

Who Was the Thief?

Sanni Metelerkamp

African

Easy
6 min read

“Yes, my baasjes, so was Oom Jakhals: he always made as if he forgot all about what he had done, and he made as if he thought all the others forgot too, quick-quick. He is maar so schelm.”

Here Outa took full advantage of the pinch of snuff he held between his right forefinger and thumb, sneezed with evident enjoyment two or three times, and continued:

“When Jakhals thought Hyena was quite well, he went to visit her.

“‘It’s very dull here in the veld,’ he said, ‘and food is so scarce, so I’m going to hire myself to a farmer. He’ll give me lots to eat and drink, and when I’m nice and fat I’ll come home again. Would you like to go too, Brown Sister?’

“Hyena smacked her lips when she heard about the nice things to eat. She thought it a very good plan. So they went to a farm, and Jakhals talked so nicely that the farmer hired them both to work for him.

“Ach! it was a beautiful place; lots of chickens and little ducks, and Afrikander sheep with large fat tails that could be melted out for soap and candles, and eggs, and doves and pigeons—all things that Jakhals liked. He just felt in his stomach that he was going to have a jolly life.

“During the day Jakhals peeped all about, in this corner, in that corner, and he found out where the farmer kept the nice fat that was melted out of the sheep’s tails. In the middle of the night, when all the people were fast

asleep, he got up and went quietly, my baasjes, quietly, like a shadow on the ground, to the place where the fat was. He took a big lump and smeared it all over Brown Sister's tail while she was asleep. Then he ate all that was left—n-yum, n-yum, n-yum—and went to sleep in the waggon-house.

“Early in the morning, when the farmer went out to milk the cows, he missed the fat.

“Lieve land! Where is all my fat?’ he said. ‘It must be that vagabond Jakhals. But wait, I’ll get him!’

“He took a thick riem and his sjambok, and went to the waggon-house to catch Jakhals and give him a beating. But when he asked about the fat, Jakhals spoke in a little, little voice.

“Ach no, Baas! Would I then do such an ugly thing? And look at my tail. There’s no fat on it. The one whose tail is full of fat is the thief.’

“He turned round and waved his tail in the farmer’s face, and anyone could easily see that there was no fat on it.

“But the fat is gone,’ said the farmer, ‘*someone* must have stolen it,’ and he went on hunting, hunting in the waggon-house.

“At last he came to where Hyena was sleeping, just like a baby, baasjes, so nicely, and snoring a little: not the loud snoring like sawing planks—gorr-korrr, gorr-korr—but nice soft snoring like people do when they sleep very fast—see-uw, see-uw. It is the deepest sleep when a person snores see-uw, see-uw. Hyena’s head was on some chaff, and her tail was sticking out behind her, stiff with fat!

“Aha! here is the thief,’ said the farmer, and he began to tie the riem round her.

“Old Brown Sister sat up and rubbed her eyes. ‘What’s the matter?’ she asked. ‘I had a beautiful dream. I dreamt I was eating fat the whole night, and——’

“And so you were—*my* fat,’ said the farmer, and he pulled the rope tighter. ‘And now I’m going to teach you not to steal again.’

“Poor old Brown Sister jumped about when she found out what he was going to do; she ran round and round the waggon-house trying to get away; she called out, and she called out that she did not know about the fat, that she had never tasted it, and had never even seen it. But it was no good.

“Look at your tail,’ said the farmer. ‘Will you tell me that your tail went by itself and rubbed itself in the fat?’

“So he tied her to the waggon wheel and beat her, and beat her—ach! she was quite sore—and she screamed and screamed, and at last he drove her away from the farm.

“Poor old Brown Sister! She didn’t even have the fat from her tail to eat, because, baasjes see, with the running round and the beating, it was all rubbed off. But she never went to live on a farm again; the veld was quite good enough for her.”

“Is that the end, Outa?” asked Willem.

“Yes, my baasje. It’s a bad end, but Outa can’t help it. It does maar end so.”

“And where was Jakhals all the time?” enquired Pietie, severely.

“Jakhals, my baasje, was sitting on the waggon saying his prayers—so, my baasjes.” Outa put his crooked hands together and cast his twinkling eyes upwards till only the yellows showed.

“Bezie, bezie, brame,

Hou jouw handjes same.’

In English: “Berry, berry, blackberry,

Hold your hands together.”

“And every time Hyena screamed, Jakhals begged her not to steal again, but to try and behave like a good Christian.”

“But *Jakhals* was the thief,” said little Jan, indignantly. “He was always the wicked one, and he was never

punished. How was that, Outa?”

A whimsical smile played over the old man’s face, and though his eyes danced as wickedly as ever, his voice was sober as he answered.

“Ach! my little master, how can Outa tell? It is maar so in this old world. It’s like the funny thing Baas Willem saw in the Kaap (Cape Town), that runs down a place so quickly that it just runs up on the other side, and *then* it can’t stop, but it has to run down again, and so it keeps on—up and down, up and down.”

“You mean the switchback?” asked Willem.

“Ach, yes! baasje, Outa means so. And in the world it is the same—up and down, up and down. And often the good ones are down and the bad ones are up. But the thing—Outa can’t get the name right—goes on, and it goes on, and by-and-by the good ones are up and the bad ones are down.”

“But Jakhals seemed always to be up,” remarked Willem.

“Yes, my baasje,” said the old man, soberly. “Jakhals seemed always to be up. It goes so sometimes, it goes so,” but his eyes suddenly had a far-away look, and one could not be certain that he was thinking of Jakhals.

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