

5 If ever you spoke to my father about witch-doctors (Oom Schalk Lourens said), he would always relate one story. And at the end of it he would explain that, while a witch-doctor could foretell the future for you from the bones, at the same time he could only tell you the things that didn't matter. My father used to say that the important things were as much hidden from the witch-doctor as from the man who listened to his prophecy.

10 My father said that when he was sixteen he went with his friend Paul, a stripling of about his own age, to a kaffir witch-doctor. They had heard that this witch-doctor was very good at throwing the bones.

15 This witch-doctor lived alone in a mud hut. While they were still on the way to the hut the two youths laughed and jested, but as soon as they got inside they felt different. They were impressed. The witch-doctor was very old and very wrinkled. He had on a queer head-dress made up from the tails of different wild animals.

20 You could tell that the boys were overawed as they sat there on the floor in the dark. Because my father, who had meant to hand the witch-doctor only a plug of Boer tobacco, gave him a whole roll. And Paul, who had said, when they were outside, that he was going to give him nothing at all, actually handed over his hunting knife.

Then he threw the bones. He threw first for my father. He told him many things. He told him that he would grow up to be a good burgher, and that he would one day be very prosperous. He would have a big farm and many cattle and two ox-wagons.

25 But what the witch-doctor did not tell my father was that in years to come he would have a son, Schalk, who could tell better stories than any man in the Marico.

Then the witch-doctor threw the bones for Paul. For a long while he was silent. He looked from the bones to Paul, and back to the bones, in a strange way. Then he spoke.

30 "I can see you go far away, my kleinbaas," he said, "very far away over the great waters. Away from your own land, my kleinbaas."

"And the veld?" Paul asked. "And the krantzes and the vlaktes?"

“And away from your own people,” the witch-doctor said.

“And will I . . . will I . . .”

“No, my kleinbasie,” the witch-doctor answered, “you will not come back. You will die there.”

- 5 My father said that when they came out of that hut Paul Kruger’s face was very white. That was why my father used to say that, while a witch-doctor could tell you true things, he could not tell you the things that really mattered.

And my father was right.

- 10 Take the case of Neels Potgieter and Martha Rossouw, for instance. They became engaged to be married just before the affair at Paardekraal. There, on the hoogte, our leaders pointed out to us that, although the Transvaal had been annexed by Sir Theophilus Shepstone, it nevertheless meant that we would have to go on paying taxes just the same. Everybody knew then that it was war.

Neels Potgieter and I were in the same commando.

- 15 It was arranged that the burghers of the neighbourhood should assemble at the veldkornet’s house. Instructions had also been given that no women were to be present. There was much fighting to be done, and this final leave-taking was likely to be an embarrassing thing.

- 20 Nevertheless, as always, the women came. And among them was Neels’s sweetheart, Martha Rossouw. And also there was my sister, Annie.

- 25 I shall never forget that scene in front of the veldkornet’s house, in the early morning, when there were still shadows on the rante, and a thin wind blew through the grass. We had no predikant there; but an ouderling, with two bandoliers slung across his body, and a Martini in his hand, said a few words. He was a strong and simple man, with no great gifts of oratory. But when he spoke about the Transvaal we could feel what was in his heart, and we took off our hats in silence.

And it was not long afterwards that I again took off my hat in much the same way. Then it was at Majuba Hill. It was after the battle, and the ouderling still had his two bandoliers around him when we buried him at the foot of the koppie.

- 30 But what impressed me most was the prayer that followed the ouderling’s brief address. In front of the veldkornet’s house we knelt, each burgher with his rifle at his side. And the womenfolk knelt down with us. And the wind seemed very gentle as it

stirred the tall grassblades; very gentle as it swept over the bared heads of the men and fluttered the kappies and skirts of the women; very gentle as it carried the prayers of our nation over the veld.

5 After that we stood up and sang a hymn. The ceremony was over. The agterryers brought us our horses. And, dry-eyed and tight-lipped, each woman sent her man forth to war. There was no weeping.

Then, in accordance with Boer custom, we fired a volley into the air.

10 “Voorwaarts, burghers,” came the veldkornet’s order, and we cantered down the road in twos. But before we left I had overheard Neels Potgieter say something to Martha Rossouw as he leant out of the saddle and kissed her. My sister Annie, standing beside my horse, also heard.

“When the moepels are ripe, Martha,” Neels said, “I will come to you again.”

15 Annie and I looked at each other and smiled. It was a pretty thing that Neels had said. But then Martha was also pretty. More pretty than the veld trees that bore those yellow moepels, I reflected – and more wild.

I was still thinking of this when our commando had passed over the bult, in a long line, on our way to the south, where Natal was, and the other commandos, and Majuba.

20 This was the war of Bronkhorstspruit and General Colley and Laing’s Nek. You have no doubt heard many accounts of this war, some of them truthful, perhaps. For it is a singular thing that, as a man grows older, and looks back on fights that he has been in, he keeps on remembering, each year, more and more of the enemy that he has shot.

25 Klaas Uys was a man like that. Each year, on his birthday, he remembered one or two more redcoats that he had shot, whereupon he got up straight away and put another few notches in the wood part of his rifle, along the barrel. And he said his memory was getting better every year.

30 All the time I was on commando, I received only one letter. That came from Annie, my sister. She said I was not to take any risks, and that I must keep far away from the English, especially if they had guns. She also said I was to remember that I was a white man, and that if there was any dangerous work to be done, I had to send a kaffir out to do it.

There were more things like that in Annie's letter. But I had no need of her advice. Our kommandant was a God-fearing and wily man, and he knew even better ways than Annie did for keeping out of range of the enemy fire.

5 But Annie also said, at the end of her letter, that she and Martha Rossouw had gone to a witch-doctor. They had gone to find out about Neels Potgieter and me. Now, if I had been at home, I would not have permitted Annie to indulge in this nonsense.

Especially as the witch-doctor said to her, "Yes, missus, I can see Baas Schalk Lourens. He will come back safe. He is very clever, Baas Schalk. He lies behind a big stone, with a dirty brown blanket pulled over his head. And he stays behind that
10 stone until the fighting is finished – quite finished."

According to Annie's letter, the witch-doctor told her a few other things about me, too. But I won't bother to repeat them now. I think I have said enough to show you what sort of a scoundrel that old kaffir was. He not only took advantage of the credulity of a simple girl, but he also tried to be funny at the expense of a young man
15 who was fighting for his country's freedom.

What was more, Annie said that she had recognised it was me right away, just from the kaffir's description of that blanket.

To Martha Rossouw the witch-doctor said, "Baas Neels Potgieter will come back to you, missus, when the moepels are ripe again. At sun-under he will come."

20 That was all he said about Neels, and there wasn't very much in that, anyway, seeing that Neels himself – except for the bit about the sunset – had made the very same prophecy the day the commando set out. I suppose that witch-doctor had been too busy thinking out foolish and spiteful things about me to be able to give any attention to Neels Potgieter's affairs.

25 But I didn't mention Annie's letter to Neels. He might have wanted to know more than I was willing to tell him. More, even, than Martha was willing to tell him – Martha of the wild heart.

Then, at last, the war ended, and over the Transvaal the Vierkleur waved again. And the commandos went home by their different ways. And our leaders revived their old
30 quarrels as to who should be president. And, everywhere, except for a number of lonely graves on hillside and vlaktes, things were as they had been before Shepstone came.

It was getting on towards evening when our small band rode over the bult again, and once more came to a halt at the veldkornet's house. A messenger had been sent on in

advance to announce our coming, and from far around the women and children and old men had gathered to welcome their victorious burghers back from the war. And there were tears in many eyes when we sang, “Hef, Burghers, Hef”.

And the moepels were ripe and yellow on the trees.

- 5 And in the dusk Neels Potgieter found Martha Rossouw and kissed her. At sundown, as the witch-doctor had said. But there was one important thing that the witch-doctor had not told. It was something that Neels Potgieter did not know, either, just then. And that was that Martha did not want him anymore.