



Why the Ratel is so Keen on Honey

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South African

Intermediate
12 min read

The children were accompanying Old Hendrik from the tobacco lands to the mealie lands farther out, and on the way, in crossing the broken, bush-grown spruit between, the eldest boy marked a fresh earth of the Ratel or honey-badger. "Dat's bad to see if we don't do sometin'," said Old Hendrik. "Dere'll be mighty little honey on dis place 'fore long if we don't drop on to Mr Ratel."

"But, Ou' Ta'," demanded Annie, "why is the Ratel always after the honey?"

"Well, Ainkye," answered Old Hendrik gravely, "it's 'cause it's in de blood. Some folk ses it's dis way an' some ses it's dat way but as soon as Ou' Ratel sees 'em comin' to ax, he fair dives into diggin', an' he's half-way down to Dublin, as your mammy ses, 'fore dey comes to where he started f'm. It ain't dat dese hyer Ratels ain't proud o' de reason, 'cause dey tinks it was mighty smart o' deir granddaddy. It's yust dey rinks nobody knows, an' so dey won't tell."

“But I knows, 'cause my ole granddaddy tole me, an' it happen in his granddaddy's time. You see it was de granddaddy of all dese yere Ratels, an it was when he was a young kerel in his daddy's house. Dere ain't no doubt he was slim, baiah slim, an' he was yust dat gone on honey dat he even played tricks on his ole daddy, till at last he tried on dat about de sack o' honey an' de honey-gum tree. Den—well, you listen.

“Dis young Seeunkie Ratel was de sort dat his mammy was al'ays a-fallin' out wid his daddy over him, reckonin' his daddy was al'ays a-tinkin' he was up to some skellumness or other. An I reckon myse'f dat de ole man know'd. However, de ole man had a big goatskin chock full o' de finest honey, an' he kep' it under de bed in de sleepin' chamber, so it 'ud be nice an handy—an' safe. In a mawnin' dey'd all get up, an de ole daddy he'd go out an' have a look round, an' de ole mammy she'd be busy a-gettin' de breakfas' ready, while little missy Wilhelmina Ratel she'd play about, inside or outside or underfoot, yust like little girls does when deir mammies is busy. An' all dis time young Seeunkie Ratel he'd be—well—dat's when de honey 'ud be doin' de disappearin'.

“What he used to do was to wait till de rest was outside or in de eatin' room, an' den he'd sneak back into de sleepin' chamber, pull out his knife, snick a chunk o' dis sugary honey out o' de bag, slip it into his pocket an' off out to have a look round too, 'fore breakfas'. Dat's when he'd scoff dis chunk o' honey.

“Well, de ole daddy he sees his honey lookin' less an' less every day, an' he scratch his head an' he say to his wife: 'Mammy,' ses he, 'dat's mighty funny about dat honey. It's a-goin' somewheres.'

“Well,' ses she, 'what you expect? You let dat good-for-nuffin' Wilhelmina play about yust as she likes an' do what she likes, an' yet you won't never b'lieve nawtin' I tells you about her. I know'd she'd be in some mischief soon,' ses she, for Ole Missis Ratel was one o' dese women what's all for deir skellum of a boy, an' so de daddy has to be good to de little girl hisse'f.

“Well, ole daddy he sit down an' he tink an' tink, an' old mammy she go out an' ketch hold o' little Wilhelmina an' spank an' spank, but young Seeunkie he stays out on de veldt an smack an' smack his lips on de honey, an' keep de tail o' one eye over his shoulder to watch if his daddy's comin'.

“Tings went on a-dis way den, till one mawnin’ at breakfas’ dey had a pretty good ole breakfas’, an’ by de time dey’d finis’ de ole daddy was a-feelin’ yust right an’ comfy, an’ he lean back in his chair an’ pulls out half a yard o’ yuicy ole to’acco. ‘Len’ your ole daddy your knife for a minute, Seeunkie,’ ses he.

“Young Seeunkie tink no mo’ about it, but dives down in his pocket an’ haul out his knife an’ lifts it over. But he hadn’t no mo’ dan stretch it out ’fore he feels de honey sticky on it, yust as de ole daddy grips his fingers on it. De yoke’s on his neck now, tinks Seeunkie, as he looks at his daddy, but he never lets on yust yet.

“Oom Ratel gets de knife open ’fore de sticky feelin’ strikes him. Den he looks down at de blade an’ de joints of it an’ den he looks up at young Seeunkie an’ de cheeks of him, an’—well, he gets up an’ grabs dat young burgher by de scruff. ‘So it’s you bin steal all dat honey, is it?’ ses he. ‘Yust what I t’ought a’ready.’

“‘Dere you is agen,’ shouts de ole fool mammy. ‘Blamin’ him ’fore you knows if it’s true or not. You ain’t ask him what he’s got to say.’

“‘Dere ain’t no need for any say in it,’ ses ole daddy. ‘Dere’s de honey on his knife to do all de sayin’.’

“‘But dat ain’t honey at all,’ ses Seeunkie, bold as brass now his mammy’s up. ‘Dat’s yust sweet honey-gum. I found a tree o’ sweet gum yestiday down by de spruit.’

“‘Sweet gum!’ ses Oom Ratel. ‘T’s lived a bit longer an’ seen a bit mo’ dan you, Seeunkie, but I ain’t never seen any sweet gum tree nor heerd o’ one yet.’

“‘Well, you’s seen an’ heerd o’ sweet gum now,’ snaps dat ole fool mammy; ‘an’ dat on’y shows how much smarter he is dan you. You let him go, an’ he’ll show you de tree a’ right enough.’

“‘Yes, I will,’ ses Seeunkie, as sa’cy as a new ticky.

“‘Right den,’ ses de ole daddy. ‘T’s yust a-goin’ round de koppie now, an’ as soon as I’m back you’ll ha’ to show me dis sweet gum tree, or else I’ll knock some gum out o’ you.’

“So off goes Oom Ratel round de koppie, an’ den young Seeunkie looks at his mammy, an’ his mammy looks at him. ‘What’ll you do now, Seeunkie?’ ses she.

“‘Go an’ show him de tree,’ ses Seeunkie. ‘You lend me anoder knife now, an’ you’ll see.’

“Well, she lend him dis knife, an’ off he pops an’ down to de spruit. Dere he pick out a nice young t’orn tree standin’ by itself, one dat hain’t got many gum cracks on it, an’ he set to work like billy-o to scrape off every bit o’ dat gum an’ leave de spots bare. An’ when he couldn’t see not de glisten o’ one speck left, den he goes back home an’ waits for de ole daddy.

“Well, an’ here comes in Oom Ratel. ‘Ready to show me dat tree now?’ ses he.

“I is,’ ses Seeunkie. ‘Come dis way an’ I’ll show you.’

“So off dey pops an’ comes to de tree. ‘Dat’s de tree, daddy,’ ses Seeunkie. ‘See how clean I scraped it till dere ain’t none left, it was dat good.’

“Oom Ratel he look at de tree an’ he see de bare spots, an’ he try to scrape de cracks wid his nails to taste it. But young Seeunkie’s scraped too clean for dat, an’ so de ole daddy has to turn round an’ look at him. ‘An’ when’s dis tree goin’ to ha’ some more honey on it?’ ses he.

“Well, it’s of a mawnin’ de honey’s out,’ ses Seeunkie. ‘Dere has to be de sun on it all day, an’ den at night de stuff runs. To-morro’ mawnin’s de time den.’

“A’ right,’ ses ole daddy. ‘To-morro’ mawnin’ you leave dis tree alone till I comes. Don’t you dah to touch it ’fore I sees it. Den we’ll see,’ ses he.

“Well, p’r’aps you tink dat ’ud set young Seeunkie to studyin’ hard. But not him; he yust stalks back wid his ole daddy, hands in pockets an’ mouf in a whistle, like a location Kaffir wid new yalla boots on. It ain’t no sort o’ trouble to him to plan skellum; it yust come nat’ral to him.

“When dey gets home young Seeunkie grins at his mammy, but Oom Ratel he goes out agen on business. An dis time he takes de honey sack wid him, for he’s got a plan an’ he’s yust a-startin’ to work it. But he hain’t got nawtin sure yet to say to his missis one way or anoder as he goes out. She has. She ses it too. ‘Didn’t I tole you!’ ses she.

“Next mawnin’ Oom Ratel gets all his goin’s out done ’fore breakfas’, so as he’ll be ready for dis honey tree first ting ahter it. But young Seeunkie he goes out too on his own account, on’y he first cuts anoder chunk o’ honey out of his ole daddy’s goatskin under de bed, an’ takes dat wid him, an’ as soon as he gets to de young mimosa he scrapes de gum spots clean agen an’ daubs ’em all fresh wid honey. Den he sneaks home an’ smiles to hisse’f

all troo breakfas' time.

“Well, ahter breakfas' Oom Ratel he ses. ‘Come on,’ an’ de young Seeunkie he ses, ‘A’ right,’ an’ off dey pops down to de honey-gum tree. Sure enough, dere’s de honey an’ dere’s de ole daddy a-tastin’ it an’ a-sayin’ what mighty good stuff it is.

“Well,’ ses de young fella, ‘I tole you all de time, but you wouldn’t b’lieve me. An’ now what?’ ses he.

“Oh, now everytin’s all right,’ ses de ole daddy grinnin’. ‘An’ here you is, Seeunkie, I’s brought dis,’ ses he, pullin’ out a big new goatskin sack. ‘You scrape off all dat honey-gum now onto a big leaf for your ole daddy to eat an’ den you can stop here wid dis sack an’ keep on scrapin’ every mawnin’ till you gets it full.’

“Oh, but,’ ses young Seeunkie, ‘it’ll take so long to fill dat!’

“Oh, dat’s all right,’ ses his ole daddy, all a-smilin’. ‘In de daytime you can dig yourse’f a little house, an’ your sister Wilhelmina can bring you some scoff every mawnin’, an’ you’ll yust have a fine ole time wid no ole daddy to boss you.’

“Well, wasn’t young Seeunkie s’prise, an’ didn’t he sniff an’ he snivel. But it ain’t no use, he ha’ to stop. An’ when it come ahternoon too, an’ he go up home an’ he howl an he prow, it still ain’t no manner o’ use eeder, for de ole man just pops out ahter him an’ shambok him away agen.

“Now, what’s all dat for?” scream ole Missis Ratel. ‘Didn’t he show you de tree, an hain’t you eat de sweet gum yourse’f?’

“I did,’ ses ole Ratel. ‘Dat’s yust it. If I hadn’t a-eat it I mightn’t a-know’d. But I put rock aloes yuice on de honey dat was in de bag under de bed last night, an’ dis sweet gum f’m de t’orn tree was yust a-stingin’ wid aloes yuice dis mawnin’. If young Seeunkie’s smart enough to steal his daddy’s honey, an’ try to fool him, den he’s big enough an’ smart enough to look out for hisse’f f’m now on. Dere’s lots o’ country out o’ doors for him to dig in.’

“Well, ole Missis Ratel she rage an’ she ramp, but it ain’t no manner o’ use. De ole man stick to what he say, an’ young Seeunkie hatto go, all ’cause he couldn’t leave any honey alone, not even his ole daddy’s.

“So,” concluded the old Hottentot, “now you knows why de Ratel is yust so dead gone on honey—it’s in de blood, an’ you cahnt get dat out nohow. An’ ahter dat, don’t you Kleinkies ever go stealin’ your ole daddy’s

honey, else you'll be gettin' de same way." With which debatable threat Old Hendrik resumed his course to the mealie lands beyond.

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