

The Animals' Dam

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Easy
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“Ach! it was dry,” said Outa, “as dry as last year’s springbok biltong. For a long time the Old Man in the sky shot down strong light and sucked all the water out of the veld. From morning to night he poured down hotness on the world, and when he rolled round to sleep, a hot wind blew—and blew—and blew—till he woke to shine again. The karroo bushes dried up, the rivers had no water, and the poor animals began to die from thirst. It was such a drought, my little masters, as you have never seen.

“At last Oom Leeuw called the animals together to make a plan.

“The Sun had gone under, and the Lady Moon was sailing in the sky—beautiful, as she always is, and looking down on the hot world. Oom Leeuw sat under a krantz on the morning side of a kopje, where it was a little cool, and the others sat round him like a watermelon slice. Leopard, Hyena, Babiaan, Jakhals, Hare and Tortoise were in front; they were the chief ones. The smaller ones, like Dassie, Mierkat, and Hedgehog, were at the sides; and Zebra, Springbok, Ostrich and Giraffe waited in the veld to hear the news. They pretended to be eating, but all the time their ears went backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards—so, my baasjes,—to catch every little sound, and they were ready at the first sign of danger to race away, kicking up the dust so that Oom Leeuw would not be able to see them.

“But they needn’t have been afraid. Oom Leeuw was too hot and tired and weak to catch anything. He just sat against the krantz with his dry tongue hanging out, and the others just lay round about in the watermelon slice

with their dry tongues hanging out, and every time they looked at the sky to see if any clouds were coming up. But no! The sky was just like a big, hot soap-pot turned over above their heads, with the Lady Moon making a silver road across it, and the little stars shining like bits broken off the big, hot Sun. There was nothing that even looked like a cloud.

“At last Oom Leeuw pulled in his tongue and rolled it about in his mouth to get the dryness off. When it stopped rattling, he began to talk.

“‘Friends and brothers and nephews,’ he said—yes, just like that Oom Leeuw began; he was so miserable that he felt friendly with them all. ‘Friends and brothers and nephews, it is time to make a plan. You know how it is with a drought; when it is at its worst, the bottom of the clouds falls out, and the water runs away fast, fast, to the sea, where there is too much water already, and the poor karroo is left again without any. Even if a land-rain comes, it just sinks in, because the ground is too loose and dry to hold it, so we must make a plan to keep the water, and my plan is to dig a dam. But it’s no use for one or two to work; everyone must help. What do you say?’

“‘Certainly,’ said Leopard.

“‘Certainly,’ said Hyena.

“‘Certainly,’ said Ant-bear.

“‘Certainly,’ said Jakhals, but he winked his eye at the Lady Moon, and then put his nose into the warm sand so that no one could see his sly smile.

“All the other animals said ‘Certainly,’ and then they began to talk about the dam. Dear land! A person would never have said their throats were dry. Each one had a different plan, and each one talked without listening to the other. It was like a Church bazaar—yes, baasjes, long ago when Outa was young he was on a bazaar in the village, but he was glad, my baasjes, when he could creep into the veld again and get the noise out of his ears.

“At last the Water Tortoise—he with the wise little head under his patchwork shell—said, ‘Let us go now while it is cool, and look for a place for the dam.’

“So they hunted about and found a nice place, and soon they began to make the dam. Baasjes, but those animals worked! They scratched, they dug, they poked, they bored, they pushed and they rolled; and they all

did their best, so that the dam could be ready when the rain came. Only lazy Jakhals did not work. He just roamed round saying to the others, 'Why don't you do this?' 'Why don't you do that?' till at last they asked, 'Why don't you do it yourself?'

"But Jakhals only laughed at them. 'And why should I be so foolish as to scratch my nails off for your old dam?' he said.

"But you said "Certainly," too, when Oom asked us, didn't you?" they asked.

"Then Jakhals laughed more than ever. 'Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! Am I then a slave of my word? That was last night. Don't you know yet that a thing is one colour by moonlight, and quite another colour when the sun shines on it? Ha! ha! ha!'

"So he went about bothering the poor animals that were working so hard, and laughing at them when they got hot and tired.

"What's the use of working so hard? Those who do not work will also drink.'

"How do you know?" they asked.

"Wait a bit, you'll see,' said sly Jakhals, winking his eye again.

"At last the dam was finished, and that very night the rain began. It kept on and on, till the dam was quite full and the water began to run away over the veld, down to the great big dam called the Sea, that is the Mother of all water, and so broad, my baasjes, that truly you can't see the wall at the other side, even when you stand on a high kopje. Yes, so Outa has heard from truth-telling people. The milk-bushes and karroo-bushes grew green again, and the little veld flowers burst out of the hard ground, and opened their white, and blue, and pink, and purple eyes to look at the Sun. They were like variegated karosses spread out on the veld, and the Old Man in the sky was not so fierce any more; he did not burn them with his hotness, but looked at them kindly.

"And the animals were toch so glad for the water! From far and near they came to the dam to drink.

"But Jakhals was before them all. Soon after the Sun went down—baasjes know, the wild animals sleep in the daytime and hunt in the night—he went to the dam and drank as much water as he wanted, and filled his clay pot with some to take home. Then he swam round and round to get cool, making the water muddy and dirty, and when the other animals came to drink, he slipped over the dam wall and was lost in the veld as if he had

been a large pin.

“My! but Oom Leeuw was very angry!

“Hoorr-rr-rr,’ he roared, ‘hoorr-rr-rr! What is this for a thing? Does the lazy one think he can share with the workers? Who ever heard of such a thing? Hoorr-rr-rr! Here, Broer Babiaan, take this big kerie and hide yourself by the dam to-night, so that you can catch this Vagabond, this Water-stealer.’

“Early that night, there was Jakhals again. He peeped this way and that way—so, my baasjes,—and, yes truly, there was old Broer Babiaan lying amongst the bushes. But Jakhals was too schelm for him. He made as if he didn’t see him. He danced along on his hind legs, all in the round, all in the round, at the edge of the dam, singing:—

‘Hing-ting-ting! Honna-mak-a-ding!

My sweet, sweet water!’

“He sang this over and over, and every time he came to the end of a line, he dipped his fingers into his clay pot and sucked them.

“Aha! but my honey is nice,’ he said, licking his lips. ‘What do I want with their old dirty water, when I have a whole potful of nice sweet water!’

“Baasjes know, baboons will do anything for honey, and when old Broer Babiaan heard Jakhals he forgot he was there to guard the dam. He crept out from his hiding-place, a little nearer, and a little nearer, and at last he couldn’t keep quiet any longer. When Jakhals came dancing along again, he called out in a great hurry, ‘Good evening, Jakhals! Please give me a little of your sweet water, too!’

“Arré!’ said Jakhals, jumping to one side and pretending to be startled. ‘What a schrik you gave me! What are you doing here, Broer Babiaan?’

“Ach no! Jakhals, I’m just taking a little walk. It’s such a fine night.’

“But why have you got that big kerie?’

“Only to dig out eintjes.’

“Do you really want some of my sweet water?”

“Yes, please, Jakhals,” said Broer Babiaan, licking his lips.

“And what will you give me for it?”

“I’ll let you fill your pot with water from the dam.”

“Ach! I don’t want any of that dirty old dam water, but I know how fond you are of this sweet water, Broer, so I’ll let you drink some. Here, I’ll hold your kierie while you drink.”

“Boer Babiaan was in such a hurry to get to the honey that he just threw the kierie to Jakhals, but just as he was going to put his fingers into the pot, Jakhals pulled it away.

“No, wait a bit, Broer,” he said. “I’ll show you a better way. It will taste much nicer if you lie down.”

“Ach no! really, Jakhals?”

“Yes, really,” said Jakhals. “And if you don’t lie down at once, you won’t get a drop of my sweet water.”

“He spoke quite crossly, and Babiaan was so tame by this time that he was ready to believe anything, so he lay down, and Jakhals stood over him with his knapsack riem.

“Now, Brother, first I’ll tie you with my riem, and then I’ll feed you with the honey.”

“Yes, yes,” said Broer Babiaan quickly.

“His mouth was watering for the honey; he couldn’t think of anything else, and he had long ago forgotten all about looking after the dam. It goes so, my baasjes, when a person thinks only of what he wants and not of what he must. So he let Jakhals tie his hands and feet, and even his tail, and then he opened his mouth wide.

“But Jakhals only danced round and round, sticking his fingers into the pot and licking them, and singing:

‘Hing-ting-ting! Honna-mak-a-ding!

My sweet, sweet water!’

“Where’s mine?’ called Broer Babiaan. ‘You said you would feed me. Where’s my sweet water?’

“Here’s all the sweet water you’ll get from me,’ said Jakhals, and—kraaks—he gave poor Broer Babiaan a hard hit with the kierie.

“Borgom! Borgom! Help!’ screamed Broer Babiaan, and tried to roll away. But there was no one to help him, so he could only scream and roll over, and each time he rolled over, Jakhals hit him again—kraaks!

“At last he squeezed the clay pot—and baasjes can believe me it had never had any honey in it at all—over Broer Babiaan’s head, while he ran off and drank as much water as he wanted, and swam, and stirred up the mud. Then he took the clay pot off Broer Babiaan’s head, filled it with water, and danced off, singing:

‘Hing-ting-ting! Honna-mak-a-ding!

My sweet, sweet water!’

“Good-bye, Brother,’ he called out. ‘I hope you’ll enjoy the sweet water you’ll get from Oom Leeuw when he sees how well you have looked after the dam.’

“Poor Old Broer Babiaan was, ach! so miserable, but he was even more unhappy after Oom Leeuw had punished him and set him on a large stone for the other animals to mock at. Baasjes, it was sad! They came in a long string, big ones and little ones, and each one stopped in front of the big stone and stuck out his tongue, then turned round and stuck out his tail—yes, so rude they were to Broer Babiaan, till the poor old animal got ashameder and ashameder, and sat all in a heap, hanging down his head and trying not to see how they were mocking at him.

“When all the animals had passed on and drunk water, Oom Leeuw untied Broer Babiaan and let him go, and off he went to the krantzies as fast as he could, with his tail between his legs.

“And that is all for to-night, my baasjes. It is too long to finish now. See, here comes Lys with the baasjes’ supper, and Outa can smell that his askoekies are burning by the hut.”

Evading the children’s detaining hands, Outa sidled away, turning in the passage doorway to paw the air with his crooked fingers in token of a final farewell.