

The Sun, a Bushman Legend

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Intermediate
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Outa, having disposed of his nightly tot, held his crooked hands towards the cheerful blaze and turned his engaging smile alternately on it and his little masters.

“Ach! what it is to keep a bit of the Sun even when the Sun is gone! Long ago Outa’s people, the Bushmen, did not know about fire. No, my baasjes, when the Big Fire, that makes the world warm and bright, walked across the sky, they were happy. They hunted, and danced, and feasted. They shot the fine big bucks with their little poisoned arrows, and they tore pieces off and ate the flesh with the red blood dripping from it: they had no fire to make it dry up. And the roots and eintjes that they dug out with their sharp stones—those, too, they ate just as they were. They did not cook, for they did not know how to make fire. But when the white man came, then they learnt. Baasjes see, Outa’s head is big—bigger than the Baas’s head—but that does not help. It’s the inside that matters, and the white man’s head inside here”—Outa tapped his wrinkled forehead—“Alla! but it can hold a lot!”

“In the olden days, when Outa’s people were cold they crept into caves and covered themselves with skins, for they had no fire to sit by. Yes, they were sorry when the Old Man in the sky put down his arms and lay down to sleep.”

“What Old Man?” asked Pietie. “Do you mean the Sun?”

“Aja! Don’t baasjes then know that the Sun was once a man? It was long, long ago, before Outa’s people lived in

the world: perhaps in the days of the Early Race that were before even the Flat Bushmen, who were the first people we really know anything about. In those days at a certain place lived a man, from whose armpits brightness streamed. When he lifted one arm, the place on that side of him was light; when he lifted the other arm, the place on that side of him was light; but when he lifted both arms, the light shone all around about him. But it only shone around the place where he lived; it did not reach to other places.

“Sometimes the people asked him to stand on a stone, so that his light could go farther; and sometimes he climbed on a kopje and lifted up his arms: ach! then the light streamed out far, far, and lighted up the veld for miles and miles. For the higher he went, the farther the light shone.

“Then the people said: ‘We see now, the higher he goes the farther his light shines. If only we could put him very high, his light would go out over the whole world.’

“So they tried to make a plan, and at last a wise old woman called the young people together and said: ‘You must go to this man from whose armpits the light streams. When he is asleep, you must go; and the strongest of you must take him under the armpits, and lift him up, and swing him to and fro—so—so—and throw him as high as you can into the sky, so that he may be above the kopjes, lifting his arms to let the light stream down to warm the earth and make green things to grow in summer.’

“So the young men went to the place where the man lay sleeping. Quietly they went, my baasjes, creeping along in the red sand so as not to wake him. He was in a deep sleep, and before he could wake the strong young men took him under the armpits and swung him to and fro, as the wise old woman had told them. Then, as they swung him, they threw him into the air, high, high, and there he stuck.

“The next morning, when he awoke and stretched himself, lifting up his arms, the light streamed out from under them and brightened all the world, warming the earth, and making the green things grow. And so it went on day after day. When he put up his arms, it was bright, it was day. When he put down one arm, it was cloudy, the weather was not clear. And when he put down both arms and turned over to go to sleep, there was no light at all: it was dark; it was night. But when he awoke and lifted his arms, the day came again and the world was warm and bright.

“Sometimes he is far away from the earth. Then it is cold: it is winter. But when he comes near, the earth gets

warm again; the green things grow and the fruit ripens: it is summer. And so it goes on to this day, my baasjes: the day and night, summer and winter, and all because the Old Man with the bright armpits was thrown into the sky.”

“But the Sun is not a man, Outa,” said downright Willem, “and he hasn’t any arms.”

“No, my baasje, not now. He is not a man any more. But baasjes must remember how long he has been up in the sky—spans, and spans, and spans of years, always rolling round, and rolling round, from the time he wakes in the morning till he lies down to sleep at the other side of the world. And with the rolling, baasjes, he has got all rounder and rounder, and the light that at first came only from under his arms has been rolled right round him, till now he is a big ball of light, rolling from one side of the sky to the other.”

Cousin Minnie, who had been listening in a desultory way to the fireside chatter, as she wrote at the side-table, started and leant toward the little group; but a single glance was enough to show that so interested were the children in the personal aspect of the tale that there was no fear of confusion arising in their minds from Outa’s decided subversion of an elementary fact which she had been at some pains to get them to understand and accept.

“And his arms, Outa,” inquired little Jan, in his earnest way, “do they never come out now?”

Outa beamed upon him proudly. “Ach! that is my little master! Always to ask a big thing! Yes, baasje, sometimes they come out. When it is a dark day, then he has put his arms out. He is holding them down, and spreading his hands before the light, so that it can’t shine on the world. And sometimes, just before he gets up in the morning, and before he goes to sleep at night, haven’t baasjes seen long bright stripes coming from the round ball of light?”

“Yes, yes,” assented his little listeners, eagerly.

“Those are the long fingers of the Sun. His arms are rolled up inside the fiery ball, but he sticks his long fingers out and they make bright roads into the sky, spreading out all round him. The Old Man is peeping at the earth through his fingers. Baasjes must count them next time he sticks them out, and see if they are all there—eight long ones, those are the fingers; and two short ones for the thumbs.”

Outa's knowledge of arithmetic was limited to the number of his crooked digits, and the smile with which he announced the extent of his mathematical attainments was a ludicrous cross between proud triumph and modest reluctance.

"When he lies down, he pulls them in. Then all the world grows dark and the people go to sleep."

"But, Outa, it isn't always dark at night," Pietie reminded him. "There are the Stars and the Moon, you know."

"Ach, yes! The little Stars and the Lady Moon. Outa will tell the baasjes about them another night, but now he must go quick—quick and let Lys rub his back with buchu. When friend Old Age comes the back bends and the bones get stiff, and the rheumatism—foei! but it can pinch! Therefore, my baasjes, Outa cooks bossies from the veld to rub on—buchu and kookamakranka and karroo bossies. They are all good, but buchu is the best. Yes, buchu for the outside, and the Baas's fire-water for the inside!"

He looked longingly at the cupboard, but wood and glass are unresponsive until acted on by human agency; so, possessing no "Open, Sesame" for that unyielding lock, Outa contented himself by smacking his lips as he toddled away.

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