

# ON THE YELLOW VELDT OF SOUTH AFRICA

By DOUGLAS STORY

THE mornings are cold in South Africa—cold with the chill of iced champagne. One wakes with the impression of a summons. One is glad to be awake. The world is full of beautiful day dawns. I have seen the sun rise north and south of the equator, in the eastern and in the western hemisphere. Nowhere have I known so inviting a daybreak as upon the veldt. It calls one to action with the smile of an assured obedience.

One wakes with one's feet to the smoldering embers. The blankets no longer tempt to sleep. They have grown strangely inadequate. The sky in the east is green with the green of the jade stone. Through it the morning star has burned a tiny glow point. Elsewhere is dense blackness. The stillness is tangible. The sounds of the night have died. The sounds of the day are not born. The green above the skyline lightens to the green on old bronze. A Kafir drags a brand from the heap of ashes. He quickens it into life. He sets about his cooking. The wait-a-bit thorns rattle their dry bones. The world stirs to its waking. The green of the horizon lightens to yellow. It warms to orange. It blazes into crimson. Out of the heart of the furnace emerges the sun, red, gleaming, new-minted. From the cook-pot comes the fragrance of coffee. It is four o'clock of a South African morning.

A souse in the bucket, a tightening of belts, the swallowing of a pannikin of coffee, the munching of a Boer-meal cookie, the on-saddling of a Basuto pony need but a sparse ten minutes when the veldt pheasants are calling from the grass. The sun clears itself of the horizon. We ride away from the wagon. The white tilt gleams monstrously huge in the dawn light. We knot our handkerchiefs about our throats, I and Chris Villiers, for the air cuts keen as a razor. Chris is Boer-born and veldt-bred; long, lanky, loose-jointed, with far-sighted blue eyes set deep beneath shaggy eyebrows the color of the sun-dried grass bushing his haunches.

He sits his horse straight-limbed with the balance of a skater. His clothes are coarse and chase-stained, his beard long and untrimmed, his velschoens hacked from the hide of the water buck with his own right hand. His stirrups are mud-caked and rusty. His rifle is clean and burnished. It is his fetish and his friend. His name is carved with infinite care upon the stock. His waist is girt with a self-fashioned bandolier glistening with cartridges. His eyes and his rifle tell the tale the Englishmen learned at Colenso and at Modder River. From his youth up Chris has been taught to shoot to kill. He has learned the value of cartridges. He rides with his rifle-butt resting upon his thigh.

We make a wide circle of two or three miles. We turn our faces to the wind. We ride forward into it. We reach a kopje, a gaunt heap of rusted iron stone, bare, unshaded.

Beyond, in the yellow veldt, is a troop of hartbeest. They are grouped about a salt pan. Their triangular shadows show black upon the sand. Through the glass their long black faces, upstanding withers, drooping quarters, gnarled horns, seem the rudely modeled creations of a savage. Their russet coats glow against the cold white of the pan. The cows are licking the salt edge of the brack, swaying their tails. Two bulls on their knees are belaboring each other good-naturedly with their awkward, ineffectual horns. The clatter of their swashbuckling comes with the memory of a medieval tourney. I would fain stay and watch. Chris needs meat. His rifle goes up at the leftmost bull. I aim at the other. The reports are as one. There is a sudden peace between the duelists. The Boer's bull falls forward upon his opponent. The other struggles to his feet. Their horns are interlocked. Before the wounded antelope can rid himself of the encumbrance of the dead, our rifles ring out a second time. Two hartbeest lie stretched upon the pan. The herd is off up the wind. The white blaze upon their rumps bobs ludicrously.

No horse can outrun the hartbeest, but we can afford to give them chase. Away out over the veldt they stretch. Their clean-cut limbs move rhythmically. They race as though drilled by a sergeant instructor. It is glorious out here in the young morning. The cool air is invigorating as a shower bath. The horses enjoy the sport. Chris points with his rifle to the front of the antelope. His keen eye has detected the break of a donga. He digs his rusty spur into his pony. The horses gallop mightily. The antelope are swallowed up in the dip of the valley. The horses are pulled up on the very brink of the donga. Together we are gazing into the hollow. There, to the right, is the bevy of red coats. They are three hundred yards distant. Chris wastes no time. He sights at a lumbering cow. The rifle cracks. The hartbeest swerves as though stung by an insect. The thud of the bullet comes heavily back to us. The antelope keeps on. We spring to our ponies. We ride rapidly along the verge of the valley. The hartbeest is distanced by her comrades. She tosses her head impatiently. Chris waves his rifle in triumph. Without a shudder of warning she pitches forward upon her long black nose, lies still, her red body strangely out of tone with the pale yellow of the landscape. Her herd comrades are but a spatter of dots sprinkled across the open veldt. Chris has no time for sentiment. He springs from his horse, clambers down to the carcass. With the dexterity of long experience he skins it. We need no bultong, and the heads of the bull hartbeest at the brack pan are better worth keeping than this staring one of the cow. So he toils up the bank with the reeking hide to his pony, fastens it behind his saddle, and mounts for the homeward journey. Beneath, in the donga, we leave the corpse of the hartbeest, pathetic in its nakedness. In the blue vault above an aasvogel is poised, watching the carrion. From the rocks a jackal creeps hungrily forward. There is no beast of the desert so poor that the veldt-scavengers will not wake him at his dying.

Easily we tripple on the back trail, Chris singing the volkslied. There is an ominous gathering of vultures above the brack pan. Chris quickens his pony, ceases his chesty carol.

"*Pas op, Mijnheer!*" he yells across to me. "The aasvogels are tearing the skins."

We canter to the edge of the pan. Nothing has been disturbed. The vultures have time at their disposal. They are still circling above the dead hartbeest, content to wait the approach of the jackals. We hobble our horses, and set to the labor of skinning. They look strangely unnatural, the two antelope, with their eyes set high up in the forehead; with their corrugated horns jutting upwards and outwards, then sharply bent back over the neck; with the absurd tufts of hair crowning their cheek bones. Yet do they afford royal sport, and our bag is unusually heavy. We have fresh meat enough to delight the Kafirs, to yield a meal for our own table. So we ride away from the brack pan. We found it pure and unsullied, dimpled with the dainty footprints of antelope. We leave it blood-stained and trampled upon, polluted with the presence of beasts of carrion.

It is hot now and airless. The veldt palpitates like a living thing. Outlines are blurred. Foul flies cling to the skins at our saddles. Locusts spring out from underneath our horses' hoofs. We plug steadily campward. We stumble upon it almost before we had recognized the surroundings. We kick up a slumbering Kafir. We call for water. We demand breakfast. There is an air of sudden resolution throughout the camp. The voorlooper gathers sticks for the fire. The cook-boy lovingly handles the fresh meat. His assistants bake cookies and cut up vegetables. The driver departs for the strayed oxen. In the shade, under the wagon, we lie, waiting tiffin. We are weary—hungry. Our pipes afford some little alleviation. We think of the joys of the morning, of the satisfaction of the kill, of men in pink hunting red hartbeest, of pheasants as vultures tearing carrion, of—

"*Skoff, baas!*"

The grinning cook-boy has made ready our steaks of antelope. We rub our eyes, and fall to as only the men of the veldt can fall to after a morning's riding. Hartbeest is not so palatable as springbok or koodoo, but this is no day of fine distinctions. We eat. We smoke. We fall asleep in the shade of the wagon. We shall not inspan till four o'clock. There is still time to dream of the Old Country, of the girl me left behind there. Chris is contentedly snoring. Elsewhere the world is silent. Even the locusts are at rest. The hot peace of the veldt has settled upon us.