

HOOFBEATS AT MIDNIGHT



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SUMMARY

Set against the turbulent backdrop of the Eastern Transvaal from 1835 to 1887. *Hoofbeats at Midnight* immerses readers in an era of gold rush fever, where adventure and lawlessness reign supreme. Barberton, a chaotic hub of fortune seekers, is a melting pot of cosmopolitan intrigue. Amidst this tumult, Hein Brandis returns to his childhood home, only to be drawn into a perilous journey by a desperate plea for help from Roelien, a woman from his past.

Roelien, now trapped in a dangerous web of deception after marrying the enigmatic Nic Beetge, cries out for salvation. Hein's resolve hardens when his mentor, Uncle Izak Langeman, becomes a casualty of a ruthless gang of cattle thieves. Determined to uncover the truth and protect those he holds dear, Hein teams up with the resourceful and fiery Marlene, and law enforcer Frans Verwey. Together, they confront Nic's gang in a high-stakes battle for justice amidst a land where revolvers and survival instincts rule. As Hein races against time, secrets unravel, alliances are tested, and danger lurks at every turn. With gunfights, cunning strategies, and an unyielding spirit, Hein delves into Barberton's shadowy underworld, navigating love, betrayal, and redemption in his quest to bring peace to a lawless frontier.

Will Hein succeed in his daring mission, or will the chaos of Barberton consume him? *Hoofbeats at Midnight* is a gripping tale of courage, loyalty, and the unbreakable bonds forged in the crucible of adversity.

EXTRACT

He quickly snatched the revolver away from Hein's stomach and his eyes were focused for only a single second on Nic, who was now staggering closer, his face still covered in blood.

Hein takes advantage of this opportunity. He grabs the wrist of the hand holding the revolver with his right hand and at the same time sends a quick uppercut with his left fist to Roberto's bony jaw. Roberto's head jerks back and his first reaction is to curse. However, Hein manages to snatch the revolver from his hand by mercilessly twisting his wrist downwards.

Roberto falls backwards and grabs for the revolver in his left sheath, but Hein's firearm is already in his hand. Long tongues of fire flash from the barrel and the other weapon also falls from Roberto's hand. Quickly the brown-burnt Ramonez rolls aside, for fear that Hein will shoot again.

Behind them, Beetge curses. He shakes his head to remove the sluggishness and relieve the throbbing pain. It feels like a veil hangs over his mind. Everything still looks confused and unreal, like a dream. However, he pulls himself together and turns around to pick up his firearms, which are still lying among the stones. This time, however, Beetge is too slow. The merciless blows that Hein had just dealt him with his fist had badly shaken his head and he is still slightly suffering from concussion. He walks and staggers like a man who has had too much to drink.

Hein does not hesitate, he picks up his other revolver from the ground and jumps onto his horse's back in a flash. Brons, who is already very shaky and nervous, does not wait for his master to urge him on with spurs. He shoots forward with a hoarse whinny and jumps over the defeated Roberto.

7. HOOFBEATS AT MIDNIGHT

CHAPTER 1

The dassies lay lazily in front of the rock crevices on the slopes of the Toto's mountains.

It is still early. Not an hour ago, the sun had bulged out from behind the Lebombo's. The rays already tremble down on the granite blocks.

Along a dull game path, a horse rider descends the mountain. Whimsically, the bronze-colored horse weaves between the mopane bushes and rocks. The man sits upright in the saddle and he looks around him, alert. The fresh morning air blows against him and the scent of spring lies heavy in the air.

He brings the horse to a standstill and stares at the plains below him. Along a mountain stream between thorn trees, he can see a pale little house. It looks like it is hiding behind a large cluster of granite blocks. A moody whirlwind plays with the pale sand on the banks of the stream. Hein Brandis had not been here for a long time, several months in fact. At first, he regularly traveled this path over the mighty Toto's mountains twice or at least once a week. But then Roelien suddenly started feeling differently towards him. One Nic Beetge was the cause of it. Roelien did not want to hurt him, but she did say directly that she liked Beetge. However, Hein realized that she had loved him, which is why Hein Brandis stayed away. Three long months, no longer, since she had left and for three long months he was alone on his farm, Groenkloof, among his animals, with only his workforce as company. The evenings! It was especially in the evenings that he thought of her. How long was it that he had cherished the vain hope that he would still marry Roelien...

Barberton had such a strange attraction for her.

"There is adventure in the world, Hein, and we are young. We waste our time here in the mountains and forests, we become slovenly, dull and in a rut," she had said many times.

There were distant places that called her. And Beetge? When he came to visit, he became the personification of the world out there that attracted her with its mystery.

And the moon has become full three times since she left.

Nic Beetge came to pick up Roelien Langeman here at the farm, Karee. He stopped early in the morning with his shiny carriage and four flashy horses in front of the door.

Yes-indeed, and since then he has not seen Roelien again and has never heard from her again. But he had always thought of her... and longed for her, sometimes passionately, with contempt. However, he comforted himself with the thought that he had to forget her.

Roelien knew that he loved her and there were days when he really believed that she loved him too. Uncle Izak also thought so.

Uncle Izak's figure rises before Hein's mind's eye. He suddenly feels guilty. Since Roelien left the farm, he has never again tried to visit the lonely old man. Maybe it was because he feared that old memories would only make him suffer again. Yet, now he knows that Uncle Izak was lonelier than he was in these long months that have passed. Roelien was the apple of his eye.

And now Uncle Izak has summoned him. Is it because he finds the loneliness on Karee unbearable?

Hein stares thoughtfully at the little house between the bushes and rocks.

Late last night, a tired and hungry boy arrived at Groenkloof. He brought a note from Uncle Izak with him. Hein could barely read the handwriting, Uncle Izak's shaky fingers probably could no longer hold the pen steady. There were only a few lines scribbled down.

"Hein, old boy, why so scarce? My old body doesn't want to work anymore. I've been in bed since yesterday and I'm wondering if you can't come here a little tomorrow?"

Three months have passed and Uncle Izak never wrote. Uncle Izak would not have written this note just to ask Hein to come over or to come and chat. No, there is something that weighs on Uncle Izak's heart. It is not just illness or loneliness that made him write this note! In his soul, Hein knows that he wants to talk about Roelien. Uncle Izak must have known all these months that Hein was fighting against the longing and yet he did not say, "come over for a bit."

A hornbill flaps its wings heavily short behind the rider, the muscular horse is startled and pulls his ears forward.

Gently, Hein presses his spurs into the horse's ribs and the animal

immediately shoots forward. He pats the horse on its neck and he just has to hold back or the animal will break into a gallop down the slope. At that moment, a bent figure appears in the door of the small, pale house. He has a cane in one hand, cups his other hand in front of his eyes and peers up at the slope of the mountain. He does not see the rider at all yet. However, his heart beats full of anticipation. He knows that if Hein has received his message, he will be here early this morning.

A deep unease lies in the old man's mind, an unease mixed with fear and deep longing. It has been many days and nights that he has worried about Roelien, his daughter, and many nights that he has had bad dreams about her. The child never wrote, and only yesterday did he receive the first letter, more than three months after she left.

And the tone of the letter! It is completely incomprehensible, it is so disjointed in places. It is this letter that made him decide to summon Hein Brandis. The boy will understand.

Hein descends to a farm road that leads to the homestead. It has been washed away by the floods. He spurs his animal to a stiff gallop, because from the old man's attitude he can see that all is not well. It is not good that Uncle Izak stays here alone like this.

The horse's hooves clap dully in Uncle Izak's ears and he looks excitedly in the direction of the road. In just a few seconds, Hein and his horse emerge from between the trees. The dust spatters out under the horse's hooves, when he is pulled up short in front of the back door. "My goodness, Hein... I'm so glad you've arrived. Yes, man... but you don't come to visit anymore."

Hein jumps off his horse and smiles friendly. Uncle Izak struggles closer. His face is wasted by age and worry. His hand lies limp and cold in the muscular hand of the young farmer.

"Ai... ai, old son..." and the old man looks with admiration at the two pistols hanging on the young man's hips. "The day when you will ride without those things! The Mapors are not so rebellious anymore?"

Hein smiles and jerks his broad shoulders back. His light brown eyes look at the old man inquisitively. Indeed, Uncle Izak Langeman had deteriorated rapidly.

"But, uncle, they are handy... very handy if a tiger's cub decides to storm at you here."

“Whattwo, then you haven’t seen how the Voortrekkers shot with their rifles. We didn’t shoot any tiger with a pistol...”

The old man is excited and clearly happy to see Hein. Brandis notices this and a warm feeling towards the old pioneer rises in him. Now he feels it for the first time, the painful loneliness that the old man must have endured in these three months that have passed.

“But uncle,” and Hein’s hand rests on the brightly rubbed stock of one of his long-barreled revolvers. “They are so handy and you can shoot with them so quickly. A rifle is a bit too clumsy and long and you can’t handle it as quickly, not if the cat is already here on top of you.”

“Aah, a Mauser is better. These things only shoot half-dead. I would like to see you repel a whole cordon of Zulus with those things...”

Hein just laughs and stands with his legs wide apart, his thumbs pressed under his large waistband. His trousers fit neatly but tightly around his legs. The khaki shirt is wide open at the neck, because it is already warm, even though it is still early in the morning. His brown hat is still on his head. His arms are brown-burnt.

For a moment, the old man looks at the young muscular body with admiration in his eyes and it is for a fleeting moment as if he sees Hein’s father before him. Just like his son, he was built... but that was years and years ago. Koen Brandis was just as quiet, but also just as energetic and with no fear on his head. Didn’t Koen beat seven muscular Mapor soldiers without any weapon! He beat them so that their jaws crackled. “Samson” was his nickname. He was, like Hein, muscular and strong, six feet tall, but by no means bulky and clumsy. Even though Samson Brandis weighed two hundred pounds, he could easily jump over a wide stream and if necessary, his feet could carry him ahead of the best runner.

Hein notices the old man’s admiring gaze and feels slightly self-conscious. It’s as if he can read Uncle Izak’s thoughts.

Uncle Izak then laughs, a chuckle that shows his yellow teeth.

“One day, Hein, soon, I still want to see how you can shoot with those things and if you can shoot straight!”

“Okay uncle, I assure uncle that the things shoot deadly.”

“Come Hein, I have something to tell you. I got up this morning, but the fever is still in my body. I made coffee. Come and drink, even if it’s

lukewarm. Old Jafta didn't come to clean the house and make fire this morning. Since Roelien left, they are not so regular anymore. Those people, one must always stand behind them..."

When Uncle Izak mentioned her name, Hein's heart suddenly started to beat faster. He was now absolutely sure that Uncle Izak had summoned him to talk about Roelien.

When Uncle Izak Langeman looked up at the young man again, the worry was clearly to be seen on the old man's face.

Hein asks immediately.

"Uncle wants to talk, about what?"

With difficulty, the old man sits down and slowly pulls the coffee pot closer.

"It's about her, Hein. I feel something has happened."

"How so?"

"You know she never wrote..."

"There is probably no news to write about yet," the young man says naively.

"She could have let us know how she is. She knows I'm here alone... I don't know her like this. I've had a feeling for a long time that something has happened to my little girl, Hein."

"Uncle is worrying unnecessarily. She is grown up. Uncle knows that the post between Ohrigstad and Barberton is erratic. It is only when the transporters have transactions around here that they come over from the gold area."

"I don't know... I don't know, Hein. Nic Beetge used to come along here often with his transport wagons... He often went into the Bothas mountains and the Toto's. He deals with cattle and such and he just talked Roelien's head full of nonsense. He took her away from here. You don't want to tell me that he hasn't come this way again, Hein?"

Unpleasant thoughts take hold of Hein Brandis. Nic is still clear in his mind, the blonde man with his hair combed back stylishly, with his lively blue eyes and the smile that always plays half mockingly around his lips, especially when he was in conversation with him. Yes, Nic Beetge came here a lot. He always said that he often had to come by here on his business trips, always into the mountains.

"He's probably buying in other areas now, uncle Izak. I'm sure..."

“Wait, Hein, sit down. You know I’m not a child of today and I have experience with people. Nic Beetge never pleased me. Yes, Roelien did like him, a lot. She hung on his lips, but I always said I thought he was a crook...”

“We can’t say that, uncle. Roelien wouldn’t look at a crook...”

“Aha, but a crook who pretends so well, old son. No, Nic is too smooth-tongued, too pretentious and I simply did not like him. Roelien went away against my will. He, Nic, always talked about cattle. He buys this and that, for so and so a big boss, but what did he buy from me and you...?”

“Only one Afrikaner bull from me, uncle.”

“And a few old cows from me for the diamond town. Old, skinny, dried-up cows... Now I ask you, where did he supposedly buy so much? There are no more farms further on between the Toto’s and the Bothas, or he has to buy from old Magato, further to the east, or from Roos Senekal, at the old wizard Njabela and then they are blacks’ cattle and who farms with them...?”

“But, maybe he just wants it for slaughter purposes. Surely the foreigners in Kimberley and Barberton don’t care how lean the cattle are that they eat... Uncle is perhaps just prejudiced against the man.”

Brandis sees the large figure of Beetge constantly before him, his laughing face and his big blue eyes. He was always clean-shaven and so neat that he could jump through a ring. “No, uncle, we might judge...”

“Enough, Hein! You don’t like the man either. I could often see it on your face. He looked at you contemptuously.”

Hein just laughs.

“He also always dragged those irons on his hips with him. Hein, maybe that’s why I don’t like those things on your body. Tag, I could have been annoyed with the man, if he kept shooting a coin into the air there at the kraal and then tried to hit it with his revolver. One big windbag!”

“Just forget about him now, uncle,” Hein says reassuringly and drinks a few mouthfuls of the steaming coffee. “Tell me rather why uncle wants to talk to me about Roelien. Is it just to say that uncle is worried because uncle hasn’t received a letter from her yet...?”

Again the old man falls silent and his tearful eyes look through the

window at the high peaks of the Toto mountains and at the circling vultures up there in the sky.

“I did get a letter, a letter from her, Hein...”

The blood suddenly pulses faster through the young man’s veins and his face brightens.

“Then why is uncle worrying? A letter from Roelien...?”

Izak Langeman lowers his head and it is as if the dark circles around his eyes become even darker. His lips tremble and he fumbles in the pocket of his greyish shirt. He pulls out a piece of crumpled paper. He smooths it out with his calloused hands on the table in front of him.

Hein leans forward instinctively.

“Good news?” he asks.

Slowly the old man shakes his head.

“No, Hein, something has happened to Roelien, something terrible,” and his face darkens at these words. “You and I must go to Barberton, that’s why I had you come, Hein. Immediately, and please don’t say no. I know you will do it, just... just for Roelien’s sake. Something terrible has happened to her.”

“No, uncle, I don’t want to believe it, uncle is just melancholic now,” he still opposes, but he already feels the cold shiver run down his spine.

“Read it yourself and then judge. One of old Jonas’ boys came running here. He said that a boss on the other side of the mountains had stopped him on the road to Maasdorp and asked if he knew where I lived. He, that man, then gave this letter from Roelien to the boy to deliver. As old Jonas’ black man indicated, it must be that Zarp man from Uncle Paul. What is that lively little guy’s name again? Oh yes, old Fransie Verwey. I always thought he was still too young for this police work, Hein. He said that the letter was supposedly urgent and that he would come along here on his return. He then went further, supposedly in the direction of Magato’s kraals.”

Hein Brandis takes the crumpled letter from Izak Langeman’s hand. His heart bounces uncontrollably as he recognizes the fine handwriting. He reads quickly and in the meantime, Uncle Izak watches him closely. The expression on the young man’s face changes slowly and he frowns. “Dear Father,” the letter reads. “I steal a chance to write. Oh Lord, why did I ever leave the farm, Father. I should never have gone. If only I

hadn't come alone, if only Daddy or Hein... but it doesn't help to be sorry and complain now. I know now that I am not worth living, what I have done is terrible. I feel ashamed of it, but how I am going to get out of here... only Providence knows... Father must not worry about me. I am not worth it, don't try to come here either, because I don't know how long I will stay here. The Zarp corporal promised me to hand this letter over to Father... I also have to let Father know that I am married in the meantime... a month ago..."

Hein looks up and his eyes narrow as he looks at the stray clouds in the clear blue sky. The sun shines generously through the window. The flies buzz lazily around them. The letter is hastily concluded. The letters literally dance before Hein as he looks at the paper again. The letter is so unfinished and so hastily written.

An icy feeling grips Hein's heart. He sees the last words, half indistinctly scratched off.

"Do not come to Barberton... wait until I write again and if it is not within one week, then know that the worst has happened."

CHAPTER 2

What do you say now, Hein? Do you see that I'm not worried for nothing... we have to go to Barberton immediately, Hein. You will help me, won't you...?"

Hein Brandis looks the old man straight in the eye. How long has he known Uncle Izak and he has never seen him like this before, so nearly hopeless and completely nervous. He had always been a man who never showed when he feared things. Under all circumstances, he always remained calm, like that day with the death of Hein's father and mother. When the Mapor soldiers swooped down on Hein and their farm like greedy wolves from the mountains. The large, muscular body of Simson Brandis was pierced with assegais after he had mowed down dozens of blacks and Uncle Izak was still on his right hand and did not panic. He was by Hein's father's side until everything was over. Then he and his wife guarded the bed of Hannie Brandis, who had suffered badly as a result of wounds she had sustained, until she no longer needed help. Uncle Izak was just as brave when his own wife passed away. She died in the evening, just after sunset, but the next morning Uncle Izak went to help with milking again. People thought that he didn't feel it much and that he would therefore get over his wife's death quickly, but they were wrong. Uncle Izak was only outwardly strong. He simply had to continue life, even if it was only for life itself and for his beautiful daughter's sake.

But now Uncle Izak is no longer strong and he needs help. Confused thoughts flash through the young man's brain. He cannot think why Roelien wrote such a strange letter. She is clearly in great danger. Immediate action must be taken.

"Say something, Hein! Will you go to Barberton with me for her sake, even today...?"

"Uncle, it is my duty to go. It is actually for uncle's sake that I have to do it. Roelien doesn't want uncle to go to Barberton. She is scared. I guess there is something very serious going on, that's why she asks twice that uncle should not go to Barberton. So uncle must stay, but I will go. She won't expect me to show up there..."

"No Hein, I can't allow that..."

“Let me go first, uncle. Stay here until I have first found out what is going on...”

“It’s not one man’s work,” the old man protests. “I am convinced that there is trouble ahead, danger, Hein. You and I will both go. We can instruct your people and mine to take care of the cattle. Besides, I don’t even know where my wild herd is at the moment, somewhere in the ravines, I guess. We just have to play it quickly...”

Hein Brandis realizes that Uncle Izak cannot stay here alone, but he is also too weak to go along. The nearest neighbours are in the vicinity of the farm Le Wayside, on top of the mountains. O’Niel, the old Irishman who lives there, will take care of him, but it is hours on horseback from here and even if they leave immediately, they will only arrive there late tonight. And he knows that he can’t turn around for long.

In the meantime, the old man has stood up. A cool breeze blew from the mountain side through the back door of the kitchen.

“Okay uncle, then we must get ready immediately, but uncle can stay with people in the vicinity of Barberton until I have done some investigation in the town itself...”

“No, firstly I don’t know the people along there very well and secondly it is not me who is in danger, but Roelien. Don’t worry about me.”

Hein stands up quickly and looks out the back door. Brons, his dark-yellow riding horse, is prancing around impatiently. He is not used to standing under the saddle for so long when his master is not nearby. His skin twitches every now and then as he tries to get rid of the pesky flies.

“Okay uncle Izak, I’ll be back in a few moments. Give me an hour or two so that I can quickly sort things out on the farm. As soon as I come back, we must hit the road. It might rain this afternoon and then it won’t be so hot. Pack food for us and take enough water with you.”

“And ammunition, Hein, certainly a lot of ammunition!” Uncle Izak answers mysteriously as if he is sure that they are going to encounter a lot of trouble. Now that the blacks have been put in their place, there are other types in the old Transvaal that make one worry about the future. “You see, Heintjie, I always said to old late Simson. This gold that they have discovered here in Barberton is only going to cause a lot of trouble. People go crazy over money... The world changes quickly...”

Brons shoots across the earth. He snorts with pleasure when he turns