

Why Little Hare Has Such a Short Tail

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South African

Intermediate
15 min read

Old Hendrik was standing by the corner of the house, milking pail in hand, watching the slow procession of the cows homeward from the veldt. The calves in the kraal clamoured insistently to hasten their mummies home; those mummies answered now and then with a patient bellow of assurance as they continued their placid pace, and Old Hendrik seemed to be as vacant of thought or stir as they. But when little Annie came strolling out to enjoy the never-staling delight of seeing the headlong rush of each calf in turn to its mammy, the old Hottentot looked down at her and begun without further warning. "Ole King Lion had five cows, an' t'ree o' dem was wild an' wand'ry."

"Oh!" cried Annie, "I never heard of that. And what did he do with them, Ou' Ta'?"

"Why, milk 'em, o' course," returned Old Hendrik. "What else? An' some o' de milk his ole missis an' de kleinkies drink, an' some he drink hisse'f. De rest he make de butter wid to grease all deir ole noses."

"Oh, how funny!" cried Annie in huge delight. "And did he mind them himself?"

"Course not!" retorted Hendrik, a little scornfully. "Ain't he a king? Kings don't mind cows. Not him. He just

make all de animals try deir turn at it, but dese t'ree wand'ry ones dey'd keep gettin' away, an' den de animal dat come home wid dem t'ree missin'—well, he'd be a-missin' too, an' Ole King Lion he'd be dat much fatter.

“Well, it come Little Hahsie's turn at last—Klein Hahsie, dat you call Little Hare, dat skellum Little Hare—but he yust prance out behind dem cows in de mawnin' wid a high ole hop an a skip. He'd show 'em about mindin' five bally ole cows, he would, ses he. He sticks a green twig in his mouf, an' he biffs his ole hat down over his eyes, an' he gets dem cows down in a hook o' de river an' squots down on a little koppiekie to watch 'em, all nice an' all right. ‘Mind five ole cows,’ ses he; ‘by de jimminy, gi'e me sometin' easier—if dere is any.’

“Well, it did look all serene-o, wid him dis side of 'em an' de river bent all round 'em on de oder sides, an' plenty o' grass an' water an' nice trees about. ‘Sho,’ ses he, ‘dem cows stray off? Dey's got mo' sense,’ ses he.

“It was yust sich a easy yob dat in a while his eye 'gun a-wanderin' round to see what else dere is dere besides de cows an' de rest of it. An' fust he sees a little bushiekie, wid green leaves like he swears he ain't seen afore, or leastways he ain't 'xamined much; so o' course he hops over to dat an' pretends to tas'e it, an' feel it, an' turn it over gen'ally.

“Den he sees de blesbuck wanderin' past, wid de teenty little buckies whimperin' an' nosin' achter deir mammies, an' fust he squot an' watch 'em, an' den he get to feelin' cussed, an' he fair hop round 'em to scare 'em an' make 'em flurry, till deir mammies turn round an' chase him out o' dat. Next he slant his eye at de spruit an' tinks he'll yust sa'nter down an' frow stones at Ou' Sculpat, de Tortoise, an' ax him what's his latest time for a mile wid a flyin' start. Den he can hear Ou' Sculpat use some rocky ole words.

“But when he gets down to de spruit Ou' Sculpat ain't dere at all, an' dat make him hoppin' mad. He's yust dat mad he chucks stones into de water an' savages de reeds for anoder five minutes on end. Den he looks up an' dere he sees de honey-bird a-whickerin' about. ‘Whatto!’ ses Hahsie. ‘Dere's honey somewheres. Here's on to it like one man.’

“Well, he hops on ahter de honey-bird, an’ he hops on an’ on, tinkin’ every mile he’s gun’ to get to dat honey soon. An’ den here comes a man ridin’ along, an’ he sees de honey-bird too, an’ he ’gins to folio’ as well. Hahsie looks at him once, an’ he sizes his face up. ‘Dat lets me out,’ ses he to hisse’f. ‘Dat face ain’t a-gun’ to stand me gettin’ any o’ dat honey. I’d about better turn back.’

“So he turns back, but de day’s got dat hot an’ de shade under de little bushiekies is dat cool, he tinks he’ll rest him a little while an’ den go on agen. Wid dat he finds a nice bush an’ squots him down. An’ you know what’s bound to happen den—he pop off to sleep.

“Along in de afternoon, when de day gets a bit cooler, he wake up an’ open his eyes. ‘Hello!’ ses he, ‘where’s dem cows by dis time?’ Den he rub his eyes an’ he grin. ‘One ting anyhow,’ ses he, ‘if Ole King Lion don’t eat again till he eat me for dis, den he’s mighty liable to die o’ starvation.’

“But when he gets back to de hook o’ de river, dere’s de two quiet ole cows all right, but de t’ree wand’ry ones—well, dey’s wandered. He look round an’ round, an’ he hop dis way an’ dat, but he don’t find hide nor hair o’ dem t’ree, till at last it’s about time to be startin’ for de kraal wid dese two. He takes one more long ole look round, but it ain’t no use, it don’t find dem cows, an’ so he starts dese two for home.

“He ain’t a-goin’ far wid ’em dough. He yust folio’s on till de two can see de kraal, an’ den he pops back to de place where de oders was lost. Now dere was a long ole, rocky ole, bushy ole island in de river dere, wid rocks stickin’ up all de way across de water to it, so Little Hahsie can cross wid some tall hoppin’. An’ he crossed, you bet he crossed mighty smart—an’ he find him a snug little place all in a patch o’ big boulders an’ bushes an’ trees. ‘Here’s me,’ ses he, ‘till I sees what’s a-goin’ to happen.’

“Well, he ain’t dere very long ’fore here comes Ole King Lion, yust a-gur-r-rowlin’ an’ a-pur-rowlin’ an’ a-singin’ out, ‘Where’s dat Klein Hahsie dat went out so high an’ smarty dis mawnin’? Lemme yust find him, dat’s all!’ You bet Little Hahsie lie low den, an’ wish dere was big wings to him as well as long legs an’ short ’uns.

“But Ole King Lion couldn’t find him. He ramp an’ he stamp, an’ he squot down like he’s goin’ to be sick an’ brings up a whackin’ ole roar dat fair shakes de island, but he don’t start Little Hahsie, ’cause Little Hahsie’s too tremblin’ to shift a foot, an’ by’n’by King Lion he go off to roar up some oder spot. ‘Dat’s a bit more like what I likes,’ ses Hahsie den.

“So at last it come dark, an’ de lion was far enough off, an’ Little Hahsie hop out to stretch his legs an’ tink a bit. ‘But I wonder how I’ll do now when I goes back home to-morro,’ ses he.

“Well, to-morro’ come, an’ Hahsie he tink dis way an’ dat way, but he make so little out of it dat he stop anoder night on de island, an’ he ’gin to feel mighty longin’ for home, I tell you. An’ nex’ day it on’y got worse, till it got dat bad about sundown he yust couldn’t stand it no longer. ‘Here’s off home,’ ses he, ‘an’ chance de chips. I’ll bet I’ll manage somehow.’

“In a while he gets home to King Lion’s place, an’ it’s as dark as billy-o, an’ he squots down by de end o’ de barn to see what’s happenin’. By’n’by out comes his ole missis f’m de kitchen where she’s a-washin’ up ahter supper. ‘Sh—shee!’ ses he, as low as he could for her to hear him.

“She tink she know dat sound, an’ she come up to him to see who it was, an’ she yust open her mouf to let out one big squeal, but he nabs her by de ear in time. ‘If you don’t stop dat row, ole missis,’ ses he, ‘I’ll bite your long fool ears off,’ ses he.

“‘But we all tink you was dead,’ ses she.

“‘Hmp!’ ses he; ‘an’ I s’pose you’s a’ready got anoder ole man in your eye?’ ses he.

“‘I hain’t,’ ses she. ‘One’s enough if he’s bin like you. But when Ole King Lion found de t’ree cows yestiday, an’ you wasn’t wid ’em, he made sure you was dead.’

“‘An’ was he sorry?’ axes Hahsie.

“‘Yes; he said it was sich a waste o’ meat, him not gettin’ you to eat,’ ses she.

“Him he blowed!” ses Hahsie. ‘You go an’ bring me out sometin’ nice to eat, an’ den I’ll see about him. He may be big an’ ugly, but he ain’t so smart as some folk I knows.’

“Well, his missis she bring him out a mealie pap pot wid lots in it yet, an’ some milk, an’ he tucks a fair ole little lot inside him. ‘Dat’s all right,’ ses he when he finis’. ‘Now, you yust fetch me de rake, an’ den skip back an’ leave de kitchen door open.’

“She fetches de rake an’ hands it to him. ‘But what’s you goin’ to do wid dat?’ ses she.

“Get out o’ dis an’ shut up, or I’ll do it to you instead!” ses he, makin’ a comb at her wid de rake, till she fair flew back to de kitchen.

“Well, he looks at de lights in de winda, an’ he tinks o’ de good ole times he’s had dere, an’ den he fair lands into hisse’f wid dat rake. He tears all his clo’es an’ he tears all his hair, an’ he gashes big streaks in his face an’ his hands an’ his ribses, till he looks like he’s yust fell into a big ole mimosa an’ bin drag’ out by de heels. Den he stagger into de kitchen an’ drop on de floor all of a heap. ‘Where’s Ou’ Doctor Jackalse?’ ses he—‘bring Ou’ Jackalse, for I’s yust about gone up.’

“His wife yust gi’en one big ole squeal an’ all de house was upside down. Here dey all comes a runnin’ an’ a yappin’, an’ here’s King Lion troo ’em all. ‘Hello, you skellum,’ ses he, ‘where come yeh from now?’

“Little Hahsie opens one eye an’ looks at him. ‘From where dem t’ree cows horn me nea’ly to deaf, ’cause I stopped ’em wanderin’,’ ses he. ‘I yust got here to-night to see my ole missis agen ’fore I pegs out.’

“Allah Crachty now!” ses King Lion, ‘ain’t dat funny! But where’s darie Ou’ Jackalse? Let’s have dis Hahsie doctored in less’n two shakes of a lamb’s tail.’



“So dey puts Little Hahsie to bed.” Illustration by J.A. Shepherd. Published in *Old Hendrik’s Tales* (1904), Longmans, Green and Company.

“So dey puts Little Hahsie to bed, an’ Ou’ Jackalse turn everybody out o’ de room while he can ’xamine him. He look him over, an’ he turn him over, an’ he feel him over, an’ den—well den, Ou’ Jackalse he wink at Ole Hahsie, slow an’ solemn, an’ Ole Hahsie he wink at Ou’ Jackalse half a-grinnin’.

“I tink you’ back’s pretty bad,’ ses Ou’ Jackalse. ‘I ’specs you’ll ha’ to stop in bed dese nex’ days or two, an’ nice bits o’ scoff to tempt your appetite.’

“Yes,’ ses Hahsie. ‘A bit o’ sugar cane or a water-millon now ’ud do me pretty fine.’

“So Little Hahsie has to stop in bed for a week, an’ all de time his wife’s a-grumblin’ at him ’cause she has to wait on him, an’ tellin’ him she’ll tell King Lion. An’ Hahsie tells her she’d yust better do it, dat’s all. But all dis time he’s s’posed to a-ketched sich a fair ole cold dat he cahnt har’ly whisper, an’ his back’s dat bad he cahnt har’ly bend it.

“Well, come de end o’ de week an’ King Lion ’gun to smell a rat. ‘To-day you can go an’ work in de to’acco lands,’ ses he.

“Little Hahsie don’t like dat, but he has to go an’ git hold. He lifts dat hoe, an’ he look at dat row, an’ he squint out on de grass alongside an’ see a nice round Aard-Vark hole. But he don’t look de oder way, else he’d a-seen King Lion hidin’ hisse’f to watch him. ‘To’acco hoein’s worse’n watchin’ cows,’ ses Hahsie, as he bent his back an’ put his hoe to work.

“Now de day was yust de sort o’ day for makin’ you feel good, an’ Hahsie hadn’t hoed ten yards ’fore he forgot all about everytin’ but wishin’ he was out on de veldt. An’ all de time King Lion in his hidin’ place was watchin’ an’ watchin’ till at last he stick his head up an’ shout out—‘Hahsie! Klein Hahsie!’

“Here I is!’ ses Hahsie, clear out an’ yumpin’ up, forgettin’ dat cold an’ dat sore back he’s s’posed to be sick wid.

“King Lion he ses yust one word—‘Ho!’ ses he, an’ he make a forty mile spring to ketch Ole Hahsie.

“An’ Hahsie he ses on’y one word too—‘Oh!’ ses he, an’ he make a fifty mile dive for darie Aard-Vark hole, an’ he drops down it out o’ sight yust as Ole King Lion claws de tail off him, all but de stump.

“By jimminy! dat skellum!’ ses King Lion outside.

“Allah Crachty! dat close shave!’ ses Hahsie inside.

“Well, King Lion he waited an’ he waited, but it wahnt no use at all, for Klein Hahsie he didn’t wait two shakes, but he sets to work an’ digs out at anoder place, a long way off in de mealies, an’ pops off over de sky line dat way. But he’s mighty careful to keep out of Ole King Lion’s way since den, for he got sich a scare dat time dat he hain’t never manage to grow a long tail agen, like he used to have afore.

“An’ if you want’s to know yust what a hairy ole scare he got,” continued Old Hendrik, “you notice him nex’ time you sees him. You’ll see a white patch on his tail—dat’s gone white wid de fright he got when de great big claws was a-grabbin’ de rest o’ de tail off. But here’s de cows, an’ I’s got to get to de milkin’,” broke off the old storyteller, swinging his pail and starting for the kraal.

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