

PASTELS UNDER THE SOUTHERN CROSS

BY

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its votaries. Numbers of women are, like myself, still more paradoxical in the matter. We love the excitement of the chase and hate to see anything killed. But this objection would almost certainly disappear in the presence of a lion, a tiger, or a rhinoceros. After the wild field where the buck were missed, we pass through Bush like an English coppice in character; a mixture of brushwood and taller trees. Here there is spoor not only of eland and zebra, but of a rhinoceros. It is quite fresh spoor, and the Shikhari is fired with hope. Very possibly rhino is still in this wood. He proceeds with caution through the thorny brushwood, looking round him as he goes, anxious to see the brute. I likewise proceed with caution, also looking round, anxious *not* to see it. I am ready and willing to meet a lion, for I have perfect confidence in the Shikhari's power of killing that. But a rhinoceros is too large and too horny. I seem to remember reading that there is only one place in which it is of the least practical use to hit it. In *Wild Sports of the World*—a mean paper-covered volume, long since vanished, from which most of my wild-beast lore was culled—I recollect a fearsome picture of a particularly bad rhinoceros, called a Keitloa, running amuck among a whole caravan of black people. The rhinoceros always runs—either up or down wind. I do not remember which. If a rhino runs at you, you wait until he is quite close, and at the psychological moment you jump aside. As he is

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very blind and very heavy, he plunges past you and usually disappears never to return. But if he is a vicious specimen, he does return; when you recommence the jumping aside performance. Personally I would rather trust to my powers of shinning up a tree—however long neglected—than to my capacity for jumping aside at the psychological moment. But those who possess presence of mind will prefer the latter course.

I never confessed to the Shikhari that I was glad we got out of that wood without meeting the rhinoceros.

When we came into the open veldt the sun was getting low in the sky. Presently the scarlet moment came. Ruddy light flowed over a flat stretch of burnt veldt across which we were walking, blending its tones of brown and black and grey, smudging on its surface the dark distant figures of the drove of eight mules, which had of course strayed, and the two black men driving them in. When we reach the waggon Mr. Mine-man is there, carrying one brown bird with no tail in particular, which they call a pheasant. The other sportsman, like the Shikhari, comes empty handed. And they speak against Palmer with their tongues.

This is all my story. The needy knife-grinder had probably more of a story, but he was too modest to tell it. Even I am here conscious of a blank, resulting from those blank coverts, which,

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were there no living witnesses, I could readily fill in from *Wild Sports of the World*. There was a picture of a buffalo charging—a buffalo is quite one of the wickedest of wild beasts—and of a celebrated sportsman tossed high up in the air. But I am afraid this incident might be wanting in local colour. There is no reason, however, why the rhinoceros, who cannot be far off, should not take the *rôle* of the Keitloa, rush in upon our camp, trample our tea-things to bits, bowl over several piccanins, and be finally triumphantly shot—in the right place—by the Shikhari. Then there was a picture of a lion dragging a white man along by the arm. Without doubt there are plenty of lions about here, and I should select Mr. Mineman as the lion's prey, to punish him for pretending to be so much more afraid of lions than he really is. The Shikhari would come close up to the lion, so as to avoid damaging its victim, and put his unerring bullet through its head. He would afterwards, in his capacity of doctor, save Mr. Mineman's arm, so that there would be no real harm done; only a few minutes of discomfort.

But alas! I am left face to face with the fact that not only did we have no adventure, but no one, except Mr. Mineman and myself had any sport. He had two birds, and I had—what? A glimpse into the real wild sports of the world. If we had not met with eland or zebra, or a lion, or a rhinoceros, it was an accident; just as it is an accident if you

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call at two or three country-houses and find no one at home. The footprints, the crushed grasses, all the recent signs of the free wild life pervading veldt and wood—I wish I could communicate the thrill of seeing them, the strangeness to one of us, who think of such creatures as specimens, as things at the Zoo, of realising them in their native haunts. It made primitive Man real too; Man, the veritably subtlest of all the beasts of the field, struggling, armed only with a thumb and a brain, against beasts a thousand fold stronger and fleeter than himself. It re-awoke a dream, suggested doubtless by Jules Verne's *Across Africa in a Balloon*, of stalking wild animals from the air, say in an aeroplane; of hovering—for they would surely not look overhead for danger—over the leopard playing with her cubs, over fighting lions and the gamesome leapings of young buck; over the river at evening, when in their order, the herds and the pairs and the solitary wild beasts come galloping with a patter of hoofs, or stealing shadow-like through the reeds to drink. Even the vast coils of the python and the spread hood of the mamba might from above be watched with equanimous interest. And this airy stalking of ours would not be with any ulterior purpose of killing. At the most it would be for the purpose of registering with brush and pencil, or on the film of the camera, or on the more delicate film of the brain, the various aspects of live Nature. Or else it would be just for the pleasure of watching

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this everlasting pageant of Life, glorious and horrible and exquisite and shocking, which unrolls itself unexhaustably over the teeming earth.

The Hottentot and his mate in-span in haste for the red sun is sinking, and now swift dusk will be falling on the veldt. A soft-voiced piccanin begs to be taken into the waggon. He is afraid of the Lion who is so near, lurking up there on the stony Kopje; but the master is obdurate. All the piccanins say they are afraid of the Lion. Though the mules go fast, they run as fast behind, holding on to the waggon, and though they run so fast, their tongues wag softly on, discoursing probably of the beautiful meat which Palmer will give this evening to his fortunate piccanins.

The veldt is grey, but on one side a tall Bush fire is leaping with many tongues of flame, far along the horizon. On the other, Jupiter and Venus shine pale and serene in pellucid sky over the last faint red of sunset. The mules hurry, hurry, the piccanins run, we jump and jolt in the waggon; and so home to dinner.