiosity and fix his attention by moving round and round him in an ever-narrowing circle. Putting his pony to a canter, John proceeded to do this with a heart beating with excitement. Round and round he went; the pauw had vanished now, he was squatting in the tuft of grass. The last circle

brought him to within seventy yards, and he did not dare to ride any nearer, so jumping off his pony he ran in towards the bird as hard as he could go. When he had covered ten paces the pauw was rising, but they are heavy birds, and he was within forty yards before it was fairly on the wing. Then he pulled up and fired both barrels of No. 4 into it. Down it came, and, incautious man, he rushed forward in triumph without reloading his gun. Already was his hand outstretched to seize the prize, when, behold! the great wings spread themselves out and the bird was flying away. John stood dancing upon the veldt, but observing that it settled within a couple of hundred yards, he ran back, mounted his pony, and pursued it. As he drew near it rose again, and flew this time a hundred yards only, and so it went on till at last he got within gun-shot of the king of birds and killed it.

By this time he was across the mountain-top, and on the brink of the most remarkable chasm he had ever seen. The place was known as Lion's Kloof, or Leeuwen Kloof in Dutch, because three lions had once been penned up by a party of Boers and shot there. This chasm or gorge was between a quarter and half a mile long, about six hundred feet in width, and a hundred and fifty to a hundred and eighty feet deep. Evidently it owed its origin to the action of running water, for at its head, just to the right of where John Niel stood, a little stream welling from hidden springs in the flat mountain-top trickled from stratum to stratum, forming a series of crystal pools and tiny waterfalls, till at last it reached the bottom of the mighty gorge, and pursued its way through it to the plains beyond, half-hidden by the umbrella-topped mimosa and

other thorns that were scattered about. Without doubt this little stream was the parent of the ravine it trickled down and through, but, wondered John Niel, how many centuries of patient, never-ceasing flow must have been necessary to the vast result before him? First centuries of saturation of the soil piled on and between the bed rocks that lay beneath it and jutted up through it, then centuries of floods caused by rain and perhaps by melting snows, to carry away the loosened mould; then centuries upon centuries more of flowing and of rainfall to wash the debris clean and complete the colossal work.

I say the rocks that jutted up through the soil, for the kloof was not clean cut. All along its sides, and here and there in its arena, stood mighty columns or fingers of rock, not solid indeed, but formed by huge boulders piled mason fashion one upon another, as though the Titans of some dead age had employed themselves in building them up, overcoming their tendency to fall by the mere crushing weight above, that kept them steady even when the wild breath of the storms came howling down the gorge and tried its strength against them. About a hundred paces from the near end of the chasm, some ninety or more feet in height, rose the most remarkable of these giant pillars, to which the remains at Stonehenge are but as toys. It was formed of seven huge boulders, the largest, that at the bottom, about the size of a moderate cottage, and the smallest, that at the top, perhaps some eight or ten feet in diameter. These boulders were rounded like a cricket-ball--evidently through the action of water--and yet the hand of Nature had contrived to balance them, each one smaller than that beneath, the one upon

the other, and to keep them so. But this was not always the case. For instance, a very similar mass which once stood on the near side of the perfect pillar had fallen, all except its two foundation stones, and the rocks that formed it lay scattered about like monstrous petrified cannon-balls. One of these had split in two, and seated on it, looking very small and far off at the bottom of that vast gulf, John discovered Jess Croft, apparently engaged in sketching.

He dismounted from his shooting pony, and looking about him perceived that it was possible to descend by following the course of the stream and clambering down the natural steps it had cut in its rocky bed. Throwing the reins over the pony's head, and leaving him with the dog Pontac to stand and stare about him as South African shooting ponies are accustomed to do, he laid down his gun and game and proceeded to descend, pausing every now and again to admire the wild beauty of the scene and examine the hundred varieties of moss and ferns, the last mostly of the maiden-hair (*Capillus Veneris*) genus, that clothed every cranny and every rock where they could find foothold and win refreshment from the water or the spray of the cascades. As he drew near the bottom of the gorge he saw that on the borders of the stream, wherever the soil was moist, grew thousands upon thousands of white arums, "pig lilies" as they call them in Africa, which were now in full bloom. He had noticed these lilies from above, but thence, owing to the distance, they seemed so small that he took them for everlastings or anemones. John could not see Jess now, for she was hidden by a bush that grows on the banks of the streams in South Africa in low-lying land, and which at certain

seasons of the year is completely covered with masses of the most gorgeous scarlet bloom. His footsteps fell very softly on the moss and flowers, and when he passed round the glorious-looking bush it was evident that she had not heard him, for she was asleep. Her hat was off, but the bush shaded her, and her head had fallen forward over her sketching block and rested upon her hand. A ray of light that came through the bush played over her curling brown hair, and threw warm shadows on her white face and the whiter wrist and hand by which it was supported.

John stood there and looked at her, and the old curiosity took possession of him to understand this feminine enigma. Many a man before him has been the victim of a like desire, and lived to regret that he did not leave it ungratified. It is not well to try to lift the curtain of the unseen, it is not well to call to heaven to show its glory, or to hell to give us touch and knowledge of its yawning fires. Knowledge comes soon enough; many of us will say that knowledge has come too soon and left us desolate. There is no bitterness like the bitterness of wisdom: so cried the great Koheleth, and so hath cried many a son of man following blindly on his path. Let us be thankful for the dark places of the earth--places where we may find rest and shadow, and the heavy sweetness of the night. Seek not after mysteries, O son of man, be content with the practical and the proved and the broad light of day; peep not, mutter not the words of awakening. Understand her who would be understood and is comprehensible to those that run, and for the others let them be, lest your fate should be as the fate of Eve, and as the

fate of Lucifer, Star of the morning. For here and there beats a human heart from which it is not wise to draw the veil--a heart in which many things are dim as half-remembered dreams in the brain of the sleeper. Draw not the veil, whisper not the word of life in the silence where all things sleep, lest in that kindling breath of love and pain pale shapes arise, take form, and fright you!

A minute or so might have passed when suddenly, and with a little start, Jess opened her great eyes, wherein the shadow of darkness lay, and gazed at him.

"Oh!" she said with a little tremor, "is it you or is it my dream?"

"Don't be afraid," he answered cheerfully, "it is I--in the flesh."

She covered her face with her hand for a moment, then withdrew it, and he noticed that her eyes had changed curiously in that moment. They were still large and beautiful as they always were, but there was a change. Just now they had seemed as though her soul were looking through them. Doubtless it was because the pupils had been enlarged by sleep.

"Your dream! What dream?" he asked, laughing.

"Never mind," she answered in a quiet way that excited his curiosity more than ever. "It was about this Kloof--and you--but 'dreams are foolishness.'"