

Reid Mayne

**The Young Yagers:
A Narrative of
Hunting Adventures in...**



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Mayne Reid

The Young Yagers: A Narrative of Hunting Adventures in Southern Africa

Chapter One. The Camp of the Young Yägers

Near the confluence of the two great rivers of Southern Africa – the *Yellow* and *Orange*— behold the camp of the “young yägers!”

It stands upon the southern bank of the latter stream, in a grove of Babylonian willows, whose silvery foliage, drooping gracefully to the water’s edge, fringes both shores of the noble river as far as the eye can reach.

A tree of rare beauty is this *Salix Babylonica*— in gracefulness of form scarce surpassed even by the palms, the “princes of the forest.” In our land, as we look upon it, a tinge of sadness steals over our reflections. We have grown to regard it as the emblem of sorrow. We have named it the “weeping willow,” and draped the tomb with its soft pale fronds, as with a winding-sheet of silver.

Far different are the feelings inspired by the sight of this beautiful tree amid the *karoos* of Southern Africa. That is a land where springs and streams are “few and far between;” and the *weeping* willow – sure sign of the presence of water – is no longer the emblem of sorrow, but the symbol of joy.

Joy reigns in the camp under its shade by the banks of the noble Orange River, as is proved by the continuous peals of laughter that ring clear and loud upon the air, and echo from the opposite shores of the stream.

Who are they that laugh so loudly and cheerfully? *The young yägers.*

And who are the young yägers?

Let us approach their camp and see for ourselves. It is night, but the blaze of the camp-fire will enable us to distinguish all of them, as they are all seated around it. By its light we can take their portraits.

There are six of them – a full “set of six,” and not one appears to be yet twenty years of age. They are all boys between the ages of ten and twenty – though two or three of them, and, maybe, more than that number, think themselves quite men.

Three of the party you will recognise at a glance as old acquaintances. They are no other than Hans, Hendrik, and Jan, our *ci-devant* “Bush-boys.”

It is several years since we saw them last, and they have grown a good deal since then; but none of them has yet reached the full stature of manhood. Though no longer “Bush-boys,” they are yet only boys; and Jan, who used to be called “little Jan,” still merits and receives that distinctive appellation. It would stretch Jan to his utmost to square off against a four-foot measuring-stick; and he could only manage it by standing upon the very tips of his toes.

Hans has grown taller, but, perhaps, thinner and paler. For two years he has been at college, where he has been very busy with his books, and has greatly distinguished himself by carrying off the first prizes in everything. Upon Hendrik there is a decided change. He has outgrown his elder brother both in length and breadth, and comes very near looking like a full-grown man. He is yet but eighteen years old, straight as a rush, with a decided military air and gait. The last is not to be wondered at, as Hendrik has now been a cornet in the Cape Mounted Rifles for more than a year, and still holds that commission, as may be learnt by looking at his forage-cap, with its golden embroidery over the peak. So much for our old acquaintances the “Bush-boys!”

But who are the other three that share with them the circle of the camp-fire? Who are their companions? for they are evidently on terms of companionship, and friendship too. Who are they? A word or two will tell that. They are the *Van Wyks*. The three sons of Diedrik Van Wyk.

And who, then, is Diedrik Van Wyk? That must also be explained. Diedrik is a very rich boor – a “*vee-boor*” – who every night shuts up within his spacious *kraals* more than three thousand horses and horned cattle, with five times that number of sheep and goats! In fact, Diedrik Van Wyk is accounted the richest *vee-boor*, or grazier, in all the Graaf Reinet.

Now the broad *plaatz*, or farm, of Diedrik Van Wyk lies contiguous to that of our old acquaintance, Hendrik Von Bloom; and it so chances that Hendrik and Diedrik are fast friends and inseparable companions. They see each other once a-day, at the least. Every evening Hendrik rides over to the “*kraal*” of Diedrik, or Diedrik to that of Hendrik, to enjoy a smoke together out of their ponderous pipes of *meerschaum*, or a “*zoopje*” of *brandewyn* distilled from their own peaches. They are, in fact, a pair of regular old comrades, – for Van Wyk in early life has seen military service as well as Von Bloom, – and, like all old soldiers, they love to repeat their camp stories, and “fight their battles o’er again.”

Under such circumstances it is not to be wondered at, that the children of both should be intimate acquaintances. But, in addition to the friendship of their fathers, there is a tie of relationship between the two families, – the two mothers were cousins, – so that the children are what is usually termed second cousins, – a very interesting sort of affinity. And it is not an unlikely thing that the relationship between the families of Von Bloom and his friend Van Wyk may one day become still closer and more interesting; for the former has for his daughter, as all the world knows, the beautiful flaxen-haired cherry-cheeked Trüey, while the latter is the father of the pretty brunette Wilhelmina – also an only daughter. Now there chance to be three boys in each family; and though both boys and girls are by far too young to think of getting married yet, there are suspicions abroad that the families of Von Bloom and Van Wyk will, at no very distant day, be connected by a double marriage – which would not be displeasing to either of the old comrades, Hendrik and Diedrik.

I have said there are three boys in each family. You already know the Von Blooms, Hans, Hendrik, and Jan. Allow me to introduce you to the Van Wyks. Their names are Willem, Arend, and Klaas.

Willem is the eldest, and, though not yet eighteen, is quite a man in size. Willem is, in fact, a boy of very large dimensions, so large that he has received the *sobriquet* of “Groot Willem” (Big William) therefrom. All his companions call him “Groot Willem.” But he is strong in proportion to his size, – by far the strongest of the young *yägers*. He is by no means tidy in his dress. His clothes, consisting of a big jacket of homespun cloth, a check shirt, and an enormously wide pair of leathern trousers, hang loosely about him, and make him look larger than he really is. Even his broad-brimmed felt hat has a slouching set upon his head, and his *feldtschoenen* are a world too wide for his feet.

And just as easy as his dress is the disposition of the wearer. Though strong as a lion, and conscious of his strength, Groot Willem would not harm a fly, and his kindly and unselfish nature makes him a favourite with all.

Groot Willem is a mighty hunter, carries one of the largest of guns, a regular Dutch “roer,” and also an enormous powder-horn, and pouch full of leaden bullets. An ordinary boy would stagger under such a load, but it is nothing to Groot Willem.

Now it may be remembered that Hendrik Von Bloom is also a “mighty hunter;” and I shall just whisper that a slight feeling of rivalry – I shall not call it jealousy, for they are good friends – exists between these two Nimrods. Hendrik’s favourite gun is a rifle, while the roer of Groot Willem is a “smooth bore;” and between the merits of these two weapons camp-fire discussions are frequent and sharp. They are never carried beyond the limits of gentlemanly feeling, for loose and slovenly as is Groot Willem in outward appearance, he is a gentleman within.

Equally a gentleman, but of far more taste and style, is the second brother of the Van Wyks, Arend. In striking appearance and manly beauty he is quite a match for Hendrik Von Bloom himself, though in complexion and features there is no resemblance between them. Hendrik is fair, while Arend is very dark-skinned, with black eyes and hair. In fact, all the Van Wyks are of the complexion known as “brunette,” for they belong to that section of the inhabitants of Holland sometimes distinguished as “Black Dutch.” But upon Arend’s fine features the hue sits well, and a handsomer youth is not to be seen in all the Graaf Reinet. Some whisper that this is the opinion of the beautiful Gertrude Von Bloom; but that can only be idle gossip, for the fair Trüey is yet but thirteen, and therefore can have no opinion on such a matter. Africa, however, is an early country, and there *might* be something in it.

Arend’s costume is a tasty one, and becomes him well. It consists of a jacket of dressed antelope-skin, – the skin of the springbok; but this, besides being tastefully cut and sewed, is very prettily embroidered with slashes of beautiful leopard-skin, while broad bands of the same extend along the outside seams of the trousers, from waist to ankle, giving to the whole dress, a very rich and striking effect. Arend’s head-dress is similar to that worn by Hendrik Von Bloom, viz: a military forage-cap, upon the front of which are embroidered in gold bullion a bugle and some letters; and the explanation of that is, that Arend, like his second cousin, is a cornet in the Cape Rifles, and a dashing young soldier he is.

Now the portrait of Klaas in pen and ink. – Klaas is just Jan’s age and Jan’s exact height, but as to circumference therein exists a great difference. Jan, as you all know, is a thin, wiry little fellow, while Klaas, on the contrary, is broad, stout, and burly. In fact, so stout is he, that Jan repeated two and a half times would scarce equal him in diameter!

Both wear cloth roundabouts and trousers, and little broad-brimmed hats; both go to the same school; and, though there is a considerable difference between them in other respects, both are great boys for bird-catching and all that sort of thing. As they only carry small shot-guns, of course they do not aspire to killing antelopes or other large animals; but, small as their guns are, I pity the partridge, guinea-hen, or even bustard, that lets either of them crawl within reach of it.

Now it has been hinted that between the hunters Groot Willem and Hendrik there is a slight feeling of rivalry in regard to matters of *venerie*. A very similar feeling, spiced perhaps with a little bit of jealousy, has long existed between the bird-catchers, and sometimes leads to a little coolness between them, but that is usually of very short duration.

Hans and Arend have no envious feelings – either of one another or of anybody else. Hans is too much of a philosopher: besides, the accomplishment in which he excels, the knowledge of natural history, is one in which he is without a rival. None of the rest make any pretensions to such knowledge; and the opinion of Hans on any matter of science is always regarded as a final judgment.

As to Arend, he is not particularly proud of any acquirement. Handsome, brave, and generous, he is nevertheless a right modest youth, – a boy to be beloved.

And now you know who are the *young yägers*.

Chapter Two.

Swartboy the Bushman and Congo the Kaffir

I have said that the young yägers were encamped on the southern bank of the Great Orange River. What were they doing there? The spot they occupied was many a long day's journey from their home in the Graaf Reinet, and many a day's journey beyond the frontier of the Cape Colony. There were no settlements near. No white men ever wandered so far, except an occasional "smouse," or trader – a class of men who extend their bartering expeditions almost to the central parts of the African Continent. Sometimes, too, the "trek-boor," or nomade grazier, may have driven his flocks to this remote place, but for all that it could not be considered a settled country. It was still a wilderness.

And what were the young Von Blooms and Van Wyks doing in the wilderness? *Jäging* to be sure, and nothing else, – they were simply out on a hunting expedition.

It was an expedition that had been long talked of and planned. Since their grand hunt of the elephant, the "Bush-boys" had not followed any game. Hendrik had been with his regiment, and Hans and Jan busy with their respective studies. So with Arend Van Wyk as with Hendrik, and Klaas as with Jan. Groot Willem alone, from time to time, had been *jäging* springboks and such other game as is to be found among the settlements. But the present was a grand expedition intended to be carried far beyond the settled part of the colony – in fact, as far as they thought fit to go. The boys had received the full sanction of their parents, and had been fitted out in proper style – each having a good horse, and each three a large wagon to carry all their camp utensils, and serve as a tent to sleep in. Each wagon had its driver, and full span of ten long-horned oxen; and these, with a small pack of rough-looking *buck-dogs*, might be seen in the camp – the oxen tied to the disselbooms of the wagons, and the dogs grouped in various attitudes around the fire. The horses were also fastened some to the wheels, and others to trees that grew near.

Two other objects in the camp are well worthy of a word or two; in fact, they are two individuals of very great importance to the expedition – as without them the wagons would be a troublesome affair. They are the drivers of these vehicles, and each is as proud of his whip-craft as Jehu could possibly have been of his.

In one of these drivers you will recognise an old acquaintance. The large head and high cheek-bones, with the flat spread nostrils between; the small oblique Mongolian eyes; the short curly wool-knots, planted sparsely over the broad skull; the yellow complexion; the thick "chunky" form, scarce four feet in height, and sparsely clad in red flannel shirt and brown leathern "crackers;" with all these features and characters before your mind, you cannot fail to recognise an old favourite – the Bushman, *Swartboy*.

Swartboy it was; and, though several years have rolled over the Bushman's bare head since we saw him last, there is no visible change observable in Swartboy. The thinly scattered "kinks" of brownly black wool still adorn Swartboy's crown and occiput, but they are no thinner – the same good-natured grin is observed upon his yellow face – he is still the same faithful servant – the same expert driver – the same useful fellow that he ever was. Swartboy, of course, drives the wagon of the Von Blooms.

Now the driver of the Van Wyk vehicle is about as unlike Swartboy as a bear to a bluebottle.

In the first place, he is above a third taller than the Bushman, standing over six feet, – not in his stockings, for he never wears stockings, but in sandals, which he does wear.

His complexion is darker than that of the Hottentot, although it is not black, but rather of a bronze colour; and the hair of his head, although somewhat "woolly," is longer than Swartboy's, and less inclined to *take root at both ends*! Where the line of Swartboy's nose is concave, that of the other is convex, and the nose itself almost aquiline. A dark piercing eye, a row of white teeth regularly

set, lips of moderate thickness, a well-proportioned form, and erect attitude, give to this individual, an aspect of grandeur and gravity, both of which are in complete contrast with the comic picture presented by the short stout body and grinning countenance of the Bushman.

The costume of the tall man has something graceful about it. It consists of a tunic-like skirt suspended around the waist and hanging down to mid-thigh. There is something peculiar in this skirt. It has the appearance of a fringe or drapery of long white hairs, not plaited or woven, but hanging free and full. It is, in fact, the true costume of a savage; and consists simply of a number of antelope's tails – the white tails of the gnoo – strung together around the waist, and allowed to fall to their full length down the thighs. A sort of "tippet" of the same surrounding the shoulders, with copper rings on the ankles and armlets encircling the wrist, a bunch of ostrich-feathers waving from his crown, and a string of beads around his neck, complete the costume of Congo the Kaffir – for to that nation of romantic savages belonged the wagon-driver of the Van Wyks.

What! a Kaffir the driver of a wagon? you will exclaim. You can hardly realise the idea, that a Kaffir – a warrior, as you may deem him – could be employed in so menial an office as wagon-driving! But it is even so. Many Kaffirs are so engaged in the Cape Colony, – indeed, many thousands; and in offices of a more degrading kind than driving a wagon team – which by the way, is far from being considered an unworthy employment in South Africa, so far that the sons of the wealthiest boors may often be seen mounted upon the voor-kist and handling the long bamboo whip with all the ability of a practised "jarvey." There is nothing odd about Congo the Kaffir being wagon-driver to the Van Wyks. He was a refugee, who had escaped from the despotic rule of the blood-stained monster Chaaka. Having in some way offended the tyrant, he had been compelled to flee for his life; and, after wandering southward, had found safety and protection among the colonists. Here he had learnt to make himself a useful member of civilised society, though a lingering regard for ancient habits influenced him still to retain the costume of his native country – the country of the Zooloo Kaffir.

No one could have blamed him for this; for, as he stood with his ample leopard-skin *kaross* suspended togalike from his shoulders, the silvery skirt draping gracefully to his knees, and his metal rings glittering under the blaze of the camp-fire, a noble picture he presented, – a savage but interesting picture. No one could blame Congo for wishing to display his fine form in so becoming a costume.

And no one did. No one was jealous of the handsome savage.

Yes, – one. There was one who did not regard him with the most amiable feelings. There was a rival who could not listen to Congo's praise with indifference. One who liked not Congo. That rival was Swartboy. Talk of the rivalry that existed between the hunters Hendrik and Groot Willem, of that between Klaas and Jan. Put both into one, and it would still fall far short of the constant struggles for pre-eminence that were exhibited between the rival "whips," Swartboy the Bushman, and Congo the Kaffir.

Swartboy and Congo were the only servants with the expedition. Cooks or other attendants the young yägers had none. Not but that the rich landdrost, – for it must be remembered that Von Bloom was now chief magistrate of his district, – and the wealthy boor could have easily afforded a score of attendants upon each trio of hunters. But there were no attendants whatever beyond the two drivers. This was not on the score of economy. No such thing. It was simply because the old soldiers, Hendrik Von Bloom and Diedrik Van Wyk, were not the men to pamper their boys with too much luxury.

"If they must go a-hunting, let them rough it," said they; and so they started them off, giving them a brace of wagons to carry their *impedimenta* – and their spoils.

But the young yägers needed no attendance. Each knew how to wait upon himself. Even the youngest could skin an antelope and broil its ribs over the fire; and that was about all the cookery they would require till their return. The healthy stomach of the hunter supplies a sauce more appetising than either Harvey or Soyer could concoct with all their culinary skill.

Before arriving at their present camp the young yägers had been out several weeks; but, although they had hunted widely, they had not fallen in with any of the great game, such as giraffes, buffaloes, or elephants; and scarce an adventure worth talking about. A day or two before a grand discussion had taken place as to whether they should cross the great river, and proceed farther northward, in search of the camelopard and elephant, or whether they should continue on the southern side, jäging springboks, hartebeests, and several other kinds of antelopes. This discussion ended in a resolve to continue on to the north, and remain there till their time was up, – the time of course being regulated by the duration of college and school vacations, and leave of absence from the “Corps.”

Groot Willem had been the principal adviser of this course, and Hans his backer. The former was desirous of jäging the elephant, the buffalo, and giraffe, – a sport at which he was still but a novice, as he had never had a fair opportunity of hunting these mighty giants of the wood; while Hans was equally desirous of an exploring expedition that would bring him in contact with new forms of vegetable life.

Strange as it may appear, Arend threw in his vote for returning home; and, stranger still, that the hunter Hendrik should join him in this advice!

But almost every thing can be explained, if we examine it with care and patience; and the odd conduct of the two “cornets” was capable of explanation.

Hans slyly hinted that it was possible that a certain brunette, Wilhelmina, might have something to do with Hendrik’s decision; but Groot Willem, who was a rough plain-spoken fellow, broadly alleged, that it was nothing else than Trüey that was carrying Arend’s thoughts homeward; and the consequence of these hints and assertions was, that neither Hendrik nor Arend offered any further opposition to going northward among the elephants, but, blushing red to the very eyes, both were only too glad to give in their assent and terminate the discussion.

Northward then became the word: – northward for the land of the tall giraffe and the mighty elephant!

The young yägers had arrived on the southern bank of the Orange River, opposite to a well-known “drift,” or crossing-place. There chanced to be a freshet in the river; and they had encamped, and were waiting until the water should fall and the ford become passable.

Chapter Three.

How Congo Crossed a “Drift.”

Next morning, by break of day, our yägers were astir, and the first object upon which they rested their eyes was the river. To their joy it had fallen several feet, as they could tell by the water-mark upon the trees.

The streams of South Africa, like those of most tropical and sub-tropical countries, and especially where the district is mountainous, rise and fall with much greater rapidity than those of temperate climes. Their sudden rise is accounted for by the great quantity of water which in tropical storms is precipitated within a short period of time – the rain falling, not in light sparse drops, but thick and heavy, for several hours together, until the whole surface of the country is saturated, and every rivulet becomes a torrent.

Of these storms we have an exemplification in our summer thunder-showers – with their big rain-drops, when in a few minutes the gutter becomes a rivulet and the rut of the cartwheel a running stream. Fortunately these “sunshiny” showers are of short duration. They “last only half-an-hour,” instead of many hours. Fancy one of them continuing for a whole day or a week! If such were to be the case, we should witness floods as sudden and terrible as those of the tropics.

The quick fall in the streams of South Africa is easily accounted for – the principal reason being that the clouds are their feeders, and not, as with us, springs and lakes. Tropic rivers rarely run from reservoirs; the abrupt cessation of the rain cuts off their supply, and the consequence is the sudden falling of their waters. Evaporation by a hot sun, and large absorption by the dry earth, combine to produce this effect. Now the young yägers saw that the “Gareep” (such is the native name of the Orange River) had fallen many feet during the night; but they knew not whether it was yet fordable. Though the place was a “drift” used by Hottentots, Bechuanas, traders, and occasionally “trek-boors,” yet none of the party knew any thing of its depth, now that the freshet was on. There were no marks to indicate the depth – no means by which they could ascertain it. They could not see the bottom, as the water was of a yellow-brown colour, in consequence of the flood. It might be three feet – it might be six – but as the current was very rapid, it would be a dangerous experiment to wade in and measure its depth in that way.

What were they to do then? They were impatient to effect a crossing. How were they to do so in safety?

Hendrik proposed that one of them should try the ford on horseback. If they could not wade it, they might swim over. He offered to go himself. Groot Willem, not to be outdone by Hendrik in daring, made a similar proposal. But Hans, who was the eldest of the party, and whose prudent counsels were usually regarded by all, gave his advice against this course. The experiment would be too perilous, he said. Should the water prove too deep, the horses would be compelled to swim, and with so rapid a current they might be carried far below the “drift,” – perhaps down to where the banks were high and steep. There they should not be able to climb out, and both horse and rider might perish.

Besides, urged Hans, even should a rider succeed by swimming to reach the opposite side in safety, the oxen and wagons could not get over in that way, and where would be the use of crossing without *them*? None whatever. Better, therefore, to wait a little longer until they should be certain that the river had subsided to its usual level. That they could ascertain by the water ceasing to fall any further, and another day would decide the point. It would only be the loss of another day.

Hans’s reasoning was good, and so was his counsel. Hendrik and Groot Willem acknowledged this, and agreed to act upon it; but for all that, Groot Willem, who was longing to get among the giraffes, buffaloes, and elephants, felt a strong desire to attempt the crossing; and Hendrik, too, was

similarly inclined, from the sheer love of adventure – for Hendrik's fault was that of being over-courageous.

Both would have risked the river – even to swimming it – had it been practicable for the teams to have crossed, but as that was not believed possible, they agreed, though with rather a bad grace, to wait upon the water another day.

But, after all, they were not to wait a day, – scarcely an hour. In an hour from that time they had crossed the drift – wagons, oxen, and all – and were trekking over the plain on the opposite side!

What had led to their so suddenly changing their resolution? How had they ascertained that the drift was fordable? For a knowledge of that fact they were indebted to Congo the Kaffir.

While engaged in their discussion as to the depth of the river, the latter had been observed standing upon the bank and throwing large pebbles into the stream. Thinking it was merely some freak or superstition on the part of the savage, none of them had taken any notice of him, Swartboy excepted. The Bushman was watching the Kaffir, with glances that bespoke a keen interest in his movements.

At length a loud scornful laugh, from Swartboy, accompanying a series of rather rough phrases, directed the attention of the young yägers upon the Kaffir.

“My footy, Congo! ole fool you! b'lieve you tell depth so? tink so, ole skellum? Ha! ha! ha! you bania groot ole humbug! Ha! ha! ha!”

The Kaffir took no notice of this rather insulting apostrophe, but continued to fling his pebbles as before; but the young yägers, who were also watching him, noticed that he was not throwing them carelessly, but in a peculiar manner, and their attention now became fixed upon him.

They saw that each time as the pebble parted from his fingers, he bent suddenly forward, with his ear close to the surface, and in this attitude appeared to listen to the “plunge” of the stone! When the sound died away, he would rise erect again, fling another pebble *farther out than the last*, and then crouch and listen as before?

“What's the Kaffir about?” asked Hendrik of Groot Willem and Arend, who, being his masters, were more likely to know.

Neither could tell. Some Zooloo trick, no doubt; Congo knew many a one. But what he meant by his present demonstration neither could tell. Swartboy's conjecture appeared to be correct, the Kaffir was *sounding the depth of the drift*.

“Hilloa, there! Congo!” cried Groot Willem. “What are ye after, old boy?”

“Congo find how deep drift be, baas Willem,” was the reply.

“Oh! you can't tell that way; can you?”

The Kaffir made answer in the affirmative.

“Bah!” ejaculated Swartboy, jealous of the interest his rival was beginning to excite; “da's all nonsense; ole fool know noffin 't all 'bout it, – dat he don't.”

The Kaffir still took no notice of Swartboy's gibes – though they no doubt nettled him a little – but kept on casting the pebbles, each one, as already stated, being flung so as to fall several feet beyond the one that preceded it. He continued at this, until the last pebble was seen to plunge within a yard or two of the opposite side of the current, here more than a hundred yards wide. Then raising himself erect, and turning his face to the young yägers, he said in firm but respectful tones —

“Mynheeren, you drift may cross – now.”

All regarded him with incredulous glances.

“How deep think you it is?” inquired Hans. The Kaffir made answer by placing his hands upon his hips. It would reach so high.

“My footy!” exclaimed Swartboy, in derision. “It's twice dar depth. Do you want drown us, ole fool?”

“May drown *you*— nobody else!” quietly replied the Kaffir, at the same time measuring Swartboy with his eye, and curling his lip in derision of the Bushman's short stature.

The young yägers burst out into a loud laugh. Swartboy felt the sting, but for some moments was unable to retort.

At length he found words —

“All talk, you ole black, all talk! You make groot show, – you berry wise, – you want wagon sweep off, – you want drown da poor oxen, – you pretend so deep. If tink so, go wade da drift, – go wade yourself! Ha!”

Swartboy thought by this challenge he had put the finisher on the Kaffir. He believed that the latter would not dare to try the ford, in spite of his assertion about its depth. But Swartboy was doomed to disappointment and humiliation.

Scarcely had he uttered the sneering challenge when the Kaffir, having bent a glance upon the rest, and seeing, that they regarded him with looks of expectation, turned round and dashed down the bank to the edge of the water.

All saw that he was bent upon crossing. Several of them uttered cries of warning, and cautioned him to desist.

But the Zooloo spirit was roused, and the savage did not heed the warning cries. He did not hurry madly into the current, however; but set about the business with caution and design. They saw him stoop down by the edge of the water, and the next moment rise erect again, holding in his hands a large stone that could not have weighed much less than a hundredweight. This, to the astonishment of all, he raised upon the crown of his head, and, holding it in that position, marched boldly into the water!

All saw the object of his carrying the stone, – which was, of course, to enable him by its additional weight to stem the strong current! In this he was quite successful, for although the water at certain places rose quite to his waist, in less than five minutes he stood high and dry on the opposite bank.

A cheer greeted him, in which all but Swartboy joined, and another received him on his return; and then the oxen were inspanned, and the horses saddled and mounted, and wagons, oxen, dogs, horses, and yägers, all crossed safely over, and continued their route northward.

Chapter Four.

A Brace of “Black Manes.”

If the young yägers had met with but few adventures south of the Gareep, they were not long north of it before they fell in with one of sufficient interest to be chronicled. It occurred at their very first camp after crossing.

They had chosen for their camp the side of a “vley,” in the midst of a wide plain, where there chanced to be both grass and water, though both of a rather indifferent kind. The plain was tolerably open, though here and there grew clumps of low bushes, and between these stood at intervals the dome-shaped houses of white ants – those of the *Termes mordax*– rising to the height of several feet above the surface.

They had just outspanned and permitted their oxen to wander upon the grass, when the voice of Swartboy was heard exclaiming —

“De leuw! de leuw!”

All looked where Swartboy pointed. There, sure enough, was a lion, – a large “schwart-fore-life,” or *black-maned* one, – right out upon the plain, and beyond the place where the oxen were browsing.

There was a clump of “bosch” just behind the lion. Out of this he had come at sight of the oxen; and, having advanced a few yards, he had lain down among the grass, and was now watching the animals as a cat would a mouse, or a spider the unconscious fly.

They had scarcely set their eyes upon him when another was seen issuing from the “bosch,” and, with stealthy trot, running up to the side of her companion. *Her* companion, I say, because the second was a lioness, as the absence of a mane and the tiger-like form testified. She was scarcely inferior in size to the lion, and not a bit less fierce and dangerous in any encounter she might chance to fall in with.

Having joined the lion, she squatted beside him; and both now sat upon their tails, like two gigantic cats, with full front towards the camp, and evidently eyeing the oxen with hungry looks.

Horses, hunters, drivers, and dogs, were all in sight; but what cared the lions for that? The tempting prey was before them, and they evidently meditated an attack, – if not just then, whenever the opportunity offered. Most certainly they contemplated supping either upon ox-beef or horse-flesh.

Now these were the first lions that had been encountered upon the expedition. “Spoor” had been seen several times, and the terrible roar had been heard once or twice around the night-camp; but the “king of beasts” now appeared for the first time *in propria persona*, with his queen along with him, and of course his presence was productive of no small excitement in the yäger camp. It must not be denied that this excitement partook largely of the nature of a “panic.”

The first fear of the hunters was for their own skins, and in this both Bushman and Kaffir equally shared. After a time, however, this feeling subsided. The lions would not attack the camp. They do so only on very rare occasions. It was the camp *animals* they were after, and so long as these were present, they would not spring upon their owners. So far there was no danger, and our yägers recovered their self-possession.

But it would not do to let the carnivorous brutes destroy their oxen, – that would not do. Something must be done to secure them. A kraal must be made at once, and the animals driven into it. The lions lay quietly on the plain, though still in a menacing attitude. But they were a good way off – full five hundred yards – and were not likely to attack the oxen so close to the camp. The huge wagons – strange sight to them – no doubt had the effect of restraining them for the present. They either waited until the oxen should browse nearer, or till night would enable them to approach the latter unobserved.

As soon, then, as it was perceived that they were not bent upon an immediate attack, Groot Willem and Hendrik mounted their horses, rode cautiously out beyond the oxen, and quietly drove the latter to the other side of the vley. There they were herded by Klaas and Jan; while all the rest, Swartboy and Congo included, went to work with axe and bill-hook in the nearest thicket of “wait-a-bit” thorns. In less than half-an-hour a sufficient number of bushes were cut to form, with the help of the wagons, a strong kraal; and inside this, both horses and oxen were driven, – the former made fast to the wheel-spokes, while the latter were clumped up loosely within the enclosure.

The hunters now felt secure. They had kindled a large fire on each side of the kraal, though they knew that this will not always keep lions off. But they trusted to their guns; and as they would sleep inside the canvass tents of their wagons, closing both “voor” and “achter-claps,” they had nothing to fear. It would be a hungry lion, indeed, that would have attempted to break the strong kraal they had made; and no lion, however hungry, would ever think of charging into a wagon.

Having made all secure, therefore, they seated themselves around one of their fires, and set about cooking their dinner, or rather dinner-supper, for it was to include both meals. Their journey prevented them from dining earlier.

They chanced to have little else than *biltong*, or dried meat, to cook. The long wait by the drift had consumed their stock of fine springbok venison, which they had laid in some days before. It is true they had venison in camp, but it was that of the “reitbok,” or reed-buck – so called from its habit of frequenting the long reeds by the banks of rivers; and it was while they were journeying through a belt of these after crossing the drift, that this one had been shot by Hendrik. A small antelope the reitbok is – the *Antilope eleotragus* of naturalists. It stands less than three feet in height, formed much like the springbok, but with a rougher coat of hair, of an ashy grey colour, and silver white underneath. Its horns, however, are not lyrate, as in the springbok, but rise first in the plane of its forehead, and then curve boldly forward to the tips. They are about twelve inches in length, wrinkled at the base, prominently ringed in the middle, and smooth near the points. The reitbok, as its name implies, inhabits the reedy bottoms by the margins of streams and rivers, and its food consists of plants growing in humid and marshy situations. Hence its flesh is inferior to that of most South African antelopes, and it was not a favourite with the young yägers. Although it had been brought along, they preferred even the dry biltong, and it was left to the less delicate appetites of Swartboy and Congo.

Now the hunters, Hendrik and Groot Willem, would have gone out to look for a springbok, or some other game, but the presence of the lions prevented that; and so the boys were obliged to content themselves with a slice of the biltong; and each, having cut him a short stick for a spit, set about broiling his piece over the coals.

During all this time the lion and lioness kept the position they had taken on the plain, scarce once having changed their attitude. They were waiting patiently the approach of night.

Groot Willem and Hendrik had both advised making an attack upon them; but in this case they again gave way to the more prudent counsel of Hans, strengthened, perhaps, by his reminding them of the instructions they had received from both their fathers at setting out. These instructions were, – never to attack a lion without good reason for so doing, but always to give the “ole leuw” a wide berth when it was possible to do so. It is well known that the lion will rarely attack man when not first assailed; and therefore the advice given to the young yägers was sound and prudent? and they followed it.

It wanted yet an hour or two of sunset. The lions still sat squatted on the grass, closely observed by the hunters.

All at once the eyes of the latter became directed upon a new object. Slowly approaching over the distant plain, appeared two strange animals, similar in form, and nearly so in size and colour. Each was about the size of an ass, and not unlike one in colour, – especially that variety of the ass which is of a buff or fulvous tint. Their forms, however, were more graceful than that of the ass, though they were far from being light or slender. On the contrary, they were of a full, round, bold outline.

They were singularly marked about the head and face. The ground colour of these parts was white, but four dark bands were so disposed over them as to give the animals the appearance of wearing a headstall of black leather. The first of these bands descended in a streak down the forehead; another passed through the eyes to the corners of the mouth; a third embraced the nose; while a fourth ran from the base of the ears passing under the throat – a regular throat-strap – thus completing the resemblance to the stall-halter.

A reversed mane, a dark list down the back, and a long black bushy tail reaching to the ground, were also characters to be observed. But what rendered these animals easily to be distinguished from all others was the splendid pair of horns which each carried. These horns were straight, slender, pointing backwards almost horizontally. They were regularly ringed till within a few inches of their tips, which were as sharp as steel spits. In both they were of a deep jet colour, shining like ebony, and full three feet in length. But what was rather singular, the horns of the smaller animal – for there was some difference in their size – were longer than those of the larger one! The former was the female, the latter the male, therefore the horns of the female were more developed than those of the male – an anomaly among animals of the antelope tribe, for antelopes they were. The young yägers had no difficulty in distinguishing their kind. At the first glance they all recognised the beautiful “oryx,” one of the loveliest animals of Africa, one of the fairest creatures in the world.

Chapter Five.

Lions Stalking the Gemsbok

On seeing the “gemsbok” – for by such name is the oryx known to the Cape colonists – the first thought of the young yägers was how they should kill or capture one of them. Beautiful as these creatures looked upon the plain, our hunters would have fancied them better on the spit – for they well knew that the venison of the gemsbok is delicious eating – not surpassed by that of any other antelope, the eland perhaps excepted.

The first thought of the yägers, then, was a steak of gemsbok venison for dinner. It might throw their dinner a little later, but it would be so much of a better one than dry biltong, that they were willing to wait.

The slices of jerked meat, already half-broiled, were at once put aside, and guns were grasped in the place of roasting-sticks.

What was the best course to be pursued? That was the next question.

It would scarce be possible to stalk the gemsboks. They are among the most wary of antelopes. They rarely approach near any cover that might shelter an enemy; and when alarmed they strike off in a straight line, and make for the open desert plains – their natural home. To stalk them, is a most difficult thing, and rarely attempted by the hunter. They can only be captured by a swift horse, and after a severe chase. Even from the swiftest horse they often make their escape; for in the first burst of a mile or two they can run like the wind. A good horse, however, has more “bottom” than they, and if well managed will in time overtake them.

The hunters having seized their guns, next thought of their horses. Should they saddle and ride out after the gemsboks? That would have been their course at once, and without further consideration, had they not observed that the antelopes were coming directly towards them. If they continued in the same course much longer, they, the yägers, need not stir from the spot. The game would approach within shot and save them the trouble of a chase. This would be very agreeable, as the hunters were hungry, and their horses tired after a hard day’s journeying.

There was some probability that the gemsboks would give them the chance they wished for. The camp was well hidden among the bushes. The smoke of the fire alone showed its situation, but the antelopes might not perceive this, or if so, might not regard it as a thing to be feared. Besides, as Groot Willem and Hendrik observed, the vley was close by, and both believed the antelopes were on their way to the water. The student Hans, however, corrected them in this belief, by telling them that the oryx is an animal *that never drinks*, – that it is quite independent of springs, streams, or vleys, – one of those creatures which Nature has formed to dwell in the desert, where no water exists! It was not likely then that the gemsboks were coming to the vley. The hunters need make no calculation on that.

At all events, they were certainly approaching the camp. They were heading straight for it, and were already less than a thousand yards from the spot. There would scarce be time to saddle before they should come within shot, or else start off alarmed at the appearance of the smoke. The hunters, therefore, gave up all thoughts of a chase; and, crouching forward to the outer edge of the grove, they knelt down behind the bushes to await the approach of the antelopes.

The latter still kept steadily on, apparently unconscious of danger. Surely they had not yet perceived the smoke, else they would have shown symptoms either of curiosity or alarm! The wind was blowing in the same direction in which they marched, or their keen sense of smell would have warned them of the dangerous proximity of the hunter’s camp. But it did not; and they continued with slow but unaltered pace to approach the spot, where no less than six dark muzzles – a full battery of small arms – were waiting to give them a volley.

It was not the destiny of either of the gemsboks to die by a leaden bullet. Death, sudden and violent awaited them, though not from the hand of man. It was to come from a different quarter.

As the yägers lay watching the approach of the antelopes, their eyes had wandered for a moment from the lions; but a movement on the part of these again drew attention to them. Up to a certain period they had remained in an upright attitude, squatted upon their tails, but all at once they were observed to crouch flat down, as if to conceal themselves under the grass, while their heads were turned in a new direction. They were turned towards the gemsboks. They had caught sight of the latter as they approached over the plain; and it was evident that they contemplated an attack upon them.

Now if the antelopes continued on in the same course, it would carry them quite clear of the lions, so that the latter would have no advantage. A gemsbok can soon scour off from a lion, as the latter is at best but a poor runner, and secures his prey by a sudden spring or two, or else not at all. Unless, therefore, the lions could obtain the advantage of getting within bounding distance of the antelopes without being seen by them, their chances of making a capture would be poor enough.

They knew this, and to effect that purpose – that of getting near – now appeared to be their design. The lion was observed to crawl off from the spot in a direction that would enable him to get upon the path of the gemsboks, between them and the camp. By a series of manoeuvres, – now crawling flat along the grass, like a cat after a partridge; now pausing behind a bush or an ant-heap to survey the game; then trotting lightly on to the next, – he at length reached a large ant-hill that stood right by the path in which the antelopes were advancing. He seemed to be satisfied of this, for he stopped here and placed himself close in to the base of the hill, so that only a small portion of his head projected on the side towards the game. His whole body, however, and every movement he made, were visible to the hunters from *their* ambush in the grove.

But where was the lioness? She was no longer by the *bosch* where first seen. Where had she gone? Not with the lion? No. On the contrary, she had gone in a direction nearly opposite to that taken by him. Their eyes had been busy with his movements, and they had not noticed hers. Now, however, that the lion had come to a halt, they looked abroad for his mate, and saw her far out upon the plain. They saw that she was progressing in the same way the lion had done, – now crawling among the grass, now trotting swiftly from bush to bush, and pausing a moment behind each, but evidently bending her course so as to arrive *in the rear* of the antelopes!

The “strategy” of the lions was now perceived. They had evidently planned it before separating. The lion was to place himself in ambush upon the path, while the lioness swept round to the rear and forced the antelopes forward; or should the latter become alarmed and retreat, the lion could then show himself in pursuit, and run the frightened game back into the clutches of the lioness.

The thing was well calculated, and although it was likely to rob the hunters of their game, they had grown so interested in the movements of the carnivora and their intended victims, that they thought only of watching the spectacle to its end.

The ambuscade was well planned, and in a few minutes its success was no longer doubtful. The gemsboks advanced steadily towards the ant-hill, occasionally switching about their black bushy tails; but that was to rid their flanks of the flies, and not from any apprehension of danger.

The lioness had completed the great *détour* she had made, and was now seen crouching after them, though still far to the rear.

As the antelopes drew near the ant-hill, the lion was observed to draw back his head until it was nearly concealed under his black shaggy mane. They could not possibly have seen him where he lay, nor he them, and he now appeared to trust to his ears to inform him of their approach.

He waited till both were opposite, and broadside toward him, at the distance of less than twenty paces from the hill. Then his tail was seen to vibrate with one or two quick jerks, his head shot suddenly forth, his body spread out apparently to twice its natural size, and the next moment he rose like a bird into the air!

With one bound he cleared the wide space that separated him from the nearest of the gemsboks, alighting on the hind-quarters of the terrified animal. A single blow of his powerful paw brought the antelope on its haunches; and another, delivered almost at the same instant, stretched its body lifeless on the plain!

Without looking after the other, or seeming to care further about it, the lion sprang upon the body of his victim, and, clutching its throat between his jaws, commenced drinking its warm blood.

It was the bull gemsbok which the lion had pulled down, as this was the one that happened to be nearest the hill.

As the lion sprang upon her companion, the cow of course started with affright, and all supposed they would see her the next moment scouring off over the plains. To their astonishment she did no such thing. Such is not the nature of the noble oryx. On the contrary, as soon as she recovered from the first moments of alarm, she wheeled round towards the enemy; and, lowering her head to the very ground, so that her long horns projected horizontally in front, she rushed with all her strength upon the lion! The latter, in full enjoyment of his red draught, saw nothing of this manoeuvre. The first intimation he had of it was to feel a pair of spears pierced right through his ribs, and it is not likely he felt much more.

For some moments a confused struggling was observed, in which both lion and oryx seemed to take part; but the attitudes of both appeared so odd, and changed so rapidly, that the spectators could not tell in what manner they were combating. The roar of the lion however had ceased, and was now succeeded by the more shrill tones of the lioness, who, bounding forward upon the spot, mixed at once in the mêlée.

A single touch of her claws brought the cow oryx to the earth, and ended the strife; and the lioness now stood over the victims screaming her note of triumph.

Was it a note of triumph? There was something odd in its tone – something singular in the movements of the creature that uttered it – something strange about the whole thing. Why was the lion silent? His roar had ceased, and he lay embracing the carcass of the bull gemsbok, and apparently drinking its blood. Yet he was perfectly without motion, not a muscle could be seen to move, not a quiver of his tawny hide betokened that he breathed or lived! Was he dead?

Chapter Six.

An Angry Lioness

Certainly there was something mysterious about the matter. The lion still kept his position; no motion could be observed, no sound escaped him; whereas the lioness uttered incessantly her shrill growling, at the same time pacing to and fro, round and round, the confused heap of bodies! She made no attempt to feed, though her prey lay bleeding before her. Surely her lord was not the cause of her abstinence! Did he insist upon having both the carcasses to himself?

Sometimes it is so. Sometimes an old male plays the selfish tyrant, and keeps the younger and weaker members of his family off, till he has gorged himself, permitting them to make a “second table” of his leavings.

In the present instance this was not likely. There were two whole carcasses, – large fat carcasses, – enough for both. Besides, the lioness was evidently the lion’s own mate – his wife. It was scarcely probable he would treat her so. Among human beings instances of such selfishness, – such a gross want of gallantry, are, I regret to say, by no means rare; but the young yägers could not believe the lion guilty of such shabby conduct – the lion, Buffon’s type of nobility! No such thing. But how was it? The lioness still growled and paced about, ever and anon stooping near the head of her partner, which was not visible from the camp, and placing her snout in contact with his as if kissing him. Still there was no sign of any response, no motion on his part; and, after watching for a good while without perceiving any, the hunters at length became satisfied that the lion was dead.

He was dead – as Julius Caesar or a door-nail, and so, too, was the brace of gemsboks. The lioness was the only living thing left from that sanguinary conflict!

As soon as the hunters became satisfied of this, they began to deliberate among themselves what was best to be done. They wished to get possession of the venison, but there was no hope of their being able to do so, as long as the lioness remained upon the ground.

To have attempted to drive her off at that moment would have been a most perilous undertaking. She was evidently excited to madness, and would have charged upon any creature that had shown itself in her neighbourhood. The frenzied manner in which she paced about, and lashed her sides with her tail, her fierce and determined look, and deep angry growl, all told the furious rage she was in. There was menace in her every movement. The hunters saw this, and prudently withdrew themselves – so as to be near the wagons in case she might come that way.

They thought that by waiting awhile she would go off, and then they could drag the antelopes up to camp.

But after waiting a good while, they observed no change in the conduct of the fierce brute. She still paced around as before, and abstained from touching the carcasses. As one of the yägers observed, she continued to “play the dog in the manger,” – would neither eat herself, nor suffer anybody else to eat.

This remark, which was made by little Jan, elicited a round of laughter that sounded in strange contrast with the melancholy howl of the lioness, which still continued to terrify the animals of the camp. Even the dogs cowered among the wheels of the wagons, or kept close to the heels of their masters. It is true that many of these faithful brutes, had they been set on, would have manfully battled with the lioness, big as she was. But the young yägers well knew that dogs before the paws of an angry lion are like mice under the claws of a cat. They did not think of setting them on, unless they had themselves made an attack; and that, the advice of Hans, coupled with the counsels they had received before leaving home, prevented them from doing. They had no intention of meddling with the lioness; and hoped she would soon retire, and leave the game, or part of it, on the ground.

After waiting a long while, and seeing that the lioness showed no symptoms of leaving the spot, they despaired of dining on oryx venison, and once more set to broiling their slices of biltong.

They had not yet commenced eating, when they perceived a new arrival upon the scene of the late struggle. Half-a-dozen hyenas appeared upon the ground; and although these had not yet touched the carcasses, but were standing a little way off – through fear of the lioness – their hungry looks told plainly what their intention was in coming there.

Now the presence of these hideous brutes was a new point for consideration. If the lioness should allow them to begin their feast upon the antelopes, in a very short while scarce a morsel of either would remain. The yägers, although they had resigned all hope of dining on the gemsbok venison, nevertheless looked forward to making their supper of it; but if the hyenas were permitted to step in, they would be disappointed.

How were the brutes to be kept off?

To drive them off would be just as perilous an undertaking as to drive off the lioness herself.

Once more Groot Willem and Hendrik talked about attacking the latter; but, as before, were opposed by Hans, who had to use all his influence with his companions before he could induce them to abandon the rash project.

At this moment an unexpected proposal put an end to their discussion.

The proposal came from Congo the Kaffir. It was neither less nor more than that he himself should go forth and do battle with the lioness!

“What! alone?”

“Alone.”

“You are mad, Congo. You would be torn to pieces!”

“No fear, Mynheeren. Congo the leuw kill without getting scratch. You see, young masters.”

“What! without arms? without a gun?”

“Congo not know how use one,” replied the Kaffir, “you see how I do ’im,” he continued. “All Congo ask you not come in way. Young masters, here stay and Congo leave to himself. No danger. Mynheeren, Congo fear if go yonder help him – leuw very mad. Congo not care for that – so much mad, so much better – leuw no run away.”

“But what do you intend to do, Congo?”

“Mynheeren soon all see – see how Congo kill lion.”

The hunters were disposed to look upon the Kaffir as about to make a reckless exposure of his life. Swartboy would have treated the proposal as a boast, and laughed thereat, but Swartboy remembered the humiliation he had had in the morning on account of similar conduct; and though he feared to be farther outstripped in hunter-craft by his rival, he had the prudence upon this occasion to conceal his envy. He bit his thick lips, and remained silent. Some of the boys, and especially Hans, would have dissuaded Congo from his purpose; but Groot Willem was inclined to let him have his way. Groot Willem knew the Kaffir better than any of the others. He knew, moreover, that savage as he was, he was not going to act any foolish part for the mere sake of braggadocio. He could be trusted. So said Groot Willem.

This argument, combined with a desire to eat gemsbok venison for supper, had its effect. Arend and Hans gave in.

Congo had full permission to battle with the lioness.

Chapter Seven.

How Congo the Kaffir killed a Lioness

Congo had now become an object of as great interest as in the morning. Greater in fact, for the new danger he was about to undergo – a combat with an enraged lioness – was accounted still greater than that of fording the Gareep, and the interest was in proportion. With eager eyes the young yägers stood watching him as he prepared himself for the encounter.

He was but a short while in getting ready. He was seen to enter the Van Wyk wagon, and in less than three minutes come out again fully armed and equipped. The lioness would not have long to wait for her assailant.

The equipment of the Kaffir must needs be described.

It was simple enough, though odd to a stranger's eye. It was neither more nor less than the equipment of a Zooloo warrior.

In his right hand he held a bunch of *assegais*, – in all six of them.

What is an “assegai?”

It is a straight lance or spear, though not to be used as one. It is smaller than either of these weapons, shorter and more slender in the shaft, but like them armed with an iron head of arrow shape. In battle it is not retained in the hand, but flung at the enemy, often from a considerable distance. It is, in short, a “javelin,” or “dart,” – such as was used in Europe before fire-arms became known, and such as at present forms the war weapon of all the savage tribes of Southern Africa, but especially those of the Kaffir nations. And well know they how to project this dangerous missile. At the distance of a hundred yards they will send it with a force as great, and an aim as unerring, as either bullet or arrow! The assegai is flung by a single arm.

Of these javelins Congo carried six, spanning their slender shafts with his long muscular fingers.

The assegais were not the oddest part of his equipment. That was a remarkable thing which he bore on his left arm. It was of oval form, full six feet in length by about three in width, concave on the side towards his body, and equally convex on the opposite. More than any thing else did it resemble a small boat or canoe made of skins stretched over a framework of wood, and of such materials was it constructed. It was, in fact, a shield, – a Zooloo shield – though of somewhat larger dimensions than those used in war. Notwithstanding its great size it was far from clumsy, but light, tight, and firm, – so much so that arrow, assegai, or bullet, striking it upon the convex side, would have glanced off as from a plate of steel.

A pair of strong bands fastened inside along the bottom enabled the wearer to move it about at will; and placed upright, with its lower end resting upon the ground, it would have sheltered the body of the tallest man. It sheltered that of Congo, and Congo was no dwarf.

Without another word he walked out, the huge *carapace* on his left arm, five of the assegais clutched in his left hand, while one that he had chosen for the first throw he held in his right. This one was grasped near the middle, and carried upon the balance.

No change had taken place in the situation of affairs out upon the plain. In fact, there had not been much time for any. Scarce five minutes had elapsed from the time the Kaffir stated his purpose, until he went forth to execute it. The lioness was still roaming about, uttering her frightful screams. The hyenas were still there. The moment the Kaffir was seen approaching, the cowardly hyenas fled with a howl, and soon disappeared under the bosch.

Far different with the lioness. She seemed to pay no regard to the approach of the hunter. She neither turned her head, nor looked in the direction he was coming. Her whole attention was absorbed by the mass of bodies upon the plain. She yelled her savage notes as she regarded them. She was no

doubt lamenting the fate of her grim and swarthy partner, that lay dead before her eyes. At all events, she did not seem to notice the hunter, until he had got within twenty paces of the spot!

At that distance the Kaffir halted, rested his huge shield upon the ground – still holding it erect – poised the assegai a moment in his right hand, and then sent it whizzing through the air.

It pierced the side of the tawny brute, and hung quivering between her ribs. Only for a moment. The fierce animal doubled round upon herself, caught the shaft in her teeth, and broke it off as if it had been a straw!

The blade of the assegai still remained in the flesh, but the lioness waited no longer. She had now perceived her enemy; and, uttering a vengeful scream, she sprang towards him. With one tremendous bound she cleared three-fourths of the space that lay between them, and a second would have carried her upon the shoulders of the Kaffir; but the latter was prepared to receive her, and, as she rose to her second leap, he disappeared suddenly from the scene! As if by magic he had vanished; and had not the boys been watching his every movement, they would have been at a loss to know what had become of him. But they knew that under that oval convex form, whose edges rested upon the earth, lay Congo the Kaffir. There lay he, like a tortoise in its shell, clutching the straps with all his might, and pressing his carapace firmly against the ground!

The lioness was more astonished than the spectators. At the second leap she pitched right down upon the shield, but the drum-like noise made by her weight, and the hard firm substance encountered by her claws, quite disconcerted her, and springing aside she stood gazing at the odd object with looks of alarm!

She stood but for a moment, and then, uttering a savage growl of disappointment, turned tail upon it, and trotted off!

This growl guided Congo. The shield was raised from the ground – only on one side, and but a very little way at first – just enough to enable the hunter to see the stern of the retreating lioness.

Then the Kaffir rose quickly to his feet, and, holding the shield erect, prepared for the casting of a second assegai.

This was quickly thrown and pierced the animal in the flank, where shaft and all remained sticking in the flesh. The lioness turned with redoubled fury, once more charged upon her assailant, and, as before, was met by the hard convex surface of the shield. This time she did not immediately retreat, but stood menacing the strange object, striking it with her clawed hoofs, and endeavouring to turn it over.

Now was the moment of peril for Congo. Had the lioness succeeded in making a capsize, it would have been all up with him, poor fellow! But he knew the danger, and with one hand clutching the leathern straps, and the other bearing upon the edge of the frame, he was able to hold firm and close, – closer even “than a barnacle to a ship’s copper.”

After venting her rage in several impotent attempts to break or overturn the carapace, the lioness at length went growling away towards her former position.

Her growls, as before, guided the actions of Congo. He was soon upon his feet, another assegai whistled through the air, and pierced through the neck of the lioness.

But, as before, the wound was not fatal, and the animal, now enraged to a frenzy, charged once more upon her assailant. So rapid was her advance that it was with great difficulty Congo got under cover. A moment later, and his ruse would have failed, for the claws of the lion rattled upon the shield as it descended.

He succeeded, however, in planting himself firmly, and was once more safe under the thick buffalo hide. The lioness now howled with disappointed rage; and after spending some minutes in fruitless endeavours to upset the shield, she once more desisted. This time, however, instead of going away, the angry brute kept pacing round and round, and at length *lay down within three feet of the spot*. Congo was besieged!

The boys saw at a glance that Congo was a captive. The look of the lioness told them this. Though she was several hundred yards off, they could see that she wore an air of determination, and was not likely to depart from the spot without having her revenge. There could be no question about it, – the Kaffir was in “a scrape.”

Should the lioness remain, how was he to get out of it? He could not escape by any means. To raise the shield would be to tempt the fierce brute upon him. Nothing could be plainer than that. The boys shouted aloud to warn him of his danger. They feared that he might not be aware of the close proximity of his enemy.

Notwithstanding the danger there was something ludicrous in the situation in which the Kaffir was placed; and the young hunters, though anxious about the result, could scarce keep from laughter, as they looked forth upon the plain.

There lay the lioness within three feet of the shield, regarding it with fixed and glaring eyes, and at intervals uttering her savage growls. There lay the oval form, with Congo beneath, motionless and silent. A strange pair of adversaries, indeed!

Long time the lioness kept her close vigil, scarce moving her body from its crouching attitude. Her tail only vibrated from side to side, and the muscles of her jaws quivered with subdued rage. The boys shouted repeatedly to warn Congo; though no reply came from the hollow interior of the carapace. They might have spared their breath. The cunning Kaffir knew as well as they the position of his enemy. Her growls, as well as her loud breathing, kept him admonished of her whereabouts; and he well understood how to act under the circumstances.

For a full half-hour this singular scene continued; and as the lioness showed no signs of deserting her post, the young yägers at length determined upon an attack, or, at all events, a feint that would draw her off.

It was close upon sunset, and should night come down what would become of Congo? In the darkness he might be destroyed. He might relax his watchfulness, – he might go to sleep, and then his relentless enemy would have the advantage.

Something must be done to release him from his narrow prison, – and at once.

They had saddled and mounted their horses, and were about to ride forth, when the sharp-eyed Hans noticed that the lioness was much farther off from the shield than when he last looked that way. And yet she had not moved, – at all events, no one had seen her stir – and she was still in the very same attitude! How then?

“Ha! look yonder! the shield is moving!”

As Hans uttered these words the eyes of all turned suddenly upon the carapace.

Sure enough, it was moving. Slowly and gradually it seemed to glide along the ground, like a huge tortoise, though its edges remained close to the surface. Although impelled by no visible power, all understood what this motion meant, – Congo was the moving power!

The yägers held their bridles firm, and sat watching with breathless interest.

In a few minutes more the shield had moved full ten paces from the crouching lioness. The latter seemed not to notice this change in the relative position of herself and her cunning adversary. If she did, she beheld it rather with feelings of curiosity or wonder than otherwise. At all events, she kept her post until the curious object had gone a wide distance from her.

She might not have suffered it to go much farther; but it was now far enough for her adversary’s purpose, for the shield suddenly became erect, and the Kaffir once more sent his assegai whirling from his hand.

It was the fatal shaft. The lioness chanced to be crouching broadside towards the hunter. His aim was true, and the barbed iron pierced through her heart. A sharp growl, that was soon stifled, – a short despairing struggle, that soon ended, and the mighty brute lay motionless in the dust!

A loud “hurrah!” came from the direction of the camp, and the young yägers now galloped forth upon the plain, and congratulated Congo upon the successful result of his perilous conflict.

The group of dead bodies was approached, and there a new surprise awaited the hunters. The lion was dead, as they had long since conjectured, – the sharp horns of the oryx had done the work; but what astonished all of them was, that the horns that had impaled the body of the great lion still remained sticking in his side. The oryx had been unable to extricate them, and would thus have perished along with her victim, even had the lioness not arrived to give the fatal blow!

This, both Congo and Swartboy assured the party, was no uncommon occurrence, and the bodies of the lion and gemsbok are often found upon the plains locked in this fatal embrace!

The cow gemsbok, yielding the more tender venison, was soon skinned and cut up; and as the delicious steaks spurted over the red coals of their camp-fire, the young yägers became very merry, and laughed at the singular incidents of the day.

Chapter Eight.

A Short Chat about Lions

Before going to supper the hunters dragged the carcasses of both lion and lioness close up to the camp-fire. A good pull it was, but they managed it by attaching strong “rheims” of raw hide around the necks of the creatures, and sliding them with the grain of the hair.

Their object in bringing them to the fire was, that they might have light to skin them, – not that they deem the lion-hides of any great value, except as trophies of their expedition – and they were not going to leave such trophies on the plain. Had the lions been permitted to remain all night where they had been killed, the hyenas would have eaten them up before morning, – skins and all. It is a fable which tells that the hyena will not eat the dead lion. The filthy brute will eat anything, even one of his own kind, – perhaps the most unpalatable morsel he could well find.

Of course the oryx were also brought up to the camp to be skinned and cut up. The bull, as large and heavy as a dead ass, gave them a good pull for it. But it afforded Groot Willem an opportunity of exhibiting his enormous strength; and the big boy, seizing the tow-rope, dragged the oryx after him with as much ease as if it had been a kitten at the end of a string of twine.

Both the gemsboks were regularly “butchered” and cut into quarters, to be carried to the next camp, and there dried. They would have dried the meat on the spot, but the water where they had halted was not good, and they did not wish to remain there another day.

The horns of the oryx are also esteemed trophies of the chase, and those of both that were killed being perfect specimens – long, handsomely ringed, and black as ebony – were added to the collection which the young yägers were forming, and stowed safely away in the wagons. The heads, with the skins left on, were carefully cleaned and preserved, at no distant day to become ornaments in the *voor-huis*, or entrance-hall, either of the Von Bloom or Van Wyk mansions.

All these matters being arranged, the yägers sat down to supper around the camp-fire. The roast ribs and steaks of the gemsbok venison proved delicious, and the whole party, as already stated, were contented and merry. Of course lions were the subject of conversation, and all laughed again and again whenever they thought of Congo and his encounter.

All of them, little Jan and Klaas excepted, had stories to tell of adventures with lions, for these animals were still to be found in the Graaf Reinet, and both Groot Willem and Arend had been present at more than one lion-hunt. Hans and Hendrik had met them in many an encounter during the great elephant expedition, and Swartboy was an old Hottentot lion-hunter.

But Congo seemed to know more of the lion than even Swartboy, though the latter would have gone wild had such a thing been hinted at by any one of the party; and many a rival story of strange interest fell from the lips of both Kaffir and Bushman at that same camp-fire. Some of the party had heard of a mode of lion-hunting practised by the Bechuana tribes, and, indeed, in Congo’s own country. There was nothing very novel about the mode. A number of people, – naked savages they were, – attacked the lion wherever they met him, either in the bush or on the open plain, and there fought him to the death. These people carried for arms only the assegai, and, as a sort of defensive weapon, a mop of black ostrich-feathers fastened upon the end of a slender stick, and somewhat resembling a large fly-brush. The object of this was to disconcert the lion when rushing upon the hunter. By sticking it in the ground at the right moment, the lion mistakes the clump of ostrich-feathers for his real assailant, and, charging upon it, permits the hunter to escape. Such a *ruse* is far inferior to the trick of the carapace, but that singular mode of defence against the lion was only practised by such cunning hunters as Congo.

Now, as already stated, the plan practised by the Bechuana savages had nothing very novel or strange in it. Any strangeness about it consisted in the fact of the imprudence of such a mode

of attack; for it was said that the hunters did not stand off at a distance and cast their assegais, on the contrary, they retained these weapons in their hands, and used them as spears, approaching the lion close enough to thrust them into his body! The consequence was, that in every encounter with their terrible antagonist, several hunters were either killed or badly mangled. This was the thing that appeared strange to our young yägers. They could not understand why any hunters should attack the fierce lion thus boldly and recklessly, when they might avoid the encounter altogether! They could not understand why even savages should be so regardless of life. Was it true that any people hunted the lion in that way? They asked Congo if it was true. He replied that it was.

Now this required explanation, – and Congo was requested to give it, which he did as follows.

The hunters spoken of were not *volunteers*. *They did not attack the lion of their own will and pleasure, but at the command of the tyrant that ruled them.* It was so in Congo's country, where the sanguinary monster, Chaaka, had sway. *The whole people of Chaaka were his slaves*, and he thought nothing of putting a thousand of them to death in a single morning to gratify some petty spleen or dislike! He had done so on more than one occasion, often adding torture. The tales of horrors practised by these African despots would be incredible were it not for the full clear testimony establishing their truth; and, although it forms no excuse for slavery, the contemplation of such a state of things in Africa lessens our disgust for the system of American bondage. Even the atrocious slave-trade, with all the horrors of the "middle passage," appears mild in comparison with the sufferings endured by the subjects of such fearful tyrants as Chaaka, Dinga, or Moselekatse!

Congo related to the young yägers that it was customary for Chaaka's people to act as the herdsmen of his numerous flocks, and that when any of his cattle were killed by a lion, – a frequent occurrence, – the unfortunate creatures who herded them were commanded to hunt the lion, and bring in his head, or *suffer death* in case of failure; and this sentence was sure to be carried into effect.

This explained the apparently reckless conduct of the hunters.

Congo further stated that he had been compelled to take part in several of these lion-hunts, in each of which the lives of men were sacrificed. He spoke of one in particular where no less than ten hunters had been killed before the lion was *captured*; – captured, not killed, for on this occasion the despot had taken a whim into his head, and ordered the fierce animal to be *taken alive*! His command was, that if the lion were not brought before him alive, and without a wound or scratch, every man engaged in the hunt should suffer death! As the unfortunate hunters well knew the threat was no idle one, they caught the lion in their naked arms, and succeeded in tying him, but not until ten of their number had fallen victims to their involuntary zeal!

To these and other tales of lions did the young yägers listen as they sat around the blazing camp-fire.

Chapter Nine.

The Unicorn

The oryx next became the subject of conversation, and Swartboy could tell more about it than any one. Of the oryx Congo knew very little, as the region most frequented by this beautiful antelope lies farther west than the country of the Kaffir tribes. Its headquarters are in the land of the Namaquas, though it is thinly scattered all around the borders of the Great Kalihari Desert.

The oryx is a desert-dwelling antelope, can live without water, and grows fat even on the plants that thinly vegetate over the barren soil. It is a bold creature – often beats off the lion, or kills him by impalement on its long bayonet-like horns. Of the truth of this fact our yägers had that day had proof. The oryx when hunted does not, like many other antelopes, make for either water or cover. It strikes in a straight line for its desert home, trusting to its heels for safety. And its confidence in them is seldom misplaced. A swift horse alone can overtake and bring it to a stand; unless it be very fat, and then it is more easily “blown.”

An interesting point occurred in the conversation about the oryx.

Arend and some of the others had read in several books of travellers that the oryx was supposed to be the fabled “unicorn,” derived from Egyptian sculptures. They asked if this was the case. Their question was not put to Swartboy, you may be sure, but to Hans the naturalist, of course.

Hans regarded the supposition as a very silly one. A mere fancy of some early South African traveller, that had been repeated, parrot-like, in the books of other travellers and the writings of several closet-naturalists. The supposition of the oryx being the original of the unicorn rested only upon the fact that its horns when seen *en profile* appear as but one; and the unicorn is so figured on the Egyptian sculptures. Now this argument can be advanced in favour of several other antelopes, and therefore falls at once to the ground as regards the oryx.

Hans mentioned several reasons why the gemsbok could not be the “fabled unicorn.” Its form, and particularly the shape of its head, are quite unlike the sculptures of that famous creature. Its horns, both in length and “set,” even when seen *en profile*, differ altogether from that of the unicorn, which points forward, whereas the horns of the oryx extend backward almost horizontally, and sometimes even touching the flanks of the animal.

“No,” continued Hans; “if the Egyptian unicorn be not a fable – if it be the representation of any animal in Africa, that animal is the gnoo; and I regard it as something singular that the resemblance between the gnoo – I mean the common species, not the ‘brindled’ – and the fabled unicorn, has not long since been noticed by naturalists and travellers.

“I should fancy that no one could look upon the pictures of both without being struck by this resemblance. Their forms, both of head and body, the elegant rounding of limb, the split hoof, the long tufted tails, the proud arching necks, with full flowing mane, – all these points go to show that the gnoo was copied for the unicorn. The *one* horn is the only circumstance that appears to invalidate my theory, but even in this respect the gnoo bears a much greater resemblance to the unicorn than does the oryx. The horns of the gnoo are set in such a manner that it often appears a *unicorn*. Their tips do not rise above the level of the skull; and in consequence of this, and also from the manner in which the animal frequently carries its head, only one horn is visible, the other being, inconspicuous against the dark ground of the head and mane. Often only half the horn appears at a distance, and is then seen pointing forward and ‘set,’ very similarly to the brow ornaments of the unicorn.

“The horn of the unicorn is usually represented quite straight in modern paintings; but this is not correct, according to the Egyptian sculpture, where a curve is given, – a positive imitation of the curve in the horns of the oryx! Even though it were straight, this would scarce invalidate my theory, for the horns of the young oryx are straight also, and we might suppose a young one to be represented.

“I do not beg the question in this way, however,” continued Hans, “for I know that whatever animal the Egyptians meant on their sculptures must have been well known to them, and it is not likely that they would have pictured a specimen of immature age. The singular character of the gnou, its odd and eccentric habits, as well as the eccentricity of its form and appearance, must have drawn attention to it from the earliest times, and such an animal would not fail to be pictured by the Egyptians. As to the one horn, I regard the existence of that, either as the result of imperfect observation on the part of the Egyptian sculptors, or, what is more likely, a want of knowledge of their art. Egyptian sculpture is at best but a rude affair, and the peculiar curve and set of the oryx horns are difficult to depict. Even in this very hour of high art, our painters do not give the most correct delineation of the head of a gemsbok. So, you see, I make out a tolerably clear case, that the gnou of South Africa is the original of that mysterious celebrity – the *unicorn*.”

The naturalist had fairly established his point, to the satisfaction of all the young yägers, who then asked him some questions about the unicorn mentioned in the Bible.

“As to the unicorn of Scripture,” replied Hans, “that is a very different affair. There can be no mistake about the animal meant by Job when he wrote, ‘Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow? or will he harrow the valleys after thee? Wilt thou trust him because his strength is great? or wilt thou leave thy labour to him?’ This is, in reality, a unicorn – the *one-horned rhinoceros*.”

Resuming the subject of the oryx, Hans informed his companions that this animal formed the type of a genus of animals called *Oryx*, of which there were three other species, – the “addax,” the “abu-harb,” and the “algazel.”

The “addax” (*Oryx addax*) is a native of Central Africa generally, and is nearly as large as the oryx; but its horns, instead of being straight, are twisted spirally. They are smaller in the female, which is agreeable to the usual disposition of these appendages, though contrary to that of the horns of the gemsbok. The colour of the addax is greyish-white over the body, and reddish-brown upon the head and neck, with a white patch across the face. It is not gregarious, but lives in pairs on the sandy deserts, for traversing which its broad hoofs are peculiarly adapted. It was known to the ancients, and Pliny speaks of it under the name *Strepsiceros*.

The “abu-harb” (*Oryx leucoryx*) is also a large powerful antelope, with long sharp horns slightly curved backward. Its colour is cream-white, with a brown mark on the forehead, another on the cheeks, and a rust-brown colour over the neck and throat. In form it bears a good deal of resemblance to the oryx, and was really the animal known by this name to the Greeks and Romans. But naturalists now apply the name “oryx” to the gemsbok or Cape oryx, (*Oryx Capensis*).

The “abu-harb” is a native of Kordofan and Sennaar, and it is one of those that are found upon the sculptures of Nubia and Egypt. Unlike the addax, it is gregarious in its habits, and lives in large herds.

The fourth species of oryx is the “algazel,” (*Oryx algazella*). This is also a native of Central Africa, but less is known of it than of any of the other three; and there are naturalists who regard it as merely a variety of the “abu-harb.”

When Hans had finished his learned discourse, it was full time for retiring to rest, so the whole party crept into their wagons, and went to sleep.

Chapter Ten. The Camel-Birds

On leaving the “drift” where they had crossed the Orange River, our hunters “treked” in a north-easterly direction. Had they gone due north they would soon have reached the rim of the Great Kalihari Desert – the Säära of Southern Africa. Of course they could not have penetrated this, and would necessarily have been compelled to head in a new direction, either to the east or west. But they had long since determined on an easterly course, as the region lying to the eastward of the desert had the reputation of being a grand country for the large animals – the buffalo, the elephant, and the camelopard; and the rivers in that part were filled with huge sea-cows (hippopotami) and gigantic crocodiles. That was the very country the young yägers wanted to be in.

They were not travelling without a guide. Congo was their guide. He knew every inch of the route. He had promised to bring them into a country abounding in elephants and giraffes; and no doubt was entertained that the Kaffir would keep his promise.

Next day they were on the move at an early hour. They made a long day’s march, and, halting a little before sunset, outspanned in a grove of mokhala-trees, standing upon the very edge of a bleak desert, that stretched before them as far as they could see, – and indeed much further. This desert had a very arid and parched appearance, the only vegetation upon it being solitary plants of the arborescent aloe, with its large coral-red flower-spike, palm-like zamias, some species of cactus-like euphorbias, and here and there small clumps of *Acacia horrida*, or “wait-a-bit” thorns, as these bushes are jocosely termed, from the disposition of their curved spines to hook upon the clothes of any one passing them.

Both plants and bushes grew far apart, and wide tracts of the plain appeared without even any of these to vary its brown monotony. It was a sort of outlying spur of the Kalihari Desert, and they would have to cross it before they should reach the country promised by their guide. There would be *fifty* miles without vley, spring, or stream — *fifty* miles from water to water.

They had outspanned by the last spring, which gurgled out among the roots of the mokhala-trees upon the very edge of the desert. There they intended remaining for a couple of days to dry the flesh of the gemsboks, and also to recruit their animals and prepare them for the long waterless journey of the desert, – a perilous passage.

It was near sunset when they had finished “outspanning,” having formed their camp in the centre of the mokhala grove, and not far from the spring.

Hans, in a contemplative mood, had wandered to the edge of the grove; and, seating himself under one of the trees, whose full umbrella-like top cast a fine shade, was gazing out upon the wide treeless waste.

He had not been long in this situation, when his attention was attracted to three upright forms that appeared upon the plain at the distance of some hundred yards from the grove. They were bipeds, for he saw them from head to heel. Not human bipeds, however, but birds. They were *ostriches*.

The merest child could have told that much – anybody – for who does not recognise the great African ostrich at the first glance? The size and form of the *Struthio camelus* are too peculiar to admit of its being taken for any other bird. The American “rhea,” or the Australian “emeu,” might pass for its half-grown young, but a full-sized African ostrich is not to be mistaken for any of its pigmy relatives, either in Australia, New Zealand, the Indian archipelago, or America. It is the great bird of birds – the biggest that carries feathers.

Of course Hans knew the three to be ostriches the moment his eye rested upon them – a cock and two hens. This was easily told, for there is as much difference between the male and female of these birds, as between the brilliant peacock and his dingy spouse. The greater size of the former;

the deep black colour of his body contrasting strongly with the snow-white plumes of his wings and tail, – and in the desert these *are* snow-white – distinguish him at once from his female companions. Their colour is a nearly uniform greyish brown, and they want those splendid jet and snowy plumes that adorn the back of their lord and master, and which have been from all time so highly prized as ornaments by both savage and civilised people.

A cock and two hens they were, that presented themselves before the eyes of the young naturalist.

They were marching slowly along. They were not affrighted. They evidently had seen nothing of the camp. How could they, as it was behind the trees in the centre of the grove? They occasionally bent their long necks to one side or the other, and cropped a leaf, or picked up a seed, but then continued their course. From their following a straight line Hans concluded they were not feeding in the regular way, but bent towards some point, perhaps to their night resting-place.

When first observed, they were coming in a side direction, that is, transversely to the direction in which Hans himself was facing. In a short time they had passed before him, and were now widening the distance, and getting farther off into the desert.

Hans at first thought of calling to the others, who were all busy about the wagons, and had not seen the ostriches. He was thinking also of some plan by which the birds might be captured or killed.

After a moment's consideration, he gave up the idea of either one thing or the other. The sight of an ostrich was nothing new to any of the party. Jan and Klaas might have cared for it, but both were tired after their long hot ride, and had already fallen asleep on the grass. Better not disturb them, thought Hans.

As to the killing or capturing the ostriches, after a moment's reflection, Hans also gave up that design. The birds were already passing – to have stalked within shot upon the naked plain would have been impossible, for Hans well knew the wary nature of the ostrich; and to have attempted a chase with their tired horses would have been equally idle.

Hans, therefore, held his peace, and sat still; following with his eyes the retreating forms of the three great camel-birds.

Their long strides soon carried them far off, but before they had receded half-a-mile, the eyes of the naturalist were removed from them, and turned on a different object.

Chapter Eleven.

The Smallest of Foxes

The object which now fixed the attention of the naturalist was a quadruped, – a very small one, not bigger than a medium-sized cat, but altogether different in form and proportions. Unlike the cats, it had a long sharp snout, and a thick bushy tail. It stood higher upon its legs, too, than do animals of the cat kind, but the most remarkable *feature* about it was its ears. These were remarkable for their length, which was out of all proportion to the size of the creature. Its whole body was barely one foot long, and yet the ears stood full six inches above the crown of its head! They stood quite erect, broad, stiff, and pointed, and ending in an acute angle at the tips.

Its colour was a beautiful Isabella above, and cream-white underneath. No; the creature was not like a cat, nor a dog neither, though it was more like the latter than the former. But there is an animal related to the canine family to which it bore a very strong resemblance, and that is the fox, for it *was* a fox, the very smallest in the world, the “caama” of Southern Africa. And yet, correctly speaking, it was not a fox neither, but a *fennec*.

What is a “fennec?”

That is an interesting question, and one about which naturalists have bothered their brains a good deal. It is an animal of which there are several species existing throughout Africa; and of which the celebrated traveller Bruce, – who, everybody thought, *lied* so largely, but about whom conceited ignorance has since changed its opinion, – first gave an account.

It differs from the foxes in several respects, but the most remarkable difference is found in the form of the eye. In the true foxes the pupil is linear or elliptical, while that of the fennec is round, thus showing the difference of habit – for the foxes are in reality *nocturnal* animals, while the fennecs are *diurnal*. Some species of foxes, however, are twilight prowlers, and one or two of the fennecs are also crepuscular.

It is, therefore, scarce possible to draw a line of demarcation between the two. The fennecs, however, have been formed into a separate genus, termed *Megalotis*, from the extreme size of their ears. It is to be hoped that the question is thus settled that has so much bothered the closet-naturalists; who, taking their ideas from the anatomy of the fennec, have classed it according to their several fancies; one making it a dog, another a cat, a third a fox, a fourth a civet, a fifth a hyena, and a sixth placing it among the galagos!

Let us call it a “fennec,” or diurnal fox, and say farther that although there are several species of *true foxes* in Africa, and several of *jackal-foxes*, there are also several of fennecs. Three are well known. The fennec of Bruce, (*Megalotis zerda*), first described by that traveller as seen by him in Abyssinia, but also indigenous to South Africa; the “zabora,” (*Megalotis famelicus*), a native of Nubia and Kordofan, and supposed to be the animal represented on Egyptian temples, which has been taken for the figure of the jackal; and the “caama fennec,” (*Megalotis caama*).

A fourth species, “Lalande’s zerda,” (*Megalotis Lalandii*), has been “hooked out” of this genus, and made to form one of itself, (*Agriodius*), not because its habits in anywise differ from the *Megalotides*, but because it chanced to differ slightly from them in the form and arrangement of its “ivories.”

Now of all these fennecs the one which was passing before the eyes of Hans was the “caama,” the smallest of the whole tribe either of fennecs or foxes.

Crouching just like a fox, now trotting nimbly a few paces, now halting and squatting close to the ground, as though fearful of being observed, the little creature passed on.

What was it after? What prey was it in pursuit of?

On watching it for a few moments, Hans saw to his great surprise that it was after the ostriches!

It was going the same way they had gone, its sharp snout set towards, and its eyes evidently bent upon, them. Whenever they stopped it did the same, squatting down as it did so, as if to avoid their observation; and when they moved on, it also trotted forward, halting at intervals behind stones and bushes and earnestly regarding the birds in advance. Beyond a doubt it was trailing them! But what could this little creature want with the ostriches? Certainly not to attack them, though it was following after them just as a fox would a covey of partridges.

It could not be that, however; as a kick from the mighty leg of one of these birds would have hoisted the fennec fifty yards over the plain, like a ball from a cricket-bat.

No; it could not be following them with hostile intentions, – puny pigmy that it appeared beside the big camel-birds!

For what, then, was it trailing them? Of course it was not running on the scent, but the view. On their track it certainly was, and as certainly was it “dogging” them. For what purpose?

This was just what the naturalist Hans wished to know; and he remained closely observing the movements of this miniature “microscopic” fox.

Talking of a microscope reminds me that Hans at that moment took out of his pocket a telescope, – a small one, which he habitually carried. This he did, because, in a few minutes, the ostriches were very distant over the plain, and their pursuer the fennec was no longer visible to the naked eye. With the glass, however, Hans could still make it out, and could see that it was manoeuvring just as when it passed him. All at once the ostriches came to a stop; and, after an apparent consultation among themselves, the cock squatted down, and his long legs were no longer seen. He was flat down upon his breast, and even through his small pocket-glass Hans could tell that his body looked more spread and bulky than before. Was he covering eggs? Was there a nest? The appearance of the ground about the sitting bird favoured that belief. There was a slight prominence around the body of the bird having the semblance of a bird’s nest; but Hans knew that the nest of the ostrich is of very simple construction, – a mere cavity scratched out in the sand, and scarce to be recognised from any great distance. Several white objects lying around the spot led Hans to the conclusion that there *was* a nest. These objects did not seem larger than “jack-stones,” but Hans, calculating well the distance that separated them from his eye, believed them to be ostrich-eggs, and therefore as large as paving-stones. Hans knew that around the nest of the ostrich scattered eggs are usually found – said by some to be there laid as a deposit for the food of the expected progeny during their early days of chickhood!

The two hens, after moving about awhile also squatted down, but they appeared only to kneel with their great legs doubled under them; whereas the cock sat low and flat upon his breast. This only more convinced Hans that there was a nest, and that the cock ostrich was taking his turn of duty, while the hens were simply gone to roost in the usual manner.

That the cock covered the eggs was nothing surprising to the young naturalist, who knew that it is the habit of the male of these birds to do so, and that he usually takes his turn during the night, when it is colder, and his greater size and strength are required to keep the eggs warm, as well as to protect the nest from prowling beasts of prey. One or other of the hens would very likely relieve him about daybreak. Of course both the hens were mothers in prospective of the future brood, as the cock ostrich is a terrible “Mormon;” and frequently does the polygamous on a large scale, having sometimes as many as a dozen wives. Our old fellow was rather a moderate Mormon, as he appeared to be satisfied with two – though bigamy, no doubt, is quite as sinful as polygamy.

Hans concluded that there was a nest, and full of eggs in process of being hatched. It was no evidence against this, that the birds had been away from it together. The day had been a very warm one, and during the middle part of the day – particularly in hot weather – the ostrich wanders away from its eggs, leaving the sun to do its work for it. The hotter the country, the less does the ostrich require to “set;” and in parts of Africa within the torrid zone where the heat reaches a very high degree, the ostrich has very little to do with the hatching of its eggs, but buries them in the burning sand, and makes the sun its “incubator!”

But what had become of our fennec – poor little fellow?

So asked Hans of himself, as he swept the plain with his telescope. While watching the late movements of the birds, he had altogether forgotten the beast.

After a time he was just able to make out its small whitish body stretched upon the ground, under the lee of a little bush, and apparently resolved upon passing the night there. Had there been any hole near, it would have preferred lodging in that – for the fennec is an animal that makes its home in a “burrow.”

Night had suddenly come on, and the darkness prevented Hans from observing farther the movements of either beast or bird; so putting up his glass, he rejoined his companions in the camp.

Chapter Twelve.

The Wingless Birds

Hans, on returning to the camp, gave an account of what he had seen. All were interested in the relation, but particularly the boys Klaas and Jan, who were not over satisfied that they had not themselves been witnesses of the affair. Hans might very well have told them of it. They wouldn't have minded being waked up to see the ostriches, especially as they passed so near. It wasn't every day one could get such a view of these fine birds – they were so shy no one could get near them, and Hans might very well have come into camp and told them, or called them, Klaas and Jan, to the spot. Hans didn't care whether they ever saw any thing worth seeing – he didn't.

So grumbled Klaas and Jan, because Hans had not waked them out of their sweet *siesta*, to see three ostriches stalking over the plain, and not doing any thing in particular.

But boys are boys, and so long as they *are* boys, they will feel a wonderful interest in birds – especially when these birds stand nearly ten feet high, and weigh three hundred pounds, as ostriches do.

Had it been a buffalo, or a giraffe, or even an elephant, neither Klaas nor Jan would have so much cared. Beasts are all very well in their way, and may interest full-grown hunters, like Hendrik and Groot Willem, but for “boy hunters,” with light fowling-pieces and Number 5 shot, birds are the game – though their Number 5 shot would hardly have tickled an ostrich.

No matter for that. They wanted to see the great camel-bird. Hans ought to have apprised them. It was “right mean” of him not to do so, – right mean, said Jan, and Klaas backed the opinion.

How long they might have grumbled, and given vent to their reproaches, can only be guessed at; but the conversation turning upon ostriches assumed a very pleasing character; and Klaas and Jan, becoming deeply interested in it, soon got over their little “miff” with Hans – especially as it was he who was now interesting them. Upon the subject of ostriches. Hans had read a good deal, and was well acquainted with the character and habits of these most interesting birds.

Swartboy stood next in his knowledge of the ostrich, for Swartboy in early life had been a “dweller of the desert,” – the home of the Bushman as well as the great camel-bird. Swartboy was only too happy at the opportunity thus offered of showing off his knowledge, for the late wonderful performances of his Kaffir rival had quite thrown him into the shade.

So what with Hans's book-knowledge and Swartboy's practical experience, the young yägers became pretty well acquainted with the whole “history” of the bird.

“The ostrich,” said Hans, “is an African bird, though also found in the adjacent countries of Asia. Several species of birds somewhat like it, belonging to South America, Australia and the islands of the Indian Archipelago, have been called ‘ostriches’ in the language of travellers. I shall have a word about these presently.

“All over the African continent, as well as Arabia, Syria, and Persia, dwells the ostrich, wherever there are desert plains – for this bird is peculiarly a denizen of the desert, and never makes its home in wooded, marshy, or even fertile districts.

“It has been known from the earliest times, and must have been more numerous in the days of Heliogabalus than now, since that tyrant had the brains of six hundred ostriches served up at a single feast!”

“Oh, the glutton!” exclaimed Jan.

“What a gourmand!” echoed Klaas.

“I should think after the feast he had more brains in his stomach than in his head,” quietly remarked Arend.

“No doubt of it,” added Hendrik.

Hans continued: —

“The ancients knew the ostrich as the ‘camel-bird,’ (*Struthio camelus*). This name was given to it on account of its fancied resemblance to the camel; and in its hoof-like two-toed feet, its long naked thighs and neck, and the pad or cushion on its chest, corresponding to the callosity on the breast of the camel, it does bear a resemblance to this animal. Like it, too, the ostrich is formed for the desert. Aristotle and Pliny described the ostrich as half bird, half quadruped.”

As soon as Hans had given the more scientific part of the natural history of the ostrich, Swartboy’s knowledge of the habits of the bird was produced, and from both were collected the details that follow.

Ostriches are gregarious – flocks of *fifty* may be seen upon the plains, peacefully associating with zebras, quaggas, wildebeests, blue wildebeests, and several other plain-frequenting antelopes.

The males are polygamous, and usually have from two to six wives. These lay twelve to sixteen eggs each, in a nest which is only a hole scooped out in the sand about six feet in diameter. Not more than half the eggs are deposited in the nest. The others lie scattered around, and are never hatched.

Swartboy alleged that these were intended to feed the young when they came out of the shell: but Hans dissented from this opinion. The naturalist believed that those scattered about were superfluous eggs, which were not deposited in the nest because one bird could not cover all that the whole family of hens would lay; and that once the “setting” was complete, the superfluous eggs were dropped about anywhere.

There is a good deal of probability in this conjecture of the young naturalist.

It is certain that the scattered eggs are those last laid, and that the birds continue to drop them after the incubation has commenced, but whether they form the food of the young is a disputed point. One bird can cover from thirty to forty, placed as they usually are upon their ends, and Swartboy said that he had often found this number in a nest, but more frequently thirty was the “setting.”

The male takes part in the incubation, sitting during the night; when his greater size and strength enable him the better to protect the eggs from cold. The “hens” relieve one another during the day, but when the sun is hot all leave the nest to itself, for hours at a time.

Hans stated, that in the more tropical regions the eggs are forsaken for long spells, and the hot sand and *sun* do the work of the parent birds; and that on this account the period of incubation is not fixed, but ranges from thirty to forty days.

The young when hatched are well developed, and in a day or two become as large as guinea-hens, leaving the nest and running about in charge of the parent birds.

At this period the old ones are very careful of their offspring. When an enemy approaches, the hen that has charge of the flock will endeavour to attract the intruder upon herself, making a feint of being wounded, spreading and drooping her wings, and tumbling from side to side along the ground, while the cock draws off the chicks in an opposite direction! Partridges, wild ducks, and many other birds, do the same.

The eggs of the ostrich are of a dull white colour. They are not all of equal size, nor are the birds either. A medium-sized ostrich-egg is six inches long, and weighs about three pounds. It is excellent eating when broiled among hot cinders, and is a meal for a man, – some say two, some three, while others allege that it is not enough for one. But “a meal for a man” is a very uncertain standard, and depends a good deal on the capacity of the man’s stomach and the state of his appetite. A better standard is found in the estimate that one ostrich-egg is equal in quantity to twenty-four of the common domestic fowl.

The shells of the ostrich-eggs are very strong, and used by the Bushmen and other natives of the desert as water-vessels – the only vessels that some of them have.

A full-grown cock ostrich stands over nine feet in height, and weighs three hundred pounds. The legs of such a bird are immensely thick and muscular, and the thigh-joint equals in size the largest leg of mutton.

The ostrich is thought to be the swiftest runner in creation, but there are doubts about this. Certain it is that it cannot be overtaken by a horse in a fair tail-on-end chase; but the bird makes “doubles” in running, and by observing these, the mounted hunter sometimes gets near it by making a cut upon it, and delivers his fire as it passes. To run an ostrich down, however, is considered an impossibility, even by the Arab on his fleet steed. Its bottom is equal to its speed, as it can keep up the pace for hours together.

The muscular strength of its great long legs is well adapted for running fast and far; and while on the run, its hoofs make a clatter like those of a trotting horse, while large stones are flung violently to the rear! When at full speed it spreads its white wing-plumes, raising them over its back, but this is only done to balance it, as it could not fly a single yard.

Its principal weapon of defence is the leg with its hoof-like foot. With this it can kick like a mule, and the blow will break a man’s leg, or send the breath out of his body, as would the kick of a horse!

But the principal security of the ostrich lies in its splendid power of vision, combined with its peculiar habitat. It is always on the naked plain, with nothing to interrupt the view, and its keen eye enables it to perceive an enemy long before the latter can get near enough to do it an injury. So sharp is its sight, it can see even farther than it can be seen, large as it is!

A most difficult matter it is to get within shooting distance of these wary birds. Sometimes a shot is obtained by lying in wait for them at vleys, or springs, where they come to drink. Many people deny that they ever drink, as they are met with at great distances from water; but it should be remembered that what may appear a great distance to a tired traveller may be nothing to a fleet ostrich, who can fling the miles behind like a race-horse.

Others have observed the ostrich come to drink at a particular place once every day; and it is well known that in captivity they swallow large quantities of water. After drinking they do not run so well, and hunters take advantage of this and run them down after leaving the pool.

There are hunters residing upon the desert karoos, who hunt the ostrich as a profession. The feathers are of considerable value, as well as the skin, which is tough and strong, and tans into a fine species of leather, out of which jackets and other garments are made. A skin without the feathers is worth about one pound sterling; and the long white plumes of the wings and tail, – of which there are five-and-forty (the finest are from the wings,) – are often sold for a shilling apiece on the spot.

Groot Willem observed that the ostrich may be easily domesticated, and he had frequently seen tame ones about the kraals of the frontier boors. They are a useless pet, however; and, although quite harmless as far as man is concerned, they become troublesome in the farm-yard, where they trample the poultry to death, and sometimes gobble up chicks and young ducks, not from any carnivorous propensity, but on account of their extreme voracity: an old rag would be swallowed in the same way.

The proper food of the ostrich is tops of shrubby plants, with grain and seeds, though they “bolt” many odd and indigestible substances. They are fond of salt, like most wild animals, and are often seen in large flocks around the salt-pans, or “salines,” many of which exist upon the desert plains of Africa.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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