



*When the Birds would Choose
a King which Tells Also Why
the White Owl Only Flies by
Night*

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South African

*Easy
24 min read*

The three children were lounging with the dogs under the tall blue-gums by the house corner, when the old Hottentot stepped out of the kitchen to find a shady spot for his afternoon nap. Before he could settle anywhere, however, the eldest boy lifted his face and caught sight of a mere speck, far up in the still hot sky, where a vulture hung motionless in the blue.

“Oh, look!” cried he at once. “There’s Old Baldy, the Aasvo’el, almost out of sight. Ain’t he just high! I bet there ain’t any other bird can fly as high as he can.”

The old Hottentot turned, first to look at the vulture and then at the little boy. “Well,” said he, “dere was one time, dough, when it took a whole big indaba of all de birds to say which flew de highest—him or Young Tink Tinky.”

“Young Tink Tinky!” echoed the eldest boy scornfully. “Why! he’s the very littlest, teeniest bird in the veldt!”

“Yes, dat’s yust de way Ou’ Jackalse talked,” answered Old Hendrik gleefully. “But he find out ’fore he finis’ dat it ain’t de size but de sense dat counts.”

“Well, I bet I could soon settle which flew the highest,” returned the boy.

“Mebbe,” said Hendrik. “But anyhow, it took de birds a deal o’ time to settle it. An’ trouble—dere was trouble, too, ’fore dey finis’, an’ de White Owl he ain’t never fly about in de daytime from dat day to dis. He’s mighty big, an’ he’s a mighty ole beak an’ clawses, but he darsent on’y fly about o’ nights since den.”

“Oh, now, you must tell us all about it, Ou’ Ta’,” commanded little Annie. “You’ll see how soon we’ll settle it.”

“Will I, Ainkye?” answered the old fellow, with his deepest smile. “Well, here’s de tale an’ you can try anyhow. You see, it was all along o’ dese yere birds dat on’y come in de summer an’ don’t stay for de hard times in de winter. De Aficander birds dat live here all de time dey got to studyin’ about dese outlander birds what yust comes to skim de cream o’ de year; an’ nawtin’ ’ud do ’em but dey’s goin’ to make a King. Dey reckon de King he’ll tell dese outlander birds he’s had yust about enough o’ deir hanky panky, an’ dey’ll ha’ to stop here all de year roun’ or stop som’ere’s else; but dey cahnt do bofe. Dat’s what Kings is for.

“Well, de birds dey talks to one anoder, an’ de birds dey gets togeder for a big indaba; but when one ses do dis way, anoder ses do dat way, till dey all dunno what’s it all a-gun’ to end in, an’ at last dey all agrees to ax a outsider to set some way o’ choosin’ dis yere King. An’ what outsider? Why, who but Ou’ Jackalse, o’ course.

“But dey’ll ha’ to wait a day or two ’fore dey gets him. De Aard-Vark is invite’ Ou’ Jackalse to a big dwala drink, an’ it ain’t no use to talk till dat’s over.

“Well, dis yust suit Ole Baldy Aasvo’el. He don’t say a word, but he sail off, an’ by’n’by he’s a-hangin’ yust over de Aard-Vark’s kraal, where de Aard-Vark’s frien’s is drinkin’ dwala, an’ he hang dere till he sees Ou’ Jackalse a-lookin’ up at him. Den he drops down behind de rise a little way off, an’ dere he waits. He knows Ou’ Jackalse ’ll come sniffin’ out, tinkin’ dere’s meat dere.

“Tain’t more’n a minute ’fore here comes Ou’ Jackalse a’ right. ‘Hello! Baldy,’ ses he, ‘where’s de meat?’

“Well,’ ses Baldy, ‘dere ain’t no meat here yust now. But dere can be lots an’ lots of it for you ’fore long if you an’ me is frien’s dese nex’ few days.’

“Ou’ Jackalse is pretty full of dwala, an’ de dwala make him pretty full o’ feelin’ yust a’ right, so he on’y laugh an’ sit down. ‘How come dat?’ ses he.

“Dis way,’ ses Baldy. ‘All us birds is a-gun’ to make us a King, an’ we’ve agree’ to call you in to gi’e us sometin’ to go by to settle de one it’s to be. You’s to set sometin’ for de birds to do, an’ de one dat does it he’s to be de King. So I’s come to see you about it beforehand.’

“You is, hey?’ ses Ou’ Jackalse, de dwala warmin’ him up good an’ happy. ‘An’ how is you come now? Is you a depitation, or is you come on your own? Is you here for all de birds or yust for one—yust for Ole Baldy?’

“Ole Baldy fair scowl to hear Ou’ Jackalse bring it out full an’ ugly like dat. But he reckon it’s de dwala doin’ it, an’ so he’ll try a bit longer. ‘Well,’ ses he, an’ he gi’en hisse’f a look up an’ down. ‘Don’t you tink I’d be a bit a’ right in de Kingin’ line myse’f? I tinks I’d be full price an’ some change over myself.’

“You does? Ho! you does, hey?’ ses Ou’ Jackalse, an’ he drop his nose atween his paws an’ fair root it in de groun’ wid laughin’.

“You should ha’ seen Ole Baldy’s feders stand up. ‘Yes, I does,’ ses he. ‘An’ how come not, I’d like to know?’ ses he. ‘Anyhow, it’s a-gun’ to pay you a lot better to stand in wid me an’ get me King dan wid any o’ de oders. It’ll pay you a lot de best,’ ses he.

“Ou’ Jackalse ain’t got so much dwala in him but what he ketch on to dat word ‘pay’ a’ right. ‘How’s it gun’ to pay me?’ ses he.

“Easy,’ ses Baldy. ‘If you gets me King, den every bird dat eats meat’ll ha’ to leave you de one half of it. What

price me now?' ses he. 'Is dere any oder bird can offer better?'

"Well, dat ain't bad,' ses Jackalse. 'But s'posin' I bargains wid you, den what's de plan? I s'pose you's made some sort o' plan for me to work on?'

"Dis,' ses Baldy. 'When all de birds at de indaba axes you what dey's to go by, den you answers an' tells 'em dat de birds is got wings yust to lift 'em in de air. Well, an' since de birds is on'y birds so's dey can rise in de air instead o' walkin' on de ground, den de bird dat can do bird's work best is de best one, an' it stand to reason de best should be King. So let 'em all fly up, an' de one dat flies de highest is de King—dat's fair enough, ain't it?' ses he.

"It do soun' a' right,' ses Jackalse. 'An' you can ax de oder birds weder it's fair or not if you like. Anyhow, it's a bargain so far—an' now I's off back to de dwala,' and off he pop.

"Ole Baldy yust stop long enough to watch him out o' sight. 'T's fix' dat skellum dis time a' right,' ses he. 'King o' de birds, eh! See me when I's doin' de Kingin'. I bet I'll make 'em all fly round a bit.' Den off he pop too.

"In de meantime Ou' Jackalse is a-headin' back for de dwala, but he hadn't got half way 'fore up yumps little Tink Tinky. 'Mawnin', Oom Jackalse,' ses he, yust as smart as a new ticky.

"Go 'way, you spot o' shadda!' ses Ou' Jackalse, in a hurry to get back to de dwala. 'Go 'way, or I'll blow you away wid de wind of a wink o' my eye.'

"Oh, dat's it, is it?' ses young Tink. 'Well, I was comin' to see you about dis King o' de bird business. But if dat's de sort you is, why I reckon I'll do it on my own, an' den I shan't owe nawtin' to no such a fathead as you.'

"King o' de birds,' ses Ou' Jackalse, an' he squot on his haunches an' laugh till he fair wobble. 'You!' ses he, an' he laugh agen till he fall on his side an' beat de ground wid his tail. 'Oh, do go an' be King o' de rest o' de birds. Be King over Ole Baldy an' de big White Owl an' all dat lot.'

"All dat lot o' big fatheads, like you,' ses young Tinky, an' he yust flick down an' tweak a beakful o' hair out of Ou' Jackalse tail. 'What price dat?' ses he, as he fly up out o' reach.

"Ou' Jackalse yump up like lightnin' struck him. 'You young squirt!' yell' he. 'I'll gi'e you King o' de birds if I gets hold o you.'

“An’ I’ll show you all about King o’ de birds ’fore I’s done wid you,’ ses Tinky. ‘You tinks you’s jüst too smart for common everyday. But I’ll show you jüst how smart you ain’t. You wait an’ see.’ An’ off he flick for where he seen Ole Baldy fly up. He knows Ou’ Jackalse come f’m dere too.

“Now when Ou’ Jackalse an’ Ole Baldy was a-talkin’ togeder, dey ain’t needer on ’em seen de Hokhi-Khee (dat’s de ladybird) a-sittin’ under a grass blade close by. An’ de Hokhi-Khee she on’y want to keep out o’ sight till dey’s gone, ’cause all de brown lace of her wings is all ruffle down her back, an’ it won’t lie nice an’ straight under dat yella cloak o’ hers wid de black spots. ‘Goodness gracious o’ me,’ ses she to herse’f, ‘I jüst ain’t fit to be seen! I hope dese two ole buffers ’ll get away soon.’

“So she kept dat close out o’ sight dey never seen her, an’ as soon as dey’s gone she hop down an’ start to get dat lace straighten’ out an’ tucked away nice an’ neat under her cloak, an’ she’s all in a shake an’ a fluster, when down pops young Tink Tinky.

“Well, I jüst do declare!’ ses she. ‘What do you drop down on a body like dat for? You’s got as much imperence as if you was de biggest bird, instead o’ de smallest.’

“All right,’ ses young Tinky. ‘I may be de littlest bird, an’ Ole Baldy may be de biggest, an’ he may a-bin here talkin’ soft to you. But I can jüst dust him down any day,’ an’ you should a-seen dat young Tinky stretch-in’ out first one little wing an’ den de oder, like he’s sayin’—‘Look at dat now’.

“But de ladybird ain’t a-listenin’ to none o’ his foolishness. ‘Yes,’ ses she, ‘you ses dat now. But you wait a bit till de Aasvo’el’s King of all you birds, den you’ll ha’ to sing small enough, Mr Tink Tinky.’

“Ho!’ ses Tinky. ‘So Ole Baldy’s bin tellin’ you he’s gun’ to be King o’ de birds, is he? But we’ll see about dat. Some’dy else may ha’ sometin’ to say about dat.’

“Well, I never,’ ses de ladybird. ‘If dat ain’t jüst like your imperence! P’r’aps you ’magines you’s gun’ to be King yourse’f?’

“Why not?’ ses he. ‘I’s as good a man as Ole Baldy any day.’

“You ses you is, an’ you has cheek enough to tink you is,’ ses de ladybird. ‘But wait till you comes to try. De one dat flies highest is gun’ to be King. I yust heard him settle dat wid Ou’ Jackalse. An’ now where’s you? But p’r’aps you tink you can fly higher dan de Aasvo’el—you has imperence enough.’

“An’ I has gumption enough too,’ ses young Tinky. ‘You yust wait an’ see if I ain’t.’

“I don’t care what you has if you’ll only go away out o’ dis now,’ ses de ladybird. ‘An’ don’t you come roun’ me any mo’ till you’s beat Ole Baldy flyin’ high.’

“Den I’ll be King,’ ses Tinky. ‘Don’t you wish I’d come if I was King?’

“No, I don’t,’ ses she.

“Den I won’t,’ ses he, an’ off he pops.

“Well, de day comes for choosin’ dis yere King, an’ all de birds dey brings Ou’ Jackalse into de indaba, an’ dey ax him what dey’s got to do to find de right one. An’ Ole Baldy look so hard at Jackalse dat he wrinkle all his head an’ half his neck, an’ Ou’ Jackalse he smile back ’fore he speak. ‘Dere’s on’y one way o’ gettin’ at it,’ ses Ou’ Jackalse. ‘Birds was made wid wings so dey could get up off de earth. So if dat’s what a bird’s for, an’ if dat’s de one ting dat make him a bird, den it stand to reason de one dat can do bird work best is de best bird. If you is to have a King den, why, de best bird should be de best King, or de best King should be de best bird, whichever way you likes it. So now de one dat flies de highest—dat’s de one to be King.’

“Dere’s a lot o’ dem birds ’ud like to say a lot o’ bad words yust den. But de way Ou’ Jackalse lay de business down dey cahnt see yust where to tackle what he said. Dey all has to say, ‘A’ right!’ an’ dey all ses it, but they don’t all tink it. So dere ain’t no more said, an’ dey all lines up in a row. An dere ain’t nob’dy noticin’ dat nob’dy’s seen Young Tinky yet. But dere ain’t nob’dy troublin much about nob’dy else nohow.

“Is you ready?’ ses Ou’ Jackalse. ‘Yes,’ ses dey. ‘Den go!’ ses he.

“Up dey goes, an’ up, an’ up, an’ up. An’ fust de partridge drops, an’ den de long-tail fink; and de Kurhaan she tink she never did hear no such foolishness nohow, so down she drop too. An’ dat way dey go on, fust one an’ den anoder droppin’ out, till last of all dere ain’t but one left—Ole Baldy.

“Ole Baldy he go up, an’ on, an’ on, an’ up, till at last he cahnt get higher; but by jimminy, he is up dere. ‘How’s

dis for high?' ses he.

“All de birds look up, an' none of 'em cahnt say one word. 'You's got it,' ses Ou' Jackalse, 'you's de highest.'

“Is he?' squeaks a chinky little voice. 'Is he?' an' dere, where dey're all lookin', up pops little Tinky off'n Ole Baldy's back, where he's bin hid in de feders widout Ole Baldy knowin'. 'What price me now?' ses he, an' up he go, yards up! 'How's dis for higher?' ses he.

“Ole Baldy he turn his head an' look up. 'Hello, you speck!' ses he, 'what you doin' up dere?'

“Flyin' higher'n you,' ses Tinky. 'Dat makes me de King.'

“King!' ses Baldy. 'If I could yust get up dere I'd King you. Come down now!'

“Oh, oh!' ses Tinky. 'So you gi'es in you can't get up to me! Dat's done den. I's King a' right,' an' he comes down yust as cheeky as billy-o, wid his tink, tink, tink, tink, till he gets to de ground. Den he chucks a leg. 'King Tinky!' ses he. 'Dat's me.'

“Well, de birds dey all drop down an' dey wait for someb'dy to say somefin'. But young Tinky he hop in front of Ou' Jackalse an' he stick his coat tails out. 'Well, Oom Jackalse,' ses he, 'who's de smart 'un to-day?'

“I wish I was one o' de birds you's bin foolin',' ses Ou' Jackalse; 'I'd show you which was smart.'

“Just den Ole Baldy bounce down in front of 'em. 'Who's King?' ses he.

“De one dat went highest,' ses Ou' Modher Reyer, de Blue Crane.

“An' dat's me,' ses Baldy.

“An' dat's me,' ses Tinky, stickin' his little wings out an' bouncin' hisse'f like he was mockin' Ole Baldy.

“Look-a'-here,' ses Baldy, 'if you ses anoder word I'll scoff you.'

“Will you?' ses Young Tinky, settin' hisse'f in front of Ole Baldy like a bantam. 'You will, hey? Well—anoder word—dere, I's said it.'

“Ole Baldy yust look one look at Tinky, an' den he make one dive to scoff him, straight. But he's dat slow an' heavy on de ground he might as well try to catch a flea on a blanket; an' dere's him a-divin' an' a-floppin', an'

dere's Young Tink a-flickin' an' a hoppin', till Ole Baldy fair boil over an' stand still. 'Birds!' ses he, 'is we gun' to stand dis an' have dis little squirt say he's King over us?'

"You bet we ain't," ses de White Owl. 'Is I de King den?' ses Baldy nex', lookin' at 'em all roun'.

"But dey all want to say sometin' to dat, 'cause if dey cahnt be King deirselves dey don't want anyb'dy else to be it. 'No,' ses dey. 'It was to be de one went highest, an' we all hear you say to Tinky what you'd do if on'y you could get up at him.'

"Den what's a-gun' to be done?" ses Baldy, as mad's a scorpion.

"Well, we'll ha' to study dat out," ses dey. 'We'll ha' to hold a indaba an' see what we'll do about it.'

"Well, dey ketches Young Tinky an' dey takes him over and puts him into a big Aard-Vark hole. 'Who'll we put to watch him now?' ses dey.

"Put de White Owl," ses Ou' Jackalse; 'he's got de biggest eyes an' de widest open.'

"So dey put de White Owl to guard de hole, an' dey all goes back to hold a indaba.

"Why, dis is yust a fine place, it's so reg'lar nice an' shady," ses Young Tinky to de White Owl. 'I's gun' to have a look for a place to be comfy in.'

"Do," ses de White Owl. 'Den you won't bodder me.'

"But what Tinky's a lookin' for is a place to get out at, an' he look, an' he look, but dere ain't no sich a place. 'I 'specs I'll ha' to do sometin' pretty soon if I's gun' to keep dis side o' trouble,' ses he to hisse'f.

"Well, dere's on'y one way out o' de hole, an' dat's de way he come in at, an' dere's de White Owl standin' at it wid his tail dis way, an' a-starin' out across de veldt to where de indaba's goin' on. Den it strike Tinky what he'll do. 'Allah Crachty! I knows what. Wait now,' ses he to hisse'f.

"So he goes to work, an' he take some dirt, an' he wet it an' he work till he's made a mud mouse. You should ha' seen darie mouse. If any mouse 'ad a-seen it he'd a-tink it was his grandaddy, it look such a whoppin' ole mouse. It fair tickle young Tinky so much when he'd finis' it dat he hatto yust stop an' laugh.

"Den he go to de hole an' he stick dat mouse out slow on one side o' de White Owl till it yust come into de tail of

his left eye, an' afore you can ketch your breaf Ole Owl make a lightnin' of a strike at it—biff!

“Well, he ain't made sich a mighty ole strike since he was a young fella, an' he strike dat hard an' he strike dat true, dat he biff his beak right troo de mouse, so dat de mud bung up his two eyes an' chock up his froat, an' you fair never did see no sich a splosh an' sich a splutter in your time. ‘Mak' los!’ screech he, an' it sound like a bushman on de mad. ‘Mak' los!’ But de mud mouse ain't a-sayin' a word, not a word; an' Young Tink Tinky's yust a-gettin' out o' dat at de rate of half-a-mile in a hunder' yards—on'y de White Owl ain't knowin' nawtin' about dat.

“Well, Ole Owl he hadn't more'n got de mud outen his eyes 'fore de indaba's finis', an' here comes all de birds. ‘Where's dat Tink Tinky?’ ses dey. ‘Fetch him out!’

“‘He's in dere a' right,’ ses de Owl. ‘What's you all decided on?’

“‘Well,’ ses dey, ‘by de law we cahnt yust say. Ole Baldy ain't King, 'cause he said he couldn't get up to Tinky. An' as to Tinky, he ain't King 'cause he ain't big enough nohow. But we's a-goin' to hang' him, so dere won't be no mistake about him not bein' King. Trot him out den.’

“‘You better trot him out yourse'f,’ ses Ole Owl. ‘My eyes is yust dat full o' dirt I cahnt see.’

“‘Well, de Sec'etary Bird he cock his eye into darie hole, like a ole crow squintin' down a marrow bone. ‘Come out o' dat an' be hanged,’ ses he. ‘Make hurry now! We ain't a-gun' to wait all day for a speck like you.’

“‘But dere ain't no Tinky come out. ‘Dat's funny he don't come out when I shout,’ ses Ole Sec.

“‘Well, de birds dey ses dey ain't got no more time to fool about. ‘Come on, Ole Owl,’ ses dey. ‘You's lookin' after him anyhow. In you pops, den, an' outs him.’

“‘A' right.’ In pops Ole Owl, an' out don't pop no Tinky. ‘By gum!’ ses all de birds.

“‘Ole Owl in de hole he look an' he crook, an' he glint, an' he squint, but he don't find no Tinky. ‘Dat's mighty funny,’ ses he, comin' out. ‘I seen you all shove him in here, an' I ain't seen him come out; but he ain't dere now. He must ha' spooked!’

“Oh, he’s spooked, is he?” ses all de birds, tearin’ mad. ‘Well, we’ll yust make spook o’ you,’ ses dey, an’ dey make a dive for him like one man.

“Ole Owl he yust glint one glance at de lot, an’ den he turn an’ he fair make a head fust for it into dat hole agen, an’ dat’s de one ting saved him. De birds dey cahnt get at him in dere on’y one at a time, an’ dere ain’t any one o’ ’em feel like facin’ dat ole hook of a beak on his lonesome. So dere dey sits outside de hole, waitin’ for him to come out. An’ dere he sits inside de hole, waitin’ for dem to come in; an’ so dere ain’t needer in nor out, but dey bofe sits an’ waits.

“Ses all de birds outside—‘If you don’t come out an’ let us get at you, we’ll yust about dance on you’ chest’.

“Ses Ole Owl inside, ses he—not a word! not a sound!

“Well, dey wait all day, an’ dey wait all afternoon, but Ole Owl ain’t a-comin’ out, an’ dey ain’t a-goin’ in. Den it drop sundown, an’ de birds dey ha’ to fly som’eres to sleep. Dey look at one anoder. ‘Yust wait till to-morrow, dat’s all!’ ses dey, an’ off dey fly to deir sleepin’ places.

“When dey’s gone Ole Owl comes out. ‘I reckon I’ll hatto get as much to eat as I can to-night,’ ses he, ‘an’ den hide some place to-morrow, so dey won’t see me.’

“An’ dat’s yust what he done, an’ yust what he’s hatto do ever since—hunt all night an’ hide all day, for fear de rest o’ de birds see him an’ ketch him, if he move about in de daylight.

“So now you knows how it come dat de Ole White Owl can on’y fly at night,” ended Old Hendrik.

“Oh!” said little Annie.

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