



The Ostrich Hunt

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Easy
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The next day all the time that was not given to lessons and meals was spent by the little boys in scouring the veld for a red tortoise. Disappointment at their fruitless search found vent in no measured terms when Outa Karel appeared in the dining-room at his usual hour.

“Ach, to hear them now!” he said, regarding them with his wide-mouthed smile of amused tolerance. “Does it then rain red tortoises? And how can the baasjes think they will find at the first shot a thing that only comes once in a thousand years?”

“Well,” said Willem, stoutly, “it might just have been the time for one. How were we to know?”

“Outa,” asked little Jan, earnestly, “do you know when it will be red tortoise time again?”

“Aja, baasjes,” said Outa readily, “it won’t be long now. Let Outa think.” He performed a tattoo on the red kopdoek—a sure sign that he was in the thick of mental gymnastics. “What comes just before a thousand, my baasjes?”

“Nine hundred and ninety-nine,” answered Pietie, who was good at arithmetic.

“Now, yes,” said Outa, triumphantly, “I knew it must be nearly time. It is nine hundred and ninety-nine years since there was a red tortoise, so next year this time baasjes can begin to look for one. Only begin, my baasjes, because it will only be creeping out of the egg then. And p’r’aps it won’t be in this veld. It might be far, far away

where people don't know about a red tortoise, and so no one will look for him. Must Outa tell another story about him?"

The sly old man had taken the best way of escaping more questions. The little boys gathered round and listened wide-eyed as he told the story of the Tortoises hunting the Ostriches.

"After Oubaas Giraffe was dead, the Tortoises had a nice life for a long time, and then there came into their veld Old Three Sticks, the Ostrich, with his mam-ma and pap-pa, and his wives, and uncles, and aunties, and children, and friends. Alla! there were a lot of Ostriches! The whole veld was full of them, and they all began eating tortoises wherever they could find them. It was just the same like when Oubaas Giraffe used to go about. And the tortoises thought and thought, and they talked and talked, but they couldn't make a plan that would drive the Ostriches away.

"The little Red Tortoise was thinking, too, but he didn't talk till he had his plan ready. Then he called all the Tortoises together. The Old Ones came because they wanted to hear what the wise little Red One had to say, and the Young Ones came because ever since he had killed Oubaas Giraffe they had listened to him. When they were all together he said, 'It now goes on too long, this hunting of the Tortoises by Old Three Sticks and his friends. Let us change places and let us, the Tortoise people, go and hunt Ostriches.'

"Peep! peep!" cried all the young Tortoises: they were quite ready. But the Old Ones said, 'Is this the wise little Red One? How is it possible for us to hunt Ostriches?'

"It is possible, because Ostriches never run straight, but always a little in the round, and a little in the round, so that in the end if they run long enough they come again to the place they began from. Now yes, on a certain day let us then go into the veld where the Ostriches like to hunt, and let us make two long rows, not straight out but always in the round; one ring, very large, outside, and the other, smaller, inside. Then when Old Three Sticks and his friends come we will call one to the other and drive them on, and they will flee through the midst of us, round and round and round till they can flee no longer.'

"Peep! peep!" said the young Tortoises, and the Old Ones joined in. They saw that it was a good plan, so they all went to the hunting veld of Old Three Sticks and his friends and spread themselves out, as the little Red Tortoise had said.

“Soon the Ostriches came, pecking, pecking, as they walked.

“The Tortoises sat very still, waiting, my baasjes, just waiting, till the Ostriches were right in the middle of the two rings. Then the little Red Tortoise gave the signal, ‘Peep! Peep!’ and at once the calling began.

“Are you there?’ called the first Tortoise.

“I am here,’ said the next, and so it went on all round the circle, one calling to the other.

“What are you doing?’ called the first one.

“Hunting Ostriches,’ said the next, and so it went on all round the circle again, one calling to the other.

“The Ostriches could see nothing. They could only hear voices calling. They looked at each other and said, ‘What are these voices? It is surely a great army come to hunt us. Let us get away.’

“They were very frightened and began to run, and as far as they ran they heard:—

“Are you there?’

“I am here.’

“What are you doing?’

“Hunting Ostriches.’

“So it went on, over and over again. The Tortoises never moved, only kept calling out. And the Ostriches ran faster and faster, all in the round, till at last they were so tired they couldn’t run any more. First one fell, and then another, and another, and another, till there were heaps of them lying about, and just where they fell they lay quite still. They were too tired to move.

“Then the Tortoises gathered together—they were very many—and they bit Old Three Sticks and all his family and friends on their long necks and killed them.

“Since then the Tortoises have had peace from the Long-necked People—Oubaas Giraffe and old Three Sticks. It is only the Things of the Air, like Crows and Lammervangers, that still hunt them, and baasjes know how they do? They catch a poor Tortoise in their claws and fly away with him, high up over a kopje, and then they

drop him on the stones—kabloops!—and there he lies with his shell all broken, and without a shell how can a Tortoise live? And then the Thing of the Air comes and eats him up, and that is the end of the poor Tortoise. But a Red Tortoise they never touch. It is his colour, baasjes, that frightens them. So the Young Tortoises were right when they said, ‘There is something, after all, in being born a certain colour.’

“After the Ostrich hunt, the little Red Tortoise was sprinkled with buchu under both arms, and his Mam-ma sang him this song:—

The little crook-legged one! I could sprinkle it,

Sprinkle it with buchu under its arms.

The little red crab! The little Wise One!

I sprinkle the buchu under both arms.

For the Long-necks, they that ate us,

It has found a way to kill them;

So we sprinkle it, the little Red One,

Sprinkle the buchu under both arms.”

The usual discussion took place when Outa had finished, and at last Pietie said, “If I had to be a Tortoise, I’d be a red one.”

“Why, my little master?”

“Because the Crows and Lammervangers don’t catch it. To be swallowed by an ostrich or stick in a giraffe’s throat would not be so bad, but I’d hate to be broken on the stones.”

“Ach! my baasje, no matter how Old Friend Death comes, we are never ready for him. When Outa was young he was nearly killed by a troop of springbucks, and he thought, ‘No, not to be trampled to death; to be carried down the river is better.’ But when the flood came and the river carried Outa away, he fought for his life just as hard as when the springbucks were on him. It was the same when the hut was burnt, and when the mad bull chased Outa across the veld. Over and over again the same. Always another sort of death seems better. Always

Old Friend Death finds a man not quite ready for him.”

“And now how would you like him to find you, Outa?” asked Willem with much interest.

A whimsical smile spread over the old man’s face. “Ach! to hear him! Just sitting in the sun, my baasje, by the skeer-kraal wall, where I have sat for so many, many years. When he comes I will say, ‘Morning, Old Friend, you have been a long time on the road—ach! so long, that I am tired of waiting. Let us go at once.’ A person needn’t pack up for that trek, baasjes. I’ll just drop my old sheepskin kaross, and take Old Friend Death’s hand and let him show me the way. It is far, my baasjes, far to that land, and no one ever comes back from it. Then someone else will tell the stories by the fire: there will be no Outa any more to talk to the little masters.” His voice had dropped to a musing tone.

“Don’t! Don’t!” cried Pietie in a choked voice.

“Outa, you mustn’t say such things,” said Willem, and they each seized one of Outa’s crooked hands, while little Jan clung to his old coat as though he would never let it go.

“I want my Outa,” he cried. “He mustn’t go away. I want my Outa Karel!”

The old man’s eyes glistened with a moisture not often seen in them. “Still! still! my little baasjes,” he said, stroking first one and then another. “Outa doesn’t want to make them sad. He is not going yet. He will sit here and tell his foolish stories for many nights yet.” A caressing smile broke over his grotesque face. “And do they then want to keep their Outa? Ach! to think of it! The kind little hearts! But what will the Nooi say if the eyes are juicy? No, Outa only said about the skeer-kraal and sitting in the sun because it sounds so nice and friendly. Look how lively and well Outa is—like a young bull-calf!” He pretended playfully to toss them. “That’s right, my children, now you laugh again. But young bull-calves must also go in the kraal, and the hut is calling Outa. Night, my baasjes, night, night. Sleep well. To-morrow Outa will tell them another beautiful story. Ach, the dear little ones! So good to their ugly Outa!”

Followed by a chorus of “good-nights” from the children; the old man shuffled away, not knowing that he had spoken with prophetic voice, and that Friend Death would find him, even as he wished, sitting in the sun by the skeer-kraal.

But that was not yet awhile, and he told many stories before setting out on the Great Trek for the Unknown Veld whence no traveller returns.

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