

CHAPTER X

JOHN HAS AN ESCAPE

On the following Monday, John, taking Jantje to drive him, departed in a rough Scotch cart, to which were harnessed two of the best horses at Mooifontein, to shoot buck at Hans Coetzee's.

He reached the place at about half-past eight, and concluded, from the fact of the presence of several carts and horses, that he was not the only guest. Indeed, the first person whom he saw as the cart pulled up was his late enemy, Frank Muller.

"Kek (look), Baas," said Jantje, "there is Baas Frank talking to his servant Hendrik, that ugly Basutu with one eye."

John, as may be imagined, was not best pleased at this meeting. He had always disliked the man, and since Muller's conduct on the previous Friday, and Jantje's story of the dark deed of blood in which he had been the principal actor, positively he loathed the sight of him. He jumped out of the cart, and was going to walk round to the back of the house in order to avoid him, when Muller, suddenly seeming to become aware of his presence, advanced to meet him with the utmost cordiality.

"How do you do, Captain?" he said, holding out his hand, which John just touched. "So you have come to shoot buck with Oom Coetzee; going to

show us Transvaalers how do to it, eh? There, Captain, don't look as stiff as a rifle barrel. I know what you are thinking of; that little business at Wakkerstroom on Friday, is it not? Well, now, I tell you what it is, I was in the wrong, and I am not afraid to say so as between man and man. I had had a glass, that was the fact, and did not quite know what I was about. We have got to live as neighbours here, so let us forget all about it and be brothers again. I never bear malice, not I. It is not the Lord's will that we should bear malice. Hit out from the shoulder, I say, and then forget all about it. If it hadn't been for that little monkey," he added, jerking his thumb in the direction of Jantje, who was holding the horses' heads, "it would never have happened, and it is not nice that two Christians should quarrel about such as he."

Muller jerked out this long speech in a succession of sentences, something as a schoolboy repeats a hardly learnt lesson, fidgeting his feet and letting his restless eyes travel about the ground as he spoke. It was evident to John, who stood quite still and listened to it in icy silence, that his address was by no means extemporary; clearly it had been composed for the occasion.

"I do not wish to quarrel with anybody, Meinheer Muller," he answered at length. "I never do quarrel unless it is forced on me, and then," he added grimly, "I do my best to make it unpleasant for my enemy. The other day you attacked first my servant and then myself. I am glad that you now see that this was an improper thing to do, and, so far as I am

concerned, there is an end of the matter," and he turned to enter the house.

Muller accompanied him as far as where Jantje was standing at the horses' heads. Here he stopped, and, putting his hand in his pocket, took out a two-shilling piece and threw it to the Hottentot, calling to him to catch it.

Jantje was holding the horses with one hand. In the other he held his stick--a long walking kerrie that he always carried, the same on which he had shown Bessie the notches. In order to secure the piece of money he dropped the stick, and Muller's quick eye catching sight of the notches beneath the knob, he stooped down, picked it up, and examined it.

"What do these mean, boy?" he asked, pointing to the line of big and little notches, some of which had evidently been cut years ago.

Jantje touched his hat, spat upon the "Scotchman," as the natives of that part of Africa call a two-shilling piece,[*] and pocketed it before he answered. The fact that the giver had murdered all his near relations did not make the gift less desirable in his eyes. Hottentot moral sense is not very elevated.

[*] Because once upon a time a Scotchman made a great impression on the simple native mind in Natal by palming off

some thousands of florins among them at the nominal value of half a crown.

"No, Baas," he said with a curious grin, "that is how I reckon. If anybody beats Jantje, Jantje cuts a notch upon the stick, and every night before he goes to sleep he looks at it and says, 'One day you will strike that man twice who struck you once,' and so on, Baas. Look, what a line of them there are, Baas. One day I shall pay them all back again, Baas Frank."

Muller abruptly dropped the stick, and followed John towards the house. It was a much better building than the Boers generally indulge in, and the sitting-room, though innocent of flooring--unless clay and cowdung mixed can be called a floor--was more or less covered with mats made of springbuck skins. In the centre of the room stood a table made of the pretty buckenhout wood, which has the appearance of having been industriously pricked all over with a darning-needle, and round it were chairs and couches of stinkwood, and seated with rimpis or strips of hide.

In one big chair at the end of the room, busily employed in doing nothing, sat Tanta (Aunt) Coetzee, the wife of Old Hans, a large and weighty woman, who evidently had once been rather handsome; and on the couches were some half-dozen Boers, their rifles in their hands or between their knees.

It struck John as he entered that some of these did not seem best pleased to see him, and he thought he heard one young fellow, with a hang-dog expression of face, mutter something about the "damned Englishman" to his neighbour rather more loudly than was necessary to convey his sentiments. However, old Coetzee came forward to greet him heartily enough, and called to his daughters--two fine girls, very smartly dressed for Dutch women--to give the Captain a cup of coffee. Then John made the rounds after the Boer fashion, and beginning with the old lady in the chair, received a lymphatic shake of the hand from every single soul in the room. They did not rise--it is not customary to do so--they merely extended their paws, all of them more or less damp, and muttered the mystic monosyllable "Daag," short for good-day. It is a very trying ceremony till one gets used to it, and John pulled up panting, to be presented with a cup of hot coffee that he did not want, but which it would be rude not to drink.

"The Captain is the rooibaatje?" said the old lady "Aunt" Coetzee interrogatively, and yet with the certainty of one who states a fact.

John signified that he was.

"What does the Captain come to the 'land' for? Is it to spy?"

The whole audience listened attentively to their hostess's question, then turned their heads to listen for the answer.

"No. I have come to farm with Silas Croft."

There was a general smile of incredulity. Could a rooibaatje farm?

Certainly not.

"There are three thousand men in the British army," announced the old vrouw oracularly, and casting a severe glance at the wolf in sheep's clothing, the man of blood who pretended to farm.

Everybody looked at John again, and awaited his answer in dead silence.

"There are more than a hundred thousand men in the regular British army, and as many more in the Indian army, and twice as many more volunteers," he said, in a rather irritated voice.

This statement also was received with the most discouraging incredulity.

"There are three thousand men in the British army," repeated the old lady, in a tone of certainty that was positively crushing.

"Yah, yah!" chimed in some of the younger men in chorus.

"There are three thousand men in the British army," she repeated for the third time in triumph. "If the Captain says that there are more he lies.

It is natural that he should lie about his own army. My grandfather's brother was at Cape Town in the time of Governor Smith, and he saw the

whole British army. He counted them; there were exactly three thousand. I say that there are three thousand men in the British army."

"Yah, yah!" said the chorus; and John gazed at this terrible person in bland exasperation.

"How many men do you command in the British army?" she interrogated after a solemn pause.

"A hundred," said John sharply.

"Girl," said the old woman, addressing one of her daughters, "you have been to school and can reckon. How many times does one hundred go into three thousand?"

The young lady addressed giggled confusedly, and looked for assistance to a sardonic Boer whom she was going to marry, who shook his head sadly, indicating thereby that these were mysteries into which it was not well to pry. Thrown on her own resources, she plunged into the recesses of an intricate calculation, in which her fingers played a considerable part, and finally, with an air of triumph, announced that it went twenty-six times exactly.

"Yah, yah!" said the chorus, "it goes twenty-six times exactly."

"The Captain," said the oracular old lady, who was rapidly driving John

mad, "commands a twenty-sixth part of the British army, and he says that he comes here to farm with Uncle Silas Croft. He says," she went on, with withering contempt, "that he comes here to farm when he commands a twenty-sixth part of the British army. It is evident that he lies."

"Yah, yah!" said the chorus.

"It is natural that he should lie!" she continued; "all Englishmen lie, especially the rooibaatje Englishmen, but he should not lie so badly. It must vex the dear Lord to hear a man lie so badly, even though he be an Englishman and a rooibaatje."

At this point John burst from the house, and swore frantically to himself as soon as he was outside. It is to be hoped that he was forgiven, for the provocation was not small. It is not pleasant to be universally set down not only as a leugenaar (liar), but as one of the very feeblest order.

In another minute old Hans Coetzee came out and patted him warmly on the shoulder, in a way that seemed to say that, whatever others might think of the insufficiency of his powers of falsehood, he, for one, quite appreciated them, and announced that it was time to be moving.

Accordingly the party climbed into their carts or on to their shooting-horses, as the case might be, and started. Frank Muller, John noticed, was mounted as usual on his fine black horse. After driving

for more than half an hour along an indefinite kind of waggon track, the leading cart, in which were old Hans Coetzee himself, a Malay driver, and a coloured Cape boy, turned to the left across the open veldt, and the others followed in turn. This went on for some time, till at last they reached the crest of a rise that commanded a large sweep of open country, and here Hans halted and held up his hand, whereon the others halted too. On looking out over the vast plain before him John discovered the reason. About half a mile beneath them was a great herd of blesbuck feeding, three hundred or more of them, and beyond them another herd of some sixty or seventy much larger and wilder-looking animals with white tails, which John at once recognised as vilderbeeste. Nearer to them again, dotted about here and there on the plain, were a couple of dozen or so of graceful yellow springbuck.

Now a council of war was held, which resulted in the men on horseback--among whom was Frank Muller--being despatched to circumvent the herds and drive them towards the carts, that took up their stations at various points, towards which the buck were likely to run.

Then came a pause of a quarter of an hour or so, till suddenly, from the far ridge of the opposite slope, John saw a couple of puffs of white smoke float up into the air, and one of the vilderbeeste below rolled over on his back, kicking and plunging furiously. Thereon the whole herd of buck turned and came thundering towards them, stretched in a long line across the wide veldt; the springbuck first, then the blesbuck, looking for all the world like a herd of great bearded goats, owing to

their peculiar habit of holding their long heads down as they galloped. Behind and mixed up with them were the vilderbeeste, who twisted and turned, and jumped into the air as though they had gone clean off their heads and were next second going clean on to them. It is very difficult, owing to his extraordinary method of progression, to distinguish one part of a galloping vilderbeeste from another; now it is his horns, now his tail, and now his hoofs that present themselves to the watcher's bewildered vision, and now again they all seem to be mixed up together. On came the great herd, making the ground shake beneath their footfall: and after them galloped the mounted Boers, from time to time jumping off their horses to fire a shot into the line of game, which generally resulted in some poor animal being left sprawling on the ground, whereon the sportsmen would remount and continue the chase.

Presently the buck were within range of some of the guns in the carts, and a regular fusillade began. About twenty blesbuck turned and came straight past John, at a distance of forty yards. Springing to the ground he fired both barrels of his "Express" at them as they tore along--alas and alas! without touching them. The first bullet struck under their bellies, the second must have shaved their backs. Reloading rapidly, he fired again at about two hundred yards' range, and this time one fell to his second barrel. But he knew that it was a chance shot: he had fired at the last buck, and he had killed one ten paces in front of it. In fact this sort of shooting is extremely difficult till the sportsman understands it. The inexperienced hand firing across a line of buck will not kill once in twenty shots, as an infinitesimal difference

in elevation, or the slightest error in judging distance--in itself no easy art on those great plains--will spoil his aim. A Boer almost invariably gets immediately behind a herd of running buck, and fires at one about half-way down the line. Consequently if his elevation is a little wrong, or if he has misjudged his sighting, the odds are that he will hit one either in front of or behind the particular animal fired at. All that is necessary is that the line of fire should be good. This John soon learnt, and when he had mastered the fact he became as good a game shot as the majority of Boers, but it being his first attempt, much to his vexation, he did not particularly distinguish himself that day, with the result that his friends the Dutchmen went home firmly convinced that the English rooibaatje shot as indifferently as he lied.

Jumping into the cart again, and leaving the dead blesbuck to look after itself for the present--not a very safe thing to do in a country where there are so many vultures--John, or rather Jantje, put the horses into a gallop, and away they went at full tear. It was a most exciting mode of progression, bumping along furiously with a loaded rifle in his hands over a plain on which antheaps as large as an armchair were scattered like burnt almonds on a cake. Then there were the antbear holes to reckon with, and the little swamps in the hollows, and other agreeable surprises. But the rush and exhilaration of the thing were too great to allow him much time to think of his neck, so away they flew, hanging on to the cart as best they could, and trusting to Providence to save them from complete disaster. Now they were bounding over an antheap, now one of the horses was on his nose, but somehow they always escaped the

last dire catastrophe, thanks chiefly to the little Hottentot's skilful driving.

Whenever the game was within range they pulled up, and John would spring from the cart and let drive, then jump in and follow on again. This went on for nearly an hour, in which time he had fired twenty-seven cartridges and killed three blesbuck and wounded a vilderbeeste, which they proceeded to chase. But the vilderbeeste was struck in the rump, and an antelope so wounded will travel far, and go very fast also, so that some miles of ground had been covered before it began to rest, only to start on again as they drew near. At last, on crossing the crest of a little rise, John saw what at first he took to be his vilderbeeste, dead. A second look, however, showed him that, although it was a dead vilderbeeste, most undoubtedly it was not the one which he had wounded, for that animal was standing, its head hanging, about one hundred and twenty yards beyond the other buck, which, no doubt, had fallen to somebody else's rifle, or else had been hit farther back and come here to die. Now this vilderbeeste lay within a hundred yards of them, and Jantje pointed out to John that his best plan would be to get out of the cart and creep on his hands and knees up to the dead animal, from the cover of which he would get a good shot at his own wounded bull.

Accordingly Jantje having withdrawn with the cart and horses out of sight under the shelter of the rise, John crouched upon his hands and knees and proceeded to carry out his stalk. All went well till he was quite close to the dead cow, and was congratulating himself on the

prospect of an excellent shot at the wounded bull, when suddenly something struck the ground violently just beneath his body, throwing up a cloud of earth and dust. He stopped amazed, and at that instant heard the report of a rifle somewhat to his right and knew that a bullet had passed beneath him. Scarcely had he realised this when there was a sudden commotion in his hair, and the soft black felt hat that he was wearing started from his head, apparently of its own accord, and, after twirling round twice or thrice in the air, fell gently to the earth, just as the sound of a second report reached his ears. It was now evident that somebody was firing at him; so, jumping up from his crouching position, John tossed his arms into the air and sprang and shouted in a way that left no mistake as to his whereabouts. In another minute he saw a man on horseback, cantering easily towards him, in whom he had little difficulty in recognising Frank Muller. He picked up his hat; there was a bullet-hole right through it. Then, full of wrath, he advanced to meet Frank Muller.

"What the devil do you mean by firing at me?" he asked.

"Allemachter, carle!" (Almighty, my dear fellow) was the cool answer, "I thought that you were a vilderbeeste calf. I galloped the cow and killed her, and she had a calf with her, and when I got the cartridges out of my rifle--for one stuck and took me some time--and the new ones in, I looked up, and there, as I thought, was the calf. So I got my rifle on and let drive, first with one barrel and then with the other, and when I saw you jump up like that and shout, and that I had been

firing at a man, I nearly fainted. Thank the Almighty I did not hit you."

John listened coldly. "I suppose that I am bound to believe you, Meinheer Muller," he said. "But I have been told that you have the most wonderful sight of any man in these parts, which makes it odd that at three hundred yards you should mistake a man upon his hands and knees for a vilderbeeste calf."

"Does the Captain think, then, that I wished to murder him; especially," he added, "after I shook his hand this morning?"

"I don't know what I think," answered John, looking straight into Muller's eyes, which fell before his own. "All I know is that your curious mistake very nearly cost me my life. Look here!" and he took a lock of his brown hair out of the crown of his perforated hat and showed it to the other.

"Ay, it was very close. Let us thank God that you escaped."

"It could not well have been closer, Meinheer. I hope that, for your own sake and for the sake of the people who go out shooting with you, you will not make such a mistake again. Good-morning!"

The handsome Boer, or Anglo-Boer, sat on his horse stroking his beautiful beard and gazing curiously after John Niel's sturdy

English-looking figure as he marched towards the cart, for, of course, the wounded vilderbeeste had long ago vanished.

"I wonder," he said to himself aloud, as he turned his horse's head and rode leisurely away, "if the old volk are right after all, and if there is a God." Frank Muller was sufficiently impregnated with modern ideas to be a free-thinker. "It almost seems like it," he went on, "else how did it come that the one bullet passed under his belly and the other just touched his head without harming him? I aimed carefully enough too, and I could make the shot nineteen times out of twenty and not miss. Bah, a God! I snap my fingers at Him. Chance is the only god. Chance blows men about like the dead grass, till death comes down like the veldt fire and devours them. But there are men who ride chance as one rides a young colt--ay, who turn its headlong rushing and rearing to their own ends--who let it fly hither and thither till it is weary, and then canter it along the road that leads to triumph. I, Frank Muller, am one of those men. I never fail in the end. I will kill that Englishman. Perhaps I will kill old Silas Croft and the Hottentot too. Bah! they do not know what is coming. I know; I have helped to lay the mine; and unless they bend to my will I shall be the one to fire it. I will kill them all, and I will take Mooifontein, and then I will marry Bessie. She will fight against it, but that will make it all the sweeter. She loves that rooibaatje; I know it; and I will kiss her over his dead body. Ah! there are the carts. I don't see the Captain. Driven home, I suppose, on account of the shock to his nerves. Well, I must talk to those fools. Lord, what fools they are with their chatter about the

'land,' and the 'verdomde Britische Gouvernement.' They don't know what is good for them. Silly sheep, with Frank Muller for a shepherd! Ay, and they shall have Frank Muller for a president one day, and I will rule them too. Bah! I hate the English; but I am glad that I am half English for all that, for that is where I get the brains! But these people--fools, fools! Well, I shall pipe and they shall dance!"

"Baas," said Jantje to John, as they were driving homewards, "Baas Frank shot at you."

"How do you know that?" asked John.

"I saw him. He was stalking the wounded bull, and not looking for a calf at all. There was no calf. He was just going to fire at the wounded bull when he turned and saw you, and he knelt down on one knee and covered you, and before I could do anything he fired, and then when he saw that he had missed you he fired again, and I don't know how it was that he did not kill you, for he is a wonderful shot with a rifle--he never misses."

"I will have the man tried for attempted murder," said John, bringing the butt-end of his rifle down with a bang on to the bottom of the cart.

"A villain like that shall not go scot-free."

Jantje grinned. "It is no use, Baas. He would get off, for I am the only witness. A jury won't believe a black man in this country, and they would never punish a Boer for shooting at an Englishman. No, Baas! you should lie up one day in the veldt where he is going to pass and shoot him. That is what I would do if I dared."