

Starlight on the Veld

It was a cold night (Oom Schalk Lourens said), the stars shone with that frosty sort of light that you see on the wet grass some mornings, when you forget that it is winter, and you get up early, by mistake. The wind was like a girl sobbing out her story of betrayal to the stars.

Jan Ockerse and I had been to Derdepoort by donkey-cart. We came back in the evening. And Jan Ockerse told me of a road round the foot of a koppie that would be a short cut back to Drogevelei. Thus it was that we were sitting on the veld, close to the fire, waiting for the morning. We would then be able to ask a kaffir to tell us a short cut back to the foot of that koppie.

“But I know that it was the right road,” Jan Ockerse insisted, flinging another armful of wood on the fire.

“Then it must have been the wrong koppie,” I answered, “or the wrong donkey-cart. Unless you also want me to believe that I am at this moment sitting at home, in my voorkamer.”

The light from the flames danced frostily on the spokes of a cartwheel, and I was glad to think that Jan Ockerse must be feeling as cold as I was.

“It is a funny sort of night,” Jan Ockerse said, “and I am very miserable and hungry.”

I was glad of that, too. I had begun to fear that he was enjoying himself.

“Do you know how high up the stars are?” Jan asked me next.

“No, not from here,” I said, “but I worked it all out once, when I had a pencil. That was on the Highveld, though. But from where we are now, in the Lowveld, the stars are further away. You can see that they look smaller, too.”

“Yes, I expect so,” Jan Ockerse answered, “but a school-teacher told me a different thing in the bar at Zeerust. He said that the stargazers work out how far away a star is by the number of years that it takes them to find it in their telescopes. This school-teacher dipped his finger in the brandy and drew a lot of pictures and things on the bar counter, to show me how it was done. But one part of his drawings always dried up on the counter before he had finished doing the other part with his finger. He said that was the worst of that dry sort of brandy. Yet he didn’t finish his explanations, because the barmaid came and wiped it all off with a rag. Then the school-teacher told me to come with him and he would use the blackboard in the other classroom. But the barmaid wouldn’t allow us to take our glasses into the private bar, and the school-teacher fell down just about then, too.”

“He seems to be one of that new kind of school-teacher,” I said, “the kind that teaches the children that the earth turns round the sun. I am surprised they didn’t sack him.”

“Yes,” Jan Ockerse answered, “they did.”

I was glad to hear that also.

It seemed that there was a waterhole near where we were outspanned. For a couple of jackals started howling mournfully. Jan Ockerse jumped up and piled more wood on the fire.

“I don’t like those wild animal noises,” he said.

“They are only jackals, Jan,” I said.

“I know,” he answered, “but I was thinking of our donkeys. I don’t want our donkeys to get frightened.”

Suddenly a deep growl came to us from out of the dark bush. And it didn’t sound a particularly mournful growl, either. Jan Ockerse worked very fast then with the wood.

“Perhaps it will be even better if we make two fires, and lie down between them,” Jan Ockerse said, “our donkeys will feel less frightened if they see that you and I are safe. You know how a donkey’s mind works.”

The light of the fire shone dimly on the skeletons of the tall trees that the white ants had eaten, and we soon had two fires going. By the time that the second deep roar from the bush reached us, I had made an even bigger fire than Jan Ockerse, for the sake of the donkeys.

Afterwards it got quiet again. There was only the stirring of the wind in the thorn branches, and the rustling movement of things that you hear in the Bushveld at night.

Jan Ockerse lay on his back and put his hands under his head, and once more looked up at the stars.

“I have heard that these stars are worlds, just like ours,” he said, “and that they have got people living on them, even.”

“I don’t think they would be good for growing mealies on, though,” I answered, “they look too high up. Like the rante of the Sneeberge, in the Cape. But I suppose they would make quite a good horse and cattle country. That’s the trouble with these low-lying districts, like the Marico and the Waterberg: there is too much horse-sickness and tsetse-fly here.”

“And butterflies,” Jan Ockerse said sleepily, “with gold wings.”

I also fell asleep shortly afterwards. And when I woke up again the fires were almost dead. I got up and fetched more wood. It took me quite a while to wake Jan Ockerse, though. Because the veldskoens I was wearing were the wrong kind, and had soft toes. Eventually he sat up and rubbed his eyes; and he said, of course, that he had been lying awake all night. What made him so certain that he had not been asleep, he said, was that he was imagining all the time that he was chasing bluebottles amongst the stars.

“And I would have caught up with them, too,” he added, “only a queer sort of thing happened to me, while I was jumping from one star to another. It was almost as though somebody was kicking me.”

Jan Ockerse looked at me in a suspicious kind of way.

So I told him that it was easy to see that he had been dreaming.

When the fires were piled high with wood, Jan Ockerse again said that it was a funny night, and once more started talking about the stars.

“What do you think sailors do at sea, Schalk,” he said, “if they don’t know the way and there aren’t any other ships around from whom they can ask?”

“They have got it all written down on a piece of paper with a lot of red and blue on it,” I answered, “and there are black lines that show you the way from Cape Town to St. Helena. And figures to tell you how many miles down the ship will go if it sinks. I went to St. Helena during the Boer War. You can live in a ship just like an ox-wagon. Only, a ship isn’t so comfortable, of course. And it is further between outspans.”

“I heard, somewhere, that sailors find their way by the stars,” Jan Ockerse said, “I wonder what people want to tell me things like that for.”

He lay silent for a while, looking up at the stars and thinking.

“I remember one night when I stood on Annie Steyn’s stoep and spoke to her about the stars,” Jan Ockerse said, later. “I was going to trek with the cattle to the Limpopo because of the drought. I told Annie that I would be away until the rains came, and I told her that every night, when I was gone, she had to look at a certain star and think of me. I showed her which star. Those three stars there, that are close together in a straight line. She had to remember me by the middle one, I said. But Annie

explained that Willem Mostert, who had trekked to the Limpopo about a week before, had already picked that middle star for her to remember him by. So I said, all right, the top star would do. But Annie said that one already belonged to Stoffel Brink. In the end I agreed that she could remember me by the bottom star, and Annie was still saying that she would look at the lower one of those three stars every night and think of me, when her father, who seemed to have been listening behind the door, came on to the stoep and said: ‘What about cloudy nights?’ in what he supposed was a clever sort of way.”

“What happened then?” I asked Jan Ockerse.

“Annie was very annoyed,” he replied, “she told her father that he was always spoiling things. She told him that he wasn’t a bit funny, really, especially as I was the third young man to whom he had said the same thing. She said that no matter how foolish a young man might be, her father had no right to make jokes like that in front of him. It was good to hear the way that Annie stood up for me. Anyway, what followed was a long story. I came across Willem Mostert and Stoffel Brink by the Limpopo. And we remained together there for several months. And it must have been an unusual sight for a stranger to see three young men sitting round the camp-fire, every night, looking up at the stars. We got friendly, after a while, and when the rains came the three of us trekked back to the Marico. And I found, then, that Annie’s father had been right. About the cloudy nights, I mean. For I understood that it was on just such a sort of night that Annie had

run off to Johannesburg with a bywoner who was going to look for work on the mines.”

Jan Ockerse sighed and returned to his thinking.

But with all the time that we had spent in talking and sleeping, most of the night had slipped away. We kept only one fire going now, and Jan Ockerse and I took turns in putting on the wood. It gets very cold just before dawn, and we were both shivering.

“Anyway,” Jan Ockerse said after a while, “now you know why I am interested in stars. I was a young man when this happened. And I have told very few people about it. About seventeen people, I should say. The others wouldn’t listen. But always, on a clear night, when I see those three bright stars in a row, I look for a long time at that lowest star, and there seems to be something very friendly about the way it shines. It seems to be my star, and its light is different from the light of the other stars . . . and you know, Schalk, Annie Steyn had such red lips. And such long, soft hair, Schalk. And there was that smile of hers.”

Afterwards the stars grew pale and we started rounding up the donkeys and got ready to go. And I wondered what Annie Steyn would have thought of it, if she had known that during all those years there was this man, looking up at the stars on nights when the sky was clear, and dreaming about her lips and her hair and her smile. But as soon as I reflected about it, I knew what the answer was, also. Of course, Annie Steyn would think nothing of Jan Ockerse. Nothing at all.

And, no doubt, Annie Steyn was right.

But it was strange to think that we had passed a whole night in talking about the stars. And I did not know, until then, that it was all on account of a love story of long ago.

We climbed on to the cart and set off to look for the way home.

“I know that school-teacher in the Zeerust bar was all wrong,” Jan Ockerse said, finally, “when he tried to explain how far away the stars are. The lower one of those three stars – ah, it has just faded – is very near to me. Yes, it is very near.”