

Who was King?



“Once upon a time,” began Outa Karel, and his audience of three looked up expectantly.

“Once upon a time, Oom Leeuw roared and the forest shook with the dreadful sound. Then, from far away over the vlakke, floated another roar, and the little lion cubs jumped about and stood on their heads, tumbling over each other in their merriment.

“‘Hear,’ they said, ‘it is Volstruis, old

Three Sticks. He tries to imitate the King, our father. He roars well. Truly there is no difference.’

“When Leeuw heard this he was very angry, so he roared again, louder than ever. Again came back the sound over the veld, as if it had been an echo.

“‘Ach, no! this will never do,’ thought Leeuw. ‘I must put a stop to this impudence. I alone am King here, and imitators—I want none.’

“So he went forth and roamed over the vlakke till he met old Three Sticks, the Ostrich. They stood glaring at each other.

“Leeuw’s eyes flamed, his mane rose in a huge mass and he lashed his tail angrily. Volstruis spread out his beautiful wings and swayed from side to side, his beak open and his neck twisting like a whip-snake. Ach! it was pretty, but if baasjes could have seen his eyes! Baasjes know, Volstruis’s eyes are very soft and beautiful—like Nonnie’s when she tells the Bible stories; but now there was only fierceness in them, and yellow lights that looked like fire.

“But there was no fight—yet. It was only their way of meeting. Leeuw came a step nearer and said, ‘We must see who is baas. You, Volstruis, please to roar a little.’

“So Volstruis roared, blowing out his throat, so, ‘Hoo-hoo-hoor-r-r-r!’ It was a fearsome sound—the sort of sound that makes you feel streams of cold water running down your back when you hear it suddenly and don’t know what it is. Yes, baasjes, if you are in bed you curl up and pull the blankets over your head, and if you are outside you run in and get close to the Nooi or Nonnie.”

A slight movement, indicative of contradiction, passed from one to another of his small hearers, but—unless it was a free and easy, conversational evening—they made it a point of honour never to interrupt Outa in full career. This, like other things, could await the finish of the story.



“Then Leeuw roared, and truly the voices were the same. No one could say, ‘This is a bigger voice,’ or ‘That is a more terrifying voice.’ No, they were just equal.

“So Leeuw said to Volstruis, ‘Our voices are alike. You are my equal in roaring. Let it then be so. You will be King of the Birds as I am King of the Beasts. Now let us go hunting and see who is baas there.’

“Out in the vlakte some sassaby were feeding, big fat ones, a nice klompje; so Leeuw started off in one direction and Volstruis in the other, but both kept away from the side the wind came from. Wild bucks can smell—ach toch! so good. Just one little puff when a hunter is creeping up to them, and at once all the heads are in the air—sniff, sniff, sniff—and they are off like the wind. Dust is all you see, and when that has blown away—ach no! there are no bucks; the whole veld is empty, empty!”

Oota stretched out his arms and waved them from side to side with an exaggerated expression of finding nothing but empty space, his voice mournful with a sense of irreparable loss.

“But”—he took up his tale with renewed energy—“Leeuw and Volstruis were old hunters. They knew how to get nearer and nearer without letting the bucks know. Leeuw trailed himself along slowly, slowly, close to the ground, and only when he was moving could you see which was Leeuw and which was sand: the colour was just the same.

“He picked out a big buck, well-grown and fat, but not too old to be juicy, and when he got near enough he hunched himself up very quietly—so, my little masters, just so—ready to spring, and then before you could whistle, he shot through the air like a stone from a catapult, and fell, fair and square, on to the sassaby’s back, his great tearing claws fastened on its shoulders and his wicked teeth meeting in the poor thing’s neck.

“Ach! the beautiful big buck! Never again would his pointed horns tear open his enemies! Never again would he lead the herd, or prong in the veld in mating time! Never again would his soft nostrils scent danger in the distance, nor his quick hoofs give the signal for the stampede! No, it was really all up with him this time! When Oom Leeuw gets hold of a thing, he doesn’t let go till it is dead.

“The rest of the herd—ach, but they ran! Soon they were far away, only specks in the distance; all except those that Volstruis had killed. Truly Volstruis was clever! Baasjes know, he can run fast—faster even than the sassaby. So when he saw Leeuw getting ready to spring, he raced up-wind as hard as he



could, knowing that was what the herd would do. So there he was waiting for them, and didn't he play with them! See, baasjes, he stood just so"—in his excitement Outa rose and struck an attitude—"and when they streaked past him he jumped like this, striking at them with the hard, sharp claws on his old two toes." Outa hopped about like a fighting bantam, while the children hugged themselves in silent delight.

"Voerts! there was one dead!"—Outa kicked to the right. "Voerts! there was another!"—he kicked to the left—"till there was a klomp of bucks lying about the veld giving their last blare. Yes, old Two Toes did his work well that day.

"When Leeuw came up and saw that Volstruis had killed more than he had, he was not very pleased, but Volstruis soon made it all right.

"Leeuw said, 'You have killed most, so you rip open and begin to eat.'

"'Oh no!' said Volstruis, 'you have cubs to share the food with, so you rip open and eat. I shall only drink the blood.'

"This put Leeuw in a good humour; he thought Volstruis a noble, unselfish creature. But truly, as I said before, Volstruis was clever. Baasjes see, he couldn't eat meat; he had no teeth. But he didn't want Leeuw to know. Therefore he said, 'You eat; I will only drink the blood.'

"So Leeuw ripped open—sk-r-r-r-r, sk-r-r-r-r—and called the cubs, and they all ate till they were satisfied. Then Volstruis came along in a careless fashion, pecking, pecking as he walked, and drank the blood. Then he and Leeuw lay down in the shade of some trees and went to sleep.

"The cubs played about, rolling and tumbling over each other. As they played they came to the place where Volstruis lay.

"'Aha!' said one, 'he sleeps with his mouth open.'

"He peeped into Volstruis's mouth. 'Aha!' he said again, 'I see something.'

"Another cub came and peeped.

"'Alle kracht!' he said, 'I see something too. Let us go and tell our father.'

"So they ran off in great excitement and woke Leeuw. 'Come, come quickly,' they said. 'Volstruis insults you by saying he is your equal. He lies sleeping under the trees with his mouth wide open, and we have peeped into it, and behold, he has no teeth! Come and see for yourself.'

"Leeuw bounded off quick-quick with the cubs at his tail.

"'Nier-r-r-r,' he growled, waking Volstruis, 'nier-r-r-r. What is the meaning of this? You pretend you are my equal, and you haven't even got teeth.'



“Teeth or no teeth,’ said Volstruis, standing up wide awake, ‘I killed more bucks than you did to-day. Teeth or no teeth, I’ll fight you to show who’s baas.’

“Come on,’ said Leeuw. ‘Who’s afraid? I’m just ready for you. Come on!’

“No, wait a little,’ said Volstruis. ‘I’ve got a plan. You see that ant-heap over there? Well, you stand on one side of it, and I’ll stand on the other side, and we’ll see who can push it over first. After that we’ll come out into the open and fight.’

“That seems an all-right plan,’ said Leeuw; and he thought to himself, ‘I’m heavier and stronger; I can easily send the ant-heap flying on to old Three Sticks, and then spring over and kill him.’

“But wait a bit! It was not as easy as he thought. Every time he sprang at the ant-heap he clung to it as he was accustomed to cling to his prey. He had no other way of doing things. And then Volstruis would take the opportunity of kicking high into the air, sending the sand and stones into Leeuw’s face, and making him howl and splutter with rage.

“Sometimes he would stand still and roar, and Volstruis would send a roar back from the other side.

“So they went on till the top of the ant-heap was quite loosened by the kicks and blows. Leeuw was getting angrier and angrier, and he could hardly see—his eyes were so full of dust. He gathered himself together for a tremendous spring, but, before he could make it, Volstruis bounded into the air and kicked the whole top off the ant-heap. Arré, but the dust was thick!

“When it cleared away, there lay Leeuw, groaning and coughing, with the great heap of earth and stones on top of him.

“Ohé! ohé!’ wailed the cubs, ‘get up, my father. Here he comes, the Toothless One! He who has teeth only on his feet! Get up and slay him.’

“Leeuw shook himself free of the earth and sprang at Volstruis, but his eyes were full of sand; he could not see properly, so he missed. As he came down heavily, Volstruis shot out his strong right leg and caught Leeuw in the side. Sk-r-r-r-r! went the skin, and goops! goops! over fell poor Oom Leeuw, with Volstruis’s terrible claws—the teeth of old Two Toes—fastened into him.

“Volstruis danced on him, flapping and waving his beautiful black and white wings, and tearing the life out of Oom Leeuw.

“When it was all over, he cleaned his claws in the sand and waltzed away slowly over the veld to where his mate sat on the nest.

“Only the cubs were left wailing over the dead King of the Forest.”

The usual babel of question and comment broke out at the close of the story, till at last Pietie’s decided young voice detached itself from the general chatter.



“Outa, what made you say that about pulling the blankets over one’s head and running to get near Mammie if one heard Volstruis bellowing at night? You know quite well that none of us would ever do it.”

“Yes, yes, my baasje, I know,” said Outa, soothingly. “I never meant anyone who belongs to the land of Volstruise. But other little masters, who did not know the voice of old Three Sticks—they would run to their mam-mas if they heard him.”

“Oh, I see,” said Pietie, accepting the apology graciously. “I was sure you could not mean a karroo farm boy.”

“Is your story a parable, Outa?” asked little Jan, who had been doing some hard thinking for the last minute.

“Ach! and what is that, my little master?”

“A kind of fable, Outa.”

“Yes, that’s what it is, baasje,” said Outa, gladly seizing on the word he understood, “a fable, a sort of nice little fable.”

“But a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, and when Cousin Minnie tells us parables she always finds the meaning for us. What is the heavenly meaning of this, Outa?”

Little Jan’s innocent grey eyes were earnestly fixed on Outa’s face, as though to read from it the explanation he sought. For once the old native was nonplussed. He rubbed his red kopdoek, laid a crooked finger thoughtfully against his flat nose, scratched his sides, monkey-fashion, and finally had recourse once more to the kopdoek. But all these expedients failed to inspire him with the heavenly meaning of the story he had just told. Ach! these dear little ones, to think of such strange things! There they all were, waiting for his next words. He must get out of it somehow.

“Baasjes,” he began, smoothly, “there is a beautiful meaning to the story, but Outa hasn’t got time to tell it now. Another time—”

“Outa,” broke in Willem, reprovingly, “you know you only want to get away so that you can go to the old tramp-floor, where the volk are dancing to-night.”

“No, my baasje, truly no!”

“And I wouldn’t be surprised to hear that you had danced, too, after the way you have been jumping about here.”

“Yes, that was fine,” said Pietie, with relish. “Voerts! there is one dead! Voerts! there is another!” Outa, you always say you are so stiff, but you can still kick well.”



“Aja, baasje,” returned Outa, modestly; “in my day I was a great dancer. No one could do the Vastrap better—and the Hondekrab—and the Valsrivier. Arré, those were the times!”

He gave a little hop at the remembrance of those mad and merry days, and yet another and another, always towards the passage leading to the kitchen.

“But the meaning, Outa, the heavenly meaning!” cried little Jan. “You haven’t told us.”

“No, my little baas, not to-night. Ask the Nonnie; she will tell you. Here she comes.”

And as Cousin Minnie entered the room, the wily old native, with an agility not to be expected from his cramped and crooked limbs, skipped away, leaving her to bear the brunt of his inability to explain his own story.

