

The Ostrich Boys

It had sighted them and now moved rapidly, racing over the flat bone-dry earth, dust and stones spurting out from under its feet. Open wings, like enormous black sails, thrust the great bulk of the body towards the boys. Its head, atop an elongated neck, was in contrast finely moulded and delicate.

'He's too fast,' Isaac shouted and turned to run.

'No, wait.' Klaasie grabbed Isaac's arm. 'The eyelashes. We mus' see the eyelashes.'

The boys stood in the hatching camp, panting with fright, bare feet tensing in the sand. A distance away, behind them, was the fence they would have to scale before the ostrich closed in, and lifted its double-toe to slash them from head to foot.

Suddenly the wings moved up and wide, and hearts thrashing in panic, the boys saw coming up to them too fast to be true, the ostrich's luminous dark eyes and upward curling eyelashes.

Isaac wrenched loose, feeling the taut hold of Klaasie's fingers releasing him. He screamed as he ran headlong, legs and feet paddling, his movements leaden in his terror that he would not be fast enough.

Klaasie, arms pumping, fled past him, leapt onto the fence and legged over.

Isaac grasped the top rail, flung his body after Klaasie and fell to the ground, knees slamming the earth.

Breath bursting out of them, the boys lay looking up at the ostrich. The bird stood on the other side of the fence, wings still held high, glowering at them in a last attempt at

threat. Then abruptly it turned, collapsed its wings and moved sedately away on long-stepping legs with not a backward glance.

The boys got up and dusted themselves off then hearts still thumping, walked towards the packing-shed beside the hatching camp. Inside, the heat simmered despite the open sides of the building. The nearby thorn trees afforded scant shade in the midday blaze and not a breath of a breeze shifted the air. Soon work would cease until the day cooled a little.

At one of the tables, Klaasie's mother and sisters were packing feathers for export and the boys waved to them as they passed through the busy shed, pushing and shoving one another past packing cases and mounds of discarded feathers.

Outside they flopped down against the wall in a strip of shade.

'You going with your pa to Port Elizabeth?' asked Klaasie.

'No. The feather auctions will be held when I have gone back to boarding school.'

'To learn more readin' an' writin'?'

'I said I would teach you. It's not difficult.'

'Nee, jong. What would Klaasie do with readin'? Soon I'll work by my Pa in the camps. Jus' like my brothers.'

Isaac did not reply. He did not want to think about the 'soon' that would come in a matter of weeks when Klaasie turned fourteen, and would become a worker on Isaac's father's ostrich farm. He was bothered by the knowledge that he, the privileged son of Abie Soloman, the owner of the farm, would have the chance to explore the world while Klaasie would probably remain a worker his life long.

'Do you not want to travel in a train one day, Klaasie? Or drive in a Model-T Ford or see the places outside the Klein Karoo?' Isaac asked his friend.

Klaasie shook his head.

'Other places are not as dry and hot,' went on Isaac. 'It rains, and makes the earth soft. And there's green all over. So green it hurts your eyes.'

'Is it jus' like that by your school?'

Isaac nodded. He did not attempt to explain what school looked like: the green sports fields spreading out around the grand buildings, the tall old trees with leaves that shivered in the cool breezes. He had once tried to tell Klaasie what the Indian Ocean looked like, how it shushed on the beach, tumbled over itself and made white riffles as it fell. But his friend had said he could not 'see' it, and did not need what he could not see.

Now Klaasie pointed and Isaac looked ahead. He saw arid earth strewn with hot grey stones, isolated thorny trees, and in the distance, the low flat-topped Karoo koppies quivering in the heat waves.

'This is my place,' said Klaasie.

'Mine too,' said Isaac, 'but I want to see other places also.'

Then the signal bell clanged back and forth, and the workers came out of the packing-sheds to return to the compound for their midday meal. The boys rose, and stepping quickly over the burning ground, walked towards the farmhouse.

As they approached, they saw automobiles parked in disarray at the front steps, and Isaac's father, Abie, standing on the veranda. Other men were there, too, some standing with their hats in their hands, others sitting in chairs. In the deep shade, their features were indistinct and their voices, though animated, did not reach clearly into the midday heat.

'What's up, Klaasie? A meeting in the middle of the day? Is that Mr. Cohen? And look, our neighbour, Jan Prinsloo, from Vlaktes Farm.'

One of the men suddenly dashed his hat to the floor and shouted, 'I'm ruined, ruined, I tell you.' His voice broke, his words fell, and the boys heard him sobbing.

Abie put his arm around the man's shoulders and led him to the far corner of the veranda. The other men began speaking again but now their voices were low murmurs.

'What's wrong, Isaac?'

'Something bad,' replied Isaac. 'I'll go round to our backdoor. I cannot go in through the front. See you after lunch, Klaasie.'

The Solomon's midday meal was finished and the servants were removing the crockery. Isaac had noticed that his parents had eaten little and his mother's face was very pale. Conversation had been stilted, and the in-between silences long in the large panelled dining-room.

When the table was cleared and the room quiet again Abie Solomon said, 'Isaac, the ostrich feather market has crashed.'

'What does that mean?'

'Prices have fallen to rock bottom,' answered Mrs Solomon.

'We will not get the price we received in 1913. This year, we will get virtually nothing for the feathers we are packing,' said Abie Solomon.

'Why did it crash?' asked Isaac.

'The automobile,' answered his father.

'There is no headroom in a Model-T Ford,' explained Mrs Solomon, 'for the feathery hats that are the fashion in Europe now. And in a convertible,' she shrugged, 'it's even more impractical, so the ladies have just stopped buying our feathers. We are therefore, undone.'

'Bankrupt, my boy,' said Abie Solomon.

Isaac looked at his parents' faces, and heard again the sobbing on the veranda, saw his father with an arm around his companion's shoulders. 'Are we ... ruined, Father?'

'Yes, Isaac.'

'We have lost everything,' said Isaac's mother. 'Our house in town with its wonderful garden, your schooling. We cannot pay for them now and will have to sell them off.'

'Will we have to sell the farm?'

'Sell it? No one will buy it,' said Isaac's father. 'The Karoo is too dry for anything but ostrich farming.'

'Will we have to leave?'

'I am afraid so,' said his father.

The reply was so faint that Isaac heard it as a whisper.

Isaac needed to speak to Klaasie. He left his bedroom before the midday resting hour was over, went out of the front door, and passed through the coolness of the shaded veranda.

As he strode towards the worker's compound the heat closed in on him, and his bare feet pressed down hard on the earth pebbled with burning stones. He moved quickly to the wood-and-wire fence and the cluster of mud huts, and stood listening. The compound was silent, the branches of the peppercorn trees had surrendered to the heat and hung low, leaves drooping towards the earth. In the meagre shade, hens and skinny dogs lay stretched out and soundless, and did not stir as Isaac moved passed.

At the open door of Klaasie's hut, he called out, his voice quiet but urgent. In the dimness inside there was a stirring and Klaasie came to the door.

Isaac put out a hand and gripped his friend's wrist. 'Come.'

They left the compound; Isaac walking ahead and Klaasie following. They went rapidly and in silence for some moments then Klaasie asked, 'Where we going, hey, Isaac?'

'Up to the big rocks,' Isaac replied and kept on walking.

'Not so quick,' said Klaasie. 'Can't get breath, man.'

Isaac's feet slapped the earth as he rushed towards the large rocks scattered above the farmland. They reached the shade of the thorn trees and sat down, not speaking. Their chests rose and fell, and their breath gasped out then slowly became quieter.

Below them lay the farm; the exact lines of the fences, the orderly camps, the clear outline of the packing-sheds and the ostriches squatting in the sand.

'Klaasie, you wanted to stay here always,' said Isaac suddenly.

'Ja.'

'And I thought to go but always return.'

'Ja, man. So what's new?'

'It won't ever be like that, Klaasie,' said Isaac, shaking his head.

'Why not?'

'Cause I have to leave.'

'Leave? What you mean?'

'This morning, the men on the veranda. A terrible misfortune has befallen us all.' Isaac's harsh words tumbled out and rushed on, becoming tangled and knotted. When

there was nothing more to say he took a breath and let go of the stiffness inside him. 'Do you see, Klaasie?' he said. 'Do you understand?'

Klaasie nodded and Isaac's eyes filled with tears. He put his arm round Klaasie's shoulders and their bony boys' bodies held one another.

'But we'll be friends for ever,' said Klaasie after a while.

Isaac pulled away. 'How? I have to leave here.'

'You come visit me.'

'Oh, Klaasie, it's not so easy.'

'Ag, is easy, man.' Klaasie's face sparked alight as he spoke.

'And how shall I "come visit you?"'

'In a Model-T Ford.'

'No.' Isaac's voice was loud. 'I will never buy what has ruined us.'

'Then walk,' said Klaasie.

'Walk?'

'Jus' a joke, man,' said Klaasie and punched Isaac lightly on the shoulder. 'But see there.' He pointed passed the ostrich camps to the horizon.

Isaac looked at the smudges in the distance. 'Karoo hills,' he said.

'Ja, but also roads, Isaac, roads.'

'All places have roads,' said Isaac.

'What the roads for, man?'

'They ... spread out to join farms and people to one another,' said Isaac, now noticing how the roads weaved distinctly through the landscape.

'An' now all roads getting automobiles,' said Klaasie. His finger jabbed. 'See? There. An' there near Vlaktes Farm.'

'I see a cloud of dust,' said Isaac stubbornly, watching as an automobile overtook a lumbering ox-wagon.

'It's automobiles, Isaac. They move quick, they make dust.'

Isaac shrugged.

'Can't run from automobiles like from ostriches,' said Klaasie.

'What ostriches?' asked Isaac scornfully. 'Everything is lost.'

'Being friends is not lost,' said Klaasie. 'Jus' come visit me. Not in a Model-T Ford, man. There will be others.'

'Lots and lots of others,' said Isaac. 'They will never go away, they will change everything.'

The bell sounded the end of the midday break and the workers came out of the compound, talking and laughing. When they reached the house Isaac's parents came down the veranda steps. Mr Solomon said a few words to the workers and then together they all moved quietly towards the packing-sheds.

'Let's go listen to your father,' said Klaasie.

Isaac, staring at the workplace below, did not respond.

Suddenly Klaasie spun around. 'Race you there,' he shouted and began to bolt down the path.

Slowly Isaac followed, and then picking up speed, he rushed after his friend, calling, 'Wait, wait for me.'

And so the boys moved away, dust rising as their bare feet hammered the ground.

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