

REID MAYNE

THE VEE-BOERS: A TALE
OF ADVENTURE IN
SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Mayne Reid

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Chapter One. On the Karoo

A vast plain, seemingly bounded but by the horizon; treeless, save where a solitary *cameel-doorn*¹ spreads its feathered leaves, or a clump of arborescent aloes, mingled with rigid-stemmed euphorbias, breaks the continuity of its outline. These types of desert vegetation but proclaim its sterility, which is further evinced by tufts of whiteish withered grass, growing thinly between them.

Over it three waggons are moving; immense vehicles with bodies above four yards in length, surrounded by an arching of bamboo canes covered with canvas. To each is attached eight pairs of long-horned oxen, with a driver seated on the box, who flourishes a whip, in length like a fishing-rod; another on foot alongside, wielding the terrible *jambok*, while at the head of the extended team marches the “foreloper,” *reim* in hand, guiding the oxen along the track.

Half a score horsemen ride here and there upon the flanks, with three others in advance; and bringing up the rear is a drove of milch cows – some with calves at the foot – and a flock of *fat-tailed* sheep, their tails full fifty pounds in weight, and trailing on the ground.

The cows and sheep are in charge of ten or a dozen dark-skinned herdsmen, most of them all but naked; while a like number of large wolfish-looking dogs completes the list of living things visible outside the waggons. But, were the end curtains raised, under their tilts would be seen women with children – of both sexes and all ages – in each the members of a single family, its male head excepted.

Of the last there are three, corresponding to the number of the waggons, of which they are the respective proprietors – the three men riding in advance. Their names, Jan Van Dorn, Hans Blom, and Klaas Rynwald. All Dutch names, and Dutch are they who bear them, at least by descent, for the scene is Southern Africa, and they are *Boers*.

Not of the ordinary class, though, as may be told by their large accompaniment of unattached cattle and sheep – over a hundred of the former, and three times as many of the latter. These, with other signs well-known to South Africans, proclaim them to be Vee-Boers².

They are far away from any settlement of civilised or white men, the nearest being their own frontier town, Zoutpansberg, in the Transvaal, from which they are distant full three hundred miles northward. Nor are they in Transvaalian territory, but that of the Tebelé, beyond the Limpopo river, and journeying on north.

Why they are there calls for explanation, and a word will suffice. The world has of late heard much of the Transvaal Republic and its brave people; how distasteful to them was annexation to the English Government; indeed, so repugnant, that many plucked up the rooftrees they had but lately planted, and were off again, scarce thinking or caring whither, so long as they got beyond the reach of British rule.

¹ The “cameel-doorn,” literally, camel-thorn, is a species of acacia, whose tender shoots and leaves are the favourite food of the cameleopard, or giraffe. It is a common and characteristic tree in most districts of southern Africa, having pinnate leaves, and, like most of the acacia tribe, bright yellow blossoms.

² “Vee-boers” are distinguished from other Boers by their special employment being the grazing and raising of cattle. To this they devote themselves exclusively, as the stockmen of Australia, and the ranchmen of Western America. They have no fixed habitation, flitting about from place to place with their flocks wherever the pasture tempts them, and making house and home of their huge trek-waggons, just as the “cheap jacks” of England. They have tents also, and sometimes erect rude huts.

It is on record – a painful one – that many of those political fugitives passed through hardships scarce conceivable, and not a few perished by the way – miserably perished, the victims of fatigue, hunger, and thirst. And it is of just such a party we purpose giving account of, their journeyings, adventures, and dangers, by flood and by field.

The time was just after the annexation, and our Vee-Boers, as introduced to the reader, were weeks away from their abandoned homes in the Transvaal.

That they had permission to enter the territory of the Tebelé, might be taken for granted, otherwise they would have been on dangerous ground. For its powerful and despotic chief was not the man to allow intrusion into his dominions, even by peaceful travellers.

But they had his leave, backed by invitation, not only to pass through, but make permanent home in them, if they wished. Jan Van Dorn, the “*baas*”³ of the migrating party, an old *jäger*, had, in bygone days, hunted all over the Tebelé country, smoked the pipe of peace with Moselekatse himself, and so established a friendship still existing. In one of his expeditions he had discovered a magnificent grazing country – a very paradise for the Vee-Boer – and it was for this they were now making.

They were journeying by night, or rather early morning, before daybreak. It was not their habit to lie late; but just then they had more than one reason for being up betimes and moving. It was in the Torrid Zone, where travelling by day is oft a very torture, especially over a plain such as that they were crossing.

They had entered upon a track of *karoo*⁴, which they knew to extend for more than 100 miles; treeless, shadeless, and without water, save here and there in pools, or natural cisterns, at long distances apart. Besides, no rain had fallen on it for months, and like as not the water reservoirs would all be dried up. Not strange, then, their travelling by night, as by day; for it was life or death to them to get across the *karoo*.

Luckily they were favoured by moonlight, with stars in a clear, unclouded sky, which insured them against straying from the practicable route. And as their guide, a Hottentot, by name Smutz knew every inch of it, they had confidence in his piloting.

So on they moved, noiselessly, save when now and then crack of whip, the sharp snap of a *jambok* (Note 5), or the ejaculations of the men wielding this formidable instrument of animal torture, disturbed the stillness of the night. More rarely was it broken by the rumble of wheels, these for the most part being fellies deep in soft, yielding sand.

³ “Baas,” master. It is synonymous with the “boss” of the Southern United States, which, no doubt, was carried thither by the slave negroes who had had dealings with the Dutch of South Africa.

⁴ The “karoos” of Southern Africa may be compared with our moorlands, only more extended in area, and with a different sort of vegetation. Heaths of many beautiful species are among their characteristic plants, as all may know who take a pride in the keeping of hothouses.

Chapter Two. A Weird Spectacle

Going at a slow crawl in profound silence, the huge vehicles, with their dark bodies and white tilts, the long serried line of yoked oxen extended in advance of them, would have presented a strange mystifying spectacle to one not knowing what it was. Weird and ghostlike under the silvery light of the moon, a native of the country, where such had never been seen before, viewing it from a distance, might have imagined it some monster of a world unknown.

But before morning came, the travellers were themselves witnesses of a spectacle common enough in that same district, yet, in seeming, quite as strange and mysterious as that of the waggon-train.

Proceeding in the opposite direction, and at no great distance off, appeared a number of dark forms, one following the other in single file. Immense creatures they were; each nearly as large as any of the waggons, but, unlike these, living and breathing. For they were elephants – a troop on the march – nigh threescore in number, their line extending for hundreds and hundreds of yards across the karoo. They were passing on silent as spectres, the tread of the ponderous pachyderm being noiseless as that of a cat. Even on stony ground it is scarce distinguishable at the shortest distance, and on that sand-bestrewn plain it made not the slightest sound to betray their presence.

Adding to their spectral appearance were the long, withered grass-tufts and karoo bushes, white as if coated with hoar frost. These concealing their stride, they seemed to glide along as boats upon water, propelled by some invisible agency, acting underneath.

To the Vee-Boers, as much hunters as herdsmen, it was a tempting, tantalising sight, and under other circumstances the silence of the night would have been broken by the cracking of shots. But they knew that to attack the elephants might infuriate and bring them in charge upon the waggon-train, which would surely be its destruction.⁵ So they resisted the temptation, and let the herd pass on; the two parties, silent and weird-like as ever, gradually widening the space between, till at length they were beyond sight of one another.

Soon after daylight declared itself; but it brought no rest to the now wearied wayfarers – not even when the sun had risen high above the horizon. For they had failed to come across any water, and halting without that were worse than keeping on. Already suffering from thirst, it would but prolong their suffering to make stop or stay.

Several of the so-called cisterns, or natural tanks, had been passed, and as many pools, but all were dry, or with only just enough moisture to keep the mud in their bottoms. Remaining by these would be rest neither to them nor the animals, now needing water as much or more than themselves.

Another element also contributed to their torture – heat. As the sun mounted higher in the firmament, this became excessive; so sultry that men and animals were perspiring at every pore; while on the ground, hot as the floor of a baker's oven, it was painful to set foot.

The shoeless natives – Hottentots and Caffres alike – suffered especially, notwithstanding the soles of their feet being callous, and hard as horn. Some were seen to adopt a singular plan for keeping them cool – by a plaster of mud, taken from the waterless but still moist pools, applying it poultice-fashion, and at intervals damping them with the juice of the euphorbia, and other succulent plants.

Equally odd, and more amusing, was the behaviour of the dogs. They would make a rush ahead of the waggons; dive under a bush, tussock of grass, or anything giving shade; and there lie panting

⁵ Elephants often march in single file – indeed, it is their common way – the sagacity of these animals telling them they are thus less exposed to danger. Often, too, a party of hunters, especially Vee-Boers, well acquainted with the habits of the great pachyderms, will allow them to pass unmolested, to be pursued and attacked farther on. A charge of infuriated elephants on a camp might result in its wholesale destruction.

till the train got past. Then, rising reluctantly, they would stand for a time contemplating the heated surface of sand, afraid to set paw upon it; whine piteously; and finally, with a plunge, start off afresh, dash past the waggons, and repeat the performance as before.

Thus on over the sun-parched plain moved the party of migrant Boers; but not now silent as in the night. What with oxen bellowing, cows lowing in response to their bawling calves, sheep bleating, and dogs howling, there was noise enough, and a surfeit of it.

And mingling with these cries of distress, at intervals came the crack of a whip, loud as the report of a pistol, and the shouts of the drivers urging their oxen on.

As if to add to their difficulty, they had entered upon a tract thickly overgrown with *waaght-een-beetje*⁶; while those of them who were on foot, had their ankles lacerated by the “*grapple-plant*.”⁷

Retarded by these various obstructions, they made but slow progress; less than three miles an hour – the orthodox rate of speed made by South African travellers “on trek;” and it had come to be a struggle painful as it was perilous. Fearfully dispiriting too; since they knew not when or how it was to end. Their sole hope rested on a large pond or lake their guide told them of, and which he had never known to go dry. But it was still over ten miles distant, which meant at least four hours of time – an appalling prospect in their then condition; men, horses, and oxen, all athirst, all tottering in their steps. There was no help for it, no alternative, but keep on; and on they kept.

⁶ “*Waaght-een-beetje*” is the Dutch synonym for “Wait-a-bit.” The tree or bush, so quaintly designated, is another of the many species of South African acacias having spines sharp as fish-hooks and so set as to hold on whatever they have caught, requiring skill, with an expenditure of time, to get clear of them. It is the acacia *detinens* of the botanists.

⁷ The “*Grapple-plant*” (*uncaria procumbens*) is a creeper, with beautiful purple blossoms and a fruit beset with hooked spines that readily catch on to the clothes, or even the skin. It is very troublesome to the barefooted natives who may have occasion to pass over ground where it grows.

Chapter Three. A Battue of Lions

It was well on in the afternoon when the travellers perceived a dark belt rising above the plain at a long distance off, but directly on their line of march. A glad sight to their eyes, as they could tell it to be timber, and knew they would there find the *vley*⁸ of which their guide had forewarned them. The prospect of water, shade, and rest, all at the same time, and all so much needed, inspired them to renewed speed; and the ponderous waggons seemed to move more lightly along, while their conductors were merrier – drivers, after jambok men, and forelopers. Even the dumb animals, becoming infected with the same spirit, partook of the general rejoicing, as though they also knew that relief was near.

Yet was it far off as ever. The promise that cheered them was not to be fulfilled. On reaching the timber at the point where the *vley* was, or should have been, they found this too dried up, as all the others. In its bed were only pebbles and white sand, from which were reflected the rays of the setting sun, as from a sheet of frosted snow! So much for their hopes of water; and as for shade, the trees proved to be *mopanes*⁹ whose leaves grow vertically on the branches, and, like the eucalypti of Australia, afford no more protection from the sun than would a network of wire!

Nor was this the worst. Scarce had they come to a stop by the wood's edge, when they heard issuing out of it a noise well-known both to themselves and their animals, and by both equally dreaded. For it was the roar of the lion; not one lion, but more like a score of them, roaring together, as if each was doing its best to outroar all the rest. The place appeared to be infested with the formidable brutes – a very lair of them; and the fearful fracas they were making caused horses, oxen, cows – in short, every four-footed creature in the train to dance affrightedly about as though no longer feeling fatigue. To ordinary travellers the noise, with its attendant dangers, would have been appalling; and even among them there was momentary alarm. But they were Boers of the Transvaal, of courage proverbial and historic; still more, Vee-Boers, who are as much hunters as graziers, and little regard to the lion's roar. It was only because of there being such a chorus of it, that they were for a time taken back.

Soon recovering themselves, however, there was a general rush towards the waggons, in which they habitually kept their *roers*¹⁰; when, each armed himself with one of these long guns, front was made to the foe, still giving tongue, though as yet unseen.

Not for long were the lions chary about putting in an appearance. Soon their tawny skins were seen glistening among the trunks of the *mopanes* zigzagging from point to point, and at each slant drawing nigher to the spot where the waggons had drawn up.

It was now seen that there were quite twenty of them, or more; while the intonation of their cries – full of fury and menace – told of the intended attack. Had they made it on the moment, and simultaneously, it would have been all up with the travellers – at the very least would there have been wholesale destruction among their animals.

But, luckily for them, the lion does not always attack on the instant; more often making approach progressively, and with the caution of the common cat, as most others of the *felidae*. Probably had the prey they contemplated springing on been a party of naked natives, with no other defence than their skin shields, the *leeuws*¹¹ would have acted differently. But seeing before them that strange array

⁸ “Vley.” The synonym in Dutch for a lake of limited extent – a pond, or pool.

⁹ The “mopane” is a tree belonging to the family of “banhinias,” with pinnate leaves set point upwards, so that the sun glints down between, and scarce any shade is given by the tree, even when in full foliage.

¹⁰ “Roer.” The sort of gun in common use among the South African Dutch. It is a single barrel of great length and carry far.

¹¹ “Leeuw.” The Boers' name for the “king of beasts.”

– the waggons with their white tilts, a spectacle in all likelihood new to them – it was but natural they should feel shy about beginning the assault. It could not be actual fear, a feeling unknown to the African lion, in those districts where it is unaccustomed to meet the white man, with his death-dealing weapons; more like was it mystification at sight of the huge vehicles larger than elephants, and which, for all the lions knew, might be also living things, and far more dangerous.

Whether from this, or whatever cause, the great felines hesitated to make approach, though gradually drawing nigher, as the confidence became strengthened by their receiving no hurt from the singular monsters that had intruded upon their domain.

This up to a certain moment; then they were saluted by a sound louder than that they were themselves making, as the Vee-Boers poured a volley upon them, which silenced half their number, by dropping them dead in their tracks.

The rest did not retreat, but stood their ground, to all appearance more mystified than ever. They had heard thunder, and seen lightning, but never with an accompaniment of smoke, such as they now saw, wondering what it all meant. And while still unresolved, and hesitating how to act, the thick blue mist, which for a while had screened them, drifted aside, to be replaced by another and similar screen as the reloaded raw blazed forth again.

After the second volley, only two or three live lions remained upon the ground; these seeming wounded, as they went limping off among the mopanes.

For the Vee-Boers it was a victory easier than they had anticipated; and over Royalty itself – a *battue* of grandest game, the kings of beasts.

On gathering up the slain, they found fifteen of the *leeuws*, young and old, male and female, six being lions, the rest lionesses.

The reason for so many having congregated there was the drought. Up till a late period there had been wafer in the vley, making it a rendezvous for buffaloes, antelopes, and other ruminants; many skeletons of which lay around, with bones clean picked – the work of these same lions, and other carnivora. But in time instinct had directed the cud-chewing animals to repair to other places, where the water was of surer supply; while the predatory species, more able to bear thirst, and hunger too, had stayed behind. Hence such a number found crowding together; and their having been for some time without food – indeed, half-famished, as it proved on examination of their carcasses – will account for their uniting to attack the travellers – an attempt so cleverly and completely foiled.

Chapter Four. The Tulp

Meanwhile the waggons had been left standing just as they drew up, the oxen still under yoke. And now came the question, whether to “outspann”¹², or not.

It was but of short debate, however, as all were convinced of the uselessness of remaining there. Indeed more than useless; since they would only be wasting time; and, thirsting as they were, that meant everything. Besides, their guide knew of another vley some miles farther on, where he had still better hopes of finding water – now their greatest want. The heat no longer discomforted them, as the sun had got low, and the atmosphere become as cool as they cared for. They might expect moonlight, too, as on the night before, which would also be in their favour. So, tired though they were, it was determined to trek on.

While this resolve was being arrived at, an incident occurred which was calculated to make them thankful they had not already out-spanned. Indeed, as they soon after came to know, it was rather a fortunate circumstance their finding the vley dried up. Had there been water in it, they would surely have stayed there all night, to discover next morning that their horses and oxen would not be worth taking farther – even unable to take themselves. Their milch kine would also have been sacrificed, as in reality were their sheep, to the last hoof. Luckily all but the sheep escaped, though with the driven cattle, milk cows, and their calves, it was the closest of shaves. In that grove – for it was a wood of only a few score acres in extent – there was a something even more dangerous than lions, at least to grass-eating animals. A plant it was which grew under the mopanes, green as a leek, and not unlike one in its leafage, covering the ground thickly, as onions in a garden bed. The Vee-Boers knew the plant well – too well – and, but for their attention being absorbed by the encounter with the lions, would long before have observed it. As it was, they only became aware of its presence on seeing their sheep – that had been left for a time to themselves – greedily browsing upon it. The *lanigers* were hungry as wolves, and would have eaten anything green that chanced in their way; so the whole flock, as soon as getting up to the wood’s edge, had rushed in among the trees, open-mouthed at what seemed a tempting morsel.

It was the *baas* of the travelling party – Jan Van Dorn himself – who first perceived the danger, and sounded the alarm, crying out —

“Oh, brothers! We’ve lost our sheep! See what they’re feeding on; it’s the *tulp*!”¹³

They thus addressed, needed no further explanation of a word which to the reader may be unintelligible. For there was not a man of them but knew what the *tulp* was, and its poisonous nature – possibly not one whose herds and flocks had not some time or other been decimated by it.

Soon as it was seen how things stood, there was a rush in among the mopanes, a surrounding of the sheep, and a chorus of shouts, as they were driven out again to open ground. But all too late, as every one seemed to be aware; and when at length the forward movement was about being resumed, it became a subject of discussion whether it would be worth while taking these animals along.

Still there was a hope that, however faint, some of them might survive, and leaning upon this, along were they taken; their owners making all haste to depart from a spot alike dangerous in its *flora* as its *fauna*.

¹² “Outspann.” The word has a general meaning, and refers not only to detaching the animals from the vehicles, but making halt either temporarily or for the night.

¹³ “Tulp.” The Dutch name for “tulip,” of which it is but an abbreviated form. The plant itself is so called from its resemblance to the tulip, both in leaf and flower. It is of the iris family, and the genus *morosa*.

Once more was there a cracking of whips, and the oxen, straightening out along the *trek-touw*¹⁴, moved reluctantly on.

And now the moon, as had been anticipated, giving a bright light, the travellers made good way; before midnight arriving at the second vley, where fortunately there was still a *souppçon* of water. It was not visible above the surface of sand that formed the vley's bed; but on examination, several cavities were discovered in which appeared the much wished-for element, that had been hollowed out by the hoofs of quaggas and zebras. Writers talk of instinct teaching these animals to dig their own drinking wells; but the teaching in reality comes from a process of reasoning-intelligence, as that of man himself. All naturalists know that, as indeed ought every one who owns dog or cat, and has observed either spring up to a door-handle, making attempt with manifest design to draw the door open.

Now, thirsting like sponges, the travellers out-spanned, and speedily. All hands that could be spared from looking after the cattle set about sinking a pit in the sand; into which, soon came water enough for all their needs.

It required caution, however, with much shouting, and wielding of jamboks, to keep the animals out of it. The scent of the water had reached their nostrils, an attraction irresistible, and horses neighed, yoke-oxen bellowed, cows groaned in chorus with their bawling calves, all madly eager to wet their muzzles, and quench their thirst that had so long tortured them.

But the Vee-Boers, accustomed to such display, knew the precautions to be taken; so kept the impatient creatures under restraint and aloof, at length giving them to drink, from the "rush-buckets"¹⁵, which were part of their *impedimenta*.

Their own thirst satisfied, then that of their stock, supper was eaten heartily, and they retired to rest and sleep. Not all, however; nearly a third of their number remaining awake, and on the alert, as guards of the camp. They had no fear of their animals wandering away, fatigued as these were. Even had it been otherwise, and ever so fresh, their straying would have been little apprehended. For *on trek*, horses and cattle – in short all domesticated quadrupeds – regard the great waggons as they would the houses of a homestead, and will return to them just the same. Instinct – or, from what has been said above, rather reason – admonishes them that beside these is their best place, safest from the attack of predatory beasts – above all, from the lion, the real *bête-noir* of South African cattle.

Those of our travelling party had been sufficiently frightened at their last halting-place, to keep them cowed, and tame, for at least twenty-four hours after; and just so were they, starting and trembling at every cry of wild creature that reached their ears – even at that of the cowardly hyaena.

And here they heard lions too, though none came near. At this vley, still affording enough water to attract fat quaggas, zebras, and gemsboks, the tawny monsters needed not whetting their teeth on tame cattle, lean and tough as those of the Vee-Boers had got to be.

So the night passed by without further disturbance or adventure; day broke again; breakfast was eaten; the oxen invoked; and the journey over the *karoo* continued.

¹⁴ "Trek-touw." The long cable-like rope of raw hide continuing the "tongue," or pole, of the waggons, and to which the forward pairs of oxen are attached. They are also made fast to it at night, when there is any fear of their straying from the camp.

¹⁵ The "milk-baskets" of the Caffres are frequently in use among the Vee-Boers, when on trek, their lightness making them more convenient than vessels of a heavier kind. They are made of the stems of a species of "cyperus," a rush allied to the "Paper-reed," sewed so closely together that when dry they will hold water. The Caffres use them as milk pails, and, when emptied, their dogs are allowed to lick them clean. The cleaning is still further carried out by an insect – a species of cockroach (*Blatta*), which eats what remains of the milk from the interstices between the rushes. So important are these roaches regarded for this purpose, that a Caffre on erecting a new hut, will take his milk-baskets into an old one, and, as soon as a sufficient number of the insects have entered them, will carry the vessels back to where their services are required.

Chapter Five. Under the Mowana

Three waggons drawn up under the shade of a gigantic *mowana*¹⁶ – the waggons of the Vee-Boers after their long, toilsome, and perilous journey across the *karoo*. They are again out-spanned, but now in *laager*, which tells of an intention to remain there for some little time. The vehicles are set in such fashion as to enclose a rectangular space, open at one end; while around them, at some distance off, a circular fence of thorny bushes roughly form a *chevaux-de-frise*, to hinder lions, hyaenas, and other marauders from approaching too near. Seemingly, the ground has been judiciously chosen, with an eye to the three chief requisites of a camp – grass, wood, and water. It is contiguous to the bank of a clear, running stream, on each side fringed with a belt of timber, trees of many different kinds; while landward, far as eye can reach, extends an open *veldt*,¹⁷ grass-covered, and affording plenteous pasturage for their cattle. These are all now on it; oxen and milch-kine; the horses, too, hopped neck-and-knee, to keep them from straying. But just now there is little fear of that, the animals not yet having recovered from the Karoo journey, and all are browsing tranquilly.

The sheep are not there – not one of them. If looked for, they would be found – or rather their carcasses – lying here and there along the line of yesterday's trek; though, like as not, even the carcasses would not be there, only the skins and bones; the flesh long since devoured by jackals, hyenas, and vultures.

In addition to wood, water, and grass, the camp-ground enjoys another convenience – in tropical Africa, nearly as essential as any of the three – shade. The *mowana*,¹⁸ with its wide extending arms, and thickly set foliage, casts shadow over a circle of full fifty yards diameter, and underneath it there is room for everybody and everything.

The hour is ten o'clock in the morning; the travellers having arrived there in the afternoon of the preceding day. That they have not been idle since can be told by the work done. The *laager*-fence itself must have cost time and labour in its construction; while inside it are other evidences of industry. Much of the lading of the waggons is out, and on the ground, to be re-packed and re-arranged for further transport; while upon lines, stretched from tree to tree, hang all sorts of *lingerie* in the process of drying; proof that the washerwomen of the party had been up and stirring betimes.

And this work, with many other kinds, is still in progress; not only the women and girls, but the men and boys being actively engaged one way or another. Some of the older hands are repairing saddles, bridles, and harness-gear; others mend *vel-schoenen*¹⁹; and still others look to the waggon-wheels, whose spokes and fellies, contracted by the drought, have been for some time threatening to part company. A lapping of wet raw hide, when it dries, will bind, and hold them together, firm as any clasp or screw of iron; this every South African traveller knows, and none better than a Vee-Boer.

Some of the women are occupied with their needles, which they ply with a skill not excelled by the most accomplished Parisian *coturière*; others milk the cows, led inside the *laager* for this purpose,

¹⁶ "Mowana" is the South African synonym for the "baobab" (*Adansonia digitata*).

¹⁷ "Veldt" is a tract of grassy plain or prairie. It is in part synonymous with our word "field," which we have changed from its ancient form, and partly from its signification.

¹⁸ As all know, the *mowana*, or baobab, is one of the largest of trees; specimens being met with having a girth of nearly 100 feet. It is not proportionately tall, however – nothing like the sequoias of California. Its leaves dried and pulverised are used as an antidote to various diseases, as diarrhoea, fevers, etc. Its fruit is slightly acid, but well-flavoured, and is eaten by the natives of tropical Africa. The *mowana* is essentially a tree of the tropics.

¹⁹ "Vel-Schoenen." Literally "skin shoes." They are made of untanned hide and sewed with thongs of the same. They are worn by many Boers, though it is their Hottentot servants who make and mend them. One of these yellow-skinned cobblers will make a pair of Vel-Schoenen in less than a couple of hours.

while yet others are engaged in preparing the *morgen-maal* ²⁰. It is being cooked on a kitchen-range, of quaint, primitive kind, such as may be met with only in Southern Africa. Hand of man has had nought to do with its manufacture, nor has there been any iron employed in it. Instead, it is an earthen structure; part mud, and part a gummy, glutinous substance secreted by insects, these having been its constructors. For the cooking-stove in question, is neither more nor less than an ant-hill, the home of a hive of *termites* ²¹ of which there are several near. For some reason or other abandoned by its builders, it has been easily transformed to the use now made of it. On the night before, a number of cavities had been hollowed out around its base, fires kindled therein, and tires of shelves cut into the sides above them. Now, at ten am, the whole mass is at furnace heat, kettles boiling, stewpots simmering, and frying-pans hissing – in short, a complete *batterie de cuisine* in stridulous activity.

One unaccustomed to Transvaalian cookery might not greatly relish the viands in preparation; the meat part of them being mostly antelope flesh, fried in lard rendered from the tails of the fat-tailed sheep. None of it, however, came from those lately poisoned by the tulp, the travellers having previously laid in a supply, sufficient to last them to the end of their contemplated journey. For the lard in question is a staple commodity among the Dutch colonists of South Africa, kept in stock not only in their houses, but carried with them in their waggons when on trek. It is often used as a substitute for butter, and however distasteful to the palate of strangers, by the Boers it is regarded of first *goût*.

And now the savoury steam, exhaling from the pots and pans, fills the air with a fragrance more agreeable to the nostrils of the travellers than all the odours of Araby. So appetising is it, that all are madly impatient to partake of the *morgen-maal*.

This they do as soon as culinary operations are ended, coffee being an accompaniment to the more substantial dishes. After which the white men of the party indulge in a “soupie” of *brandeywyn* ²² winding up with a smoke; when all return to the tasks of the day. The children alone remain idle at play; some of the most courageous boys climbing up among the branches of the mowana, for the tempting fruit seen there. But the work of none is now of long continuance, only up till about twelve noon. Then it is necessarily suspended on account of the sultry heat, and all congregate under the mowana; the animals seeking shade beneath other umbrageous trees that stand by the side of their pasture ground.

²⁰ The “morgen-maal” (morning meal) of the Cape Dutch is a more substantial repast than an ordinary English breakfast, being quite as much a dinner. The hour for eating it is about eleven am; but there is usually an earlier *déjeuner* consisting of a cup of coffee, and a slice of bread, or cake.

²¹ The “termites,” or white ants as more commonly called, often make their “hills” as large as good-sized hay cocks, to which they bear a strong resemblance. It is quite a common thing for Trek or Vee Boers to utilise them as above described.

²² “Brandeywyn.” A liquor of the brandy or whisky specialty, distilled from peaches. It is the common tippie in use among the Dutch colonists of the Cape, and other parts of South Africa.

Chapter Six.

A Rush of Buffaloes

It had come to be late in the afternoon, with a cooler atmosphere as the sun sank towards the horizon; but as most of the necessary jobs had been done in the morning, there was no resumption of work. Milking the cows, and feeding the calves, were the only tasks that now occupied the people of the laager, and these were entrusted to the Caffre attendants, well up in all matters relating to cow-kine and the dairy. Indeed, all the different tribes of this race, whether of Kaffirland proper, or the more northerly Zululand, look upon cattle as their chief source of wealth and subsistence.

Some of the women had set about the evening meal; when the younger men – nearly all sons, nephews, or other relatives of Van Dorn, Blom, and Rynwald – bethought them of spending an hour or so in shooting at a target, the sport of their preference, and encouraged by the elders. For by a people, part of whose food is obtained through the chase, and whose every-day life exposes them to its perils, being a good marksman is naturally held in high estimation.

Getting hold of their guns, therefore, the young Boers proceeded to the open veldt; and, after making up a match, commenced practice, the shell of an ostrich's egg serving them for mark. This most of them could hit at 100 paces distance, four times out of six; and at 200 would not often miss it. Their long roers carried still farther, and an ordinary-sized antelope, even at 300, would have stood but little chance with them.

And now there was keen competition between these young marksmen, with a desire to excel, quite as much as among our crack-shots at Wimbledon. But they had not been long thus occupied, when their ears were saluted by a sound, admonishing them they might soon expect something to shoot at very different from an egg-shell. From afar, over the plain, came a noise like the rumbling of distant thunder, growing louder as they listened; at length to be recognised as the quick trample of buffaloes – a herd of them “on the run.” And that they were running in the direction of the laager could be told by the continually increasing sound. But soon there was no doubt of it; the animals themselves being seen, as they came crashing through a tract of bush on the farther side of the veldt, and bounding on over the open. An immense herd it was, blackening the green sward to the width of a hundred yards, and thick as sheep in a flock.

To the amateur British Nimrod in South Africa the sight of such big game, and in such plenty, would have imparted pleasure instead of begetting fear. And in the same light the young Boers would have regarded it, but for a circumstance that presented the spectacle in an altogether different aspect – one of danger. Alongside the great tree, under which their camp was placed, ran an open list leading down to the river, and, in all probability, the buffaloes would pass that way, making for the water. Indeed, they were heading straight for it; though drink might not be their object. Their maddened bounds and loud bellowing, as they came thundering on, seemed to betoken some other cause of excitement than thirst. However that might be, it soon became evident they meant to pass under the mowana, right through the laager. The enclosing fence of thorns would be no obstruction to them, any more than if it were of reeds or straw; and woe to all who should chance to be in their way! Tornado or cyclone would not be more destructive.

By this every one in the camp, and every living creature around it, had become aware of the threatening peril. Men shouted, women shrieked, the children screaming in chorus; while the horses neighed affrightedly, dancing about in their hopples; the cattle lowed and routed; and the dogs ran to and fro, some barking, some angrily growling. In short, the place lately so tranquil, most of its occupants indulging in the *dolce-far-niente*, was suddenly transformed into what seemed a Pandemonium.

Meanwhile, the young marksmen out in the open had not been idle. If taken by surprise, they felt no dismay, nor aught rendering them powerless to act. Instead, soon as convinced that the buffaloes were bent for passing under the mowana, one and all made a rush towards their horses, calling out to those in the camp to bring saddles and bridles. They knew that the likeliest way to stem the advancing torrent was to present front to it on horseback; and there might be time, as the foremost of the buffaloes were still nearly a mile off. It would be quick work; but luckily the hobbled horses were easily and quickly caught, and in a trice bridled and saddled. Then, each mounting his own – the whole party numbering nigh a dozen – they galloped out upon the veldt to meet the advancing enemy. Scarce another minute elapsed before their horses' heads were within less than 300 yards from those of the foremost buffaloes; there for an instant to be drawn up, though there was no stoppage on the part of the bovines. And had the young Boers stayed silent when they halted, in all likelihood both they and their horses would in another minute have been run over, and trampled to death. But they did not stay silent; instead, all together raised gun to shoulder, and taking good aim, delivered a volley right in the faces of the black brutes that threatened them. There was a responsive crashing from some of their bullets, that only struck the great buttressed horns; but half-a-dozen of them told better, and a like number of the buffaloes, headmost of the herd, were seen to tumble over on the sward, dead as door-nails; the impetus of their rush shooting them their full body's length in advance of the rest.

The reports of the roars, their blaze and smoke – sounds and sights, in all probability, new to the wild animals – had an effect upon them instantaneous and deterrent. Whatever had been their worry behind, whether pursuit by lions or otherwise, it was now less a thing of fear than that they saw in front. So one and all came to a stop, quickly as they could gather up their legs. It took time, though, the masses behind forcing the front rank forward, beyond where it was inclined to go.

Perhaps all might have resumed their onward career and the dreaded catastrophe, occurred all the same, had not the young Boers taken other precautions to prevent it. In this they succeeded, by a continuous shouting, yelling at the highest pitch of voice, while they hurriedly rammed powder and ball down the barrels of their roars; and when these were reloaded poured a second volley into the hesitating herd. It brought another half-dozen of the buffaloes to grass; but that was a thing they little cared about. Far more would they have been pleased to see the animals turn tail, and make away from them.

And with this very sight were they gratified in an instant after. The first fusillade, with its fire and smoke, to say nothing of the fatal effects, had caused fear among the wild bovines; the second brought dismay, and, not desiring to encounter a third, the headmost of the herd swung round, followed by the rearmost, all going off in a direction that would carry them wide of the mowana.

“Praise be to God, our people are saved!” was the thought of the young Boers, more than one of them giving vocal expression to it.

Chapter Seven. A Buffalo Chase

As the danger seemed averted, and there seemed no likelihood of its recurrence, most of the young Boers drew up around the fallen buffaloes, and dismounted to *gralloch* and skin them. Three, however, who had become excited beyond restraint, kept to their saddles, and went after the retreating herd. This trio of implacable pursuers were Piet Van Dorn, the eldest son of Jari; Andries Blom, a nephew of Hans; a son of Klass Rynwald; all three nearly of an age. But between the two first there had long been rivalry as to which was the more accomplished hunter, with rivalry of another sort presently to be spoken of.

Their horses being of lighter hoof than the heavy bovines, they were not long in again coming up with the latter; each, soon as within shot-range, singling out one, and delivering his fire. But only two of the buffaloes fell; the third, which was that aimed at by Van Dorn, though hit, keeping its feet and running on. Not with the herd, however, for the sting of the shot seemed to drive it crazy; and, separating from the rest, it struck to the left and went scouring off alone.

But it was not to escape thus, at least unpursued. Rather than it should, Piet Van Dorn would have ridden his horse to death, and almost to dying himself. His hunter pride was touched, and something more. What would Katharine Rynwald say – what think – on hearing that he had fired and failed to bring down the thing fired at – he alone of all the three? And she would be sure to hear of it; ay, be told of it within the hour. The cynical and satisfied smile on Andries Blom's face, as he saw the wounded buffalo bound away, seemingly but little hurt, was sure promise that the fair Katharine would come to know all about it. So without waiting to say a word to the other two, Van Dorn reined round to the left, and pressed his horse to top speed, reloading his gun as he galloped.

Perhaps young Rynwald would have followed to lend him a helping hand, but for Blom. The latter did not want that buffalo killed; instead, he hoped with all his heart that it might still escape. And to give it a better chance, he cried out to the brother of Katharine, who bore his father's name —

“Klass! let us two follow the drove, and bring down another couple, so that the camp people may have plenty of meat – dogs and all. We mayn't have such a chance for months.”

Thus appealed to, Klass thought no more about helping Van Dorn, but dashed on after the other, who had already started in pursuit of the herd. They did not again come up with it, however; but that signified little to Andries Blom.

Meanwhile, Piet Van Dorn, who inherited all his father's hunting instincts, with much of his prowess, was doing his best to overtake the wounded bull. For a bull it was, and of immense size; apparently the patriarch of the herd it had so unaccountably forsaken. This had caused the young hunter some surprise; and he was also surprised, as well as chagrined, at his first shot not having brought the bull down. For he had aimed at a vital part, with excellent opportunity, and could not account for his having missed. True, it was not altogether a miss, though not much better, the buffalo seeming but little hurt as it careered on over the veldt, tail high in air. Mounted on a strong, swift horse, however, Van Dorn at length got again within range of it; and once more raising his roer, delivered what he believed would be its death shot. Only to see, with chagrin greater than ever, that though he had made a hit, it was not a kill. Indeed, so far from the bull being further disabled, he but seemed to gather fresh strength, and with a loud bellow and angry toss of the head, continued on at a heightened speed.

But the pursuit was continued too; for with Piet Van Dorn it was now do or die. Not for worlds would he have allowed that buffalo to escape him; and, once more appealing to the speed of his horse, as he rammed another cartridge down the barrel of his gun, he followed at his fastest. It was a tail-on-end chase, prolonged for nearly another league, before the pursuer thought himself near enough

to send another shot at the pursued. He did so at length, hearing his bullet hit with a dull thud, as it buried itself in the flesh of the great bovine. Still the animal fell not, neither staggered, though it made no attempt to run on. The third shot produced an effect in it quite different from the two former, and, instead of further retreat, it stopped short, wheeled round, angrily shook its horned head, tore up the turf with its hoofs, then, with a loud bellow, charged back on its relentless pursuer. Having perfect control of his horse, and trust in the animal's speed, the young hunter could have easily avoided the onset by galloping wide out of the way. And he was in the act of doing so, had half reined round, when he felt the horse sink beneath him, and himself going a "cropper" over neck and head.

There was no mystery about the cause, which on the instant declared itself by a peal of unearthly laughter ringing loud in his ears, while at the same time he saw the creature that sent it up. His horse had gone knee-deep into the hole of a "laughing hyena,"²³ out of which the ugly brute now bounding ran off affrightedly over the veldt, as it went emitting its wild, weird cachinnations as the cries of a maniac fresh escaped from some lunatic asylum. All, too, as if in mockery at the hunter's mishap!

The horse was in no way injured, though, perhaps, better for his rider if he had been, for, on regaining his legs, which he instantly did, the triple scare he had got, from the oncoming of the buffalo, his own tumble, and the screams of the hyena, was too much for him, and he broke off in wild stampede, leaving his master to look out for himself.

For some seconds Piet Van Dorn felt dismay, even to fearing death. The infuriated bull was fast nearing him, with head lowered, and horns set to crush or impale him. In another moment he might receive the fatal shock to know no more. For although he was also uninjured, and again upon his feet, there was no hope for him to escape by flight, and his gun was empty; nor was there aught near to afford him shield or shelter. A look cast despairingly around revealed the veldt smooth and level for miles in every direction. Some bushes there were, with here and there a straggling tree, but none seemingly of sufficient size for climbing. At a last glance, however, he caught sight of one branched to the ground, and with a full, dense foliage. It might afford at least a temporary concealment, and without staying to think further, he made for it at lightning speed. Luckily it was in his line of retreat, and as no time was lost, he got up to and behind it before the bull could overtake him.

Never was hunter more overjoyed than he, when after a quick inspection of the tree, he saw it had two trunks, either of which would bear his weight up to ten or twelve feet above the ground. But there was a *per contra*, which acted as a damper to his joy, on his perceiving that both were beset with sharp spines. For it was a *doorn-boom*²⁴ a very "monkey puzzle," to ascend which would have deterred most *quadrumanas*, as for a time it did him. Not long, however; it was "die dog, or eat the hatchet," a choice between horns and thorns, and Piet Van Dorn preferred laceration by the latter, to facing certain death by the former. So throwing his arm around the largest of the twin trunks he commenced swarming up, regardless of the thorns tearing into his flesh, even undismayed by the hissing of a *boom-slang*²⁵ which with neck craned out threatened him from a branch above. But his resolution to climb had been too late. Scarce were his feet well off the ground when he experienced a shock that sent him sprawling back upon it, a concussion of such violence as for a time to deprive him of his senses. On recovering them he saw that he was lying some six or seven paces from the tree, bruised and bleeding. But where was the buffalo-bull? Raising himself on elbow, he looked all round; but no buffalo was in sight, nor quadruped of any kind. His own horse, with the hyena, had long since disappeared, and now also the horned bovine; he himself seemingly the only living, breathing thing over all that wilderness of veldt.

²³ The so-called laughing hyena (*H. Crocuta*), as the other species, often make burrows, but sometimes appropriate those of the ant-eater. This species, though smaller than the striped hyena, is of a fiercer nature and more dangerous. So much so as to have earned for it among the South African colonists the title of *Tiger wolf*.

²⁴ "Doorn-boom." Another of the thorny acacias so characteristic of South African scenery.

²⁵ "Boom-slang." Literally "tree snake." It is a large serpent, of yellowish brown colour, which makes its home in trees. It is not venomous, however, though of formidable aspect.

Chapter Eight. Trapped by a Tree

The feelings of the young Boer may be better imagined than described. For a time mystification, then changing to weird fear, as a sense of the supernatural stole over him. Around the spot upon which he had been pitched were several small ant-hills; so, scrambling to the top of the nearest, and then standing erect, he had the veldt under his view for miles on every side. He could see no bush, nor other cover that would have concealed an animal so large as was the buffalo. Yet buffalo there was none on it.

It now recurred to him that his unconsciousness might have been of longer duration than he had supposed it; giving the buffalo time to scamper off out of sight. But this hypothesis was also untenable for more reasons than one. For an animal of such bulk to have got beyond his view on that smooth, level plain was of itself highly improbable. Besides, why should the buffalo have run away from him? The last glimpse he had of it was while in mad, determined rush towards himself, and he knew it was the shock of its horns against the doorn-boom that had shot him off the tree as from a catapult. What reason would it have for retreating then, wounded as it was, and feeling itself, too, master of the situation, as it must have felt on becoming the aggressor? Of all this the young hunter was conscious, and not on that account the more mystified. For he had also bethought him of his three bullets sent into the buffalo's body, recalling how carefully he had taken aim, and how their failing to bring the animal down, had surprised and puzzled him. It was then the weird fear came over him in full, almost a horror, as the mystery remained unsolved. He rubbed his eyes, and once more took a survey of the veldt; scanning it minutely all over, as he mechanically interrogated, "Am I in my senses? or has it been a dream?"

At this crisis his ears were saluted by a sound, seemingly in response to his questioning, and promising to end his perplexity. It was a loud snort, which he knew could only proceed from the throat of a buffalo-bull, and the same whose sudden disappearance had been puzzling him. Just then reverberating all over the veldt in a long, continued roar, it seemed to rise out of the earth.

But another noise in accompaniment was less misleading as to direction. This was the swish of leaves, with a snapping of twigs, as a tree tossed about by the wind. Turning his eyes upon that he had late essayed to climb, he saw it was in violent agitation; oscillating to and fro, as if under the impulse of a tornado. But the bellowing which he now knew to come from among its branches told a different tale, proclaiming the buffalo still there.

Though thus relieved from all awe of the unearthly, Piet Van Dorn was almost as much mystified as ever. What could the animal be doing by the doorn-boom, and why had it stayed there? As yet he saw it not, the thick foliage intervening, but its repeated routs, with the shakings of the tree, left no doubt about its presence. The thought flashed upon him that the bull supposed he had succeeded in ascending the tree, and was still up in it; so in blind fury had remained there, at intervals butting the trunk and bellowing.

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