

FLAMES IN THE KALAHARI



MEIRING FOUCHÉ

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by

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and

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SUMMARY

In the rugged landscapes of the North Western Province, Helm du Plessis has worked tirelessly to build a future for his daughter, Ansie. His six hundred prime oxen, the fruits of years of labor, represent hope and prosperity. But when Helm is brutally murdered by masked cattle rustlers, the once-peaceful village of Kameeldraai is thrust into chaos, gripped by fear and uncertainty.

Enter Ryk Schoonraad, a fearless, blue-eyed stranger whose reputation precedes him. As he learns of Helm's tragic death, Ryk vows to bring the ruthless culprits to justice. However, Ansie, consumed by grief and a thirst for vengeance, refuses to stand by idly. Against Ryk's advice, she insists on joining the perilous mission to avenge her father. Their journey leads them deep into the vast and unforgiving Kalahari Desert, where searing heat and treacherous terrain prove as dangerous as the criminals they pursue. The mission grows increasingly dire when Ryk is ambushed by a cunning member of the gang, leaving him gravely injured and fighting for his life. Meanwhile, Ansie's determination draws her into the gang's clutches, where she faces unimaginable danger amidst a raging veld fire.

As the desert's trials push them to their limits, Ryk and Ansie's paths cross once more. Bound by shared loss and a relentless drive for justice, they form an unlikely partnership. Together, they uncover a sinister plot involving stolen cattle and treachery that stretches beyond their borders. But the rustlers, led by the merciless Helmuth Braun and his sadistic right-hand man, Mertel Duvenhage, won't go down without a fight. What follows is a gripping battle of cunning and courage, as Ryk and Ansie confront the gang in a breathtaking showdown. In this clash of justice versus brutality, the line between revenge and righteousness blurs, forcing them to question how far they are willing to go for justice.

With vivid characters, heart-pounding action, and a setting as vast and dangerous as the Kalahari itself, this story is a thrilling tale of resilience and redemption that will leave readers breathless.

EXTRACT

That kick in the stomach did Ryk Schoonraad no good at all. He felt faint and numb. It seemed as if he had no control over his muscles. Hence, Jurie slowly but surely bent his arm back and halfway down, so that the pistol relentlessly moved closer to the position from which he could fire at his opponent's face. Ryk strained as much as he could, but in vain.

"I'm going to get you... Now I'm going to get you," Jurie Vermaas promised, and with a feeling of dismay, Ryk Schoonraad realised that the thug was telling the truth this time. He tried to wrench the thug's arm away. He tried to swing his body, but Jurie was so agile that it did nothing to his attempt to get the pistol aimed. With a dark oppression, the tall man felt how his fate was slowly but surely being sealed here behind the Wag-'n-bietjie bush in the stream.

That kick in the stomach also hindered his breathing. It made him feel even more tired. Even more powerless. It was as if he was even losing interest in the fight. He got the feeling as if he should now just throw everything to the wind and surrender. It was the result of unspeakable exhaustion. Jurie Vermaas still had to wrestle the pistol back about an inch before he could aim it at Ryk Schoonraad's face.

2. FLAMES IN THE KALAHARI

Chapter 1 MASKED RIDERS

Helm du Plessis, a prominent frontier farmer from the North Western Province, sat calmly in the saddle and looked calmly and gratefully at his large herd of cattle that stretched out in the grey bush clearing. This herd of cattle represented many days, many weeks and many years of patient work and attentiveness. Helm du Plessis had farmed for a long time and in difficult circumstances to gather this herd that he was now driving to the market of Kimberley. These were beautiful oxen. Big and well-fed. Six hundred of them. If he could get fifteen or twenty pounds a piece for them now, it would be a whole lot of money.

Helm was in the middle behind the herd. On the flanks, they were touched by his two farmhands, Windvoël and Danster. He turned in the saddle and looked back at where the white tent of the ox-wagon was appearing on the horizon. It gladdened his heart when he saw the white tent. The ox-wagon was driven by his cheerful and courageous daughter, Ansie. Ansie was the apple of his eye, and he had been terribly attached to her since he lost his wife two years ago. The child was willing to stay with him in the wilderness and care for him. He was determined that, after they returned from Kimberley, he would build a neat house for them, buy Ansie a few nice dresses and also purchase a few amenities that would make life more interesting for the child. The grey bush clearing was slowly narrowing here until it almost became a stream where it stretched a short distance ahead between two high rocky outcrops to a large valley where the frontier village, Kameeldraai, was situated. Helm planned to travel to Kameeldraai tonight and spend the night there. He did not want to drive his oxen too fast, because he wanted them to arrive in good condition in Kimberley.

It was when he looked up at the gateway between the two rocky outcrops that Helm, a big, burly fellow, pulled his felt hat deeper over his eyes and frowned. He immediately pulled his horse in, stopped and stared attentively ahead of him. Something must have startled the oxen. At the forefront, a cloud of dust was rising and the foremost animals were not only stopped, but began to turn around and bunch together.

It's strange, thought Helm. What could have startled the animals? He doubted that it was a lion, because the lions along here had already been hunted well.

Helm got a peculiar sensation when he saw two riders slipping through the grey bush far at the front of his cattle. Now he understood what was going on. His cattle were being blocked by those riders and driven back diagonally.

He was just about to nudge his horse with his heels to gallop closer and go see who was being so presumptuous when he saw two more riders coming up here to the left of him.

Helm immediately pulled away and rode towards the two riders who were coming up with the clearing. They were riding at a fast gallop. Apparently, they had also noticed him, because they were galloping straight towards him.

Helm looked again at the forefront of his herd of cattle, and he could not make sense of it at all. The foremost cattle were being turned around with determination and driven back diagonally, almost out of the direction from which they were now coming.

"Now what the heck is going on," Helm asked aloud.

The two strangers who had come up with the clearing stopped here by him, and Helm became aware of something he had not noticed until now.

The faces of the two men were not visible. Only the upper parts of their noses and their eyes were visible. The lower parts of their faces were covered by two black cloths that were tied over them.

They rode two big, strong horses, well-fed and with coats that shone. They sat in large military saddles. On either side of each saddle was a rifle tucked into rifle sheaths. Around their waists, each had a bandolier from which a pistol hung.

Even before Helm could ask what was going on here, that his cattle were being blocked, one of the strangers spoke. He was a tall, slender man, but strongly built and with two bright eyes that lived and peered over the edge of the black cloth. He had gaiters on, and he cut a completely dapper figure there where he sat in the saddle.

"Are these your cattle, old chap?" asked the stranger. And when he spoke, his pronunciation surprised Helm. He did not speak like an

Afrikaner farmer. There was something strange and unfamiliar about his pronunciation that immediately branded him as a foreigner.

“Yes, these are my cattle,” answered the farmer, “and I would like to know what is actually going on here. I am busy driving them to the market in Kimberley and now I see that a few scoundrels are busy blocking them. Are they from your people, old Nephew, or who is it that is standing and interfering with my cattle up front?”

The tall man laughed easily.

“Yes, they are my people,” he said. “I have come to talk business with you, old chap. What is your name?”

“I am Helm du Plessis from Kameelplaas further back,” answered the farmer. He leaned over towards the stranger’s companion. This one was a shorter, dark man and Helm imagined that he had seen the man on occasion, but he could not think where.

“Oh, you want to talk business,” said Helm. “If you want to talk business, you do not yet have the right to block my cattle.”

“Don’t let us get excited, old chap,” said the man behind the mask. “As I say, I want to talk business with you.”

“Before I talk business with you,” answered Helm, “I would like to know why I should talk business with a man who hides behind a mask. Before I talk business with you, old nephew, I would like to know who you are. Where you come from.”

“That is not relevant at the moment,” said the tall man. “All that matters is that I want to buy this herd of cattle from you. How many are there?”

“Exactly six hundred oxen,” answered Helm. “Good animals as you can see. Big and well-fed. It took me many years to build up this herd.”

“All right,” said the stranger, “six hundred oxen you say. I will buy them from you at five pounds a piece.”

Helm du Plessis grasped the reins on the saddle knob. His eyes laughed under the wide-brimmed hat.

“Five pounds a piece,” he said. “Do you think you are dealing with a child? Five pounds a piece for these oxen? Are you then out of your mind, old chap? Do you think I will raise oxen for five pounds a piece? These are not calves. These are big grown oxen. They do not go around and wander because they are skinny. They are well-fed.”

“Five pounds and nothing more.”

“In that case,” said Helm, “you can go to your godfather. I will get anything from fifteen to twenty pounds a piece for them in Kimberley. Do not think I am a sheep’s head and that this is a bankrupt estate, you hear!

And now I would be glad, old friend, if you would immediately instruct those drivers to leave my oxen alone. I want to travel through to Kameeldraai tonight.”

Helm was just about to turn his horse around when the stranger spoke again.

“You apparently did not listen to me properly. I offered you five pounds a piece for your oxen. That is three thousand pounds. It is a large sum of money, isn’t it?”

“I am not interested in your offer,” answered Helm curtly. He was beginning to feel restless about these two men who were talking to him and who were hiding behind masks. He glanced down at the butt of his rifle.

“If you imagine that I will give up years of work for a pittance, then you are making a very big mistake, old nephew,” he said firmly. “You will have to go look somewhere else for oxen that you can buy for five pounds. You will not buy them from Helm du Plessis. And now, as I say, get your men out of the way there in front of the oxen. You are rather presumptuous to have the oxen blocked before you have even talked business. What do you think you are anyway? To tell the truth, I just don’t like your conduct. And if you don’t make yourself scarce now, it may be that the sparks will fly.”

The shorter, pale man leaned forward in the saddle.

“You are talking big, aren’t you, Du Plessis,” he said. “If I owe you any advice, you should take the three thousand pounds for these oxen because otherwise...”

“Otherwise what?” asked Helm challengingly.

“Otherwise I’ll just take them,” said the tall stranger calmly.

“Take,” asked Helm and the frown deepened between his eyes. “Take my oxen? But you are out of your mind. In this world, a man can’t just take things.”

“That is what I am saying, Du Plessis,” said the man with the strange accent. “If you do not want to sell them for five pounds a piece, then

I'll simply take them.”

“Now take, let me see,” said Helm threateningly. “Your nerves will be shot before you lay your paws on my oxen. You can be very sure of that.”

The two riders looked at each other, and in their eyes, Helm saw something that he did not like.

“For the last time, Du Plessis,” said the short, pale man who spoke with an Afrikaans accent, “take the three thousand pounds or you will lose your oxen. We have the money here in the saddlebags. We want your oxen.”

“But you won't get them,” answered Helm resolutely. “I have nothing more to say to you. These are my oxen and I will decide to whom I sell them and for how much. As I said before, this is not a bankrupt estate. That is all, gentlemen, good day and good riddance to you.”

He gave his horse the spurs, and as he turned the animal around, he looked at where Windvoël and Danster were moving. The two farmhands, who had apparently also noticed something wrong, were busy coming closer.

Helm's horse was still barely at a gallop when the pistol shot struck him between the shoulders. He saw the grey bush in front of him tilt. There in the sunlight, it became dark in front of him and with a soft groan, he slid out of the saddle. When he hit the ground at his horse's feet, the frontier farmer was already dead. The stranger's shot had struck him straight through the heart.

Danster and Windvoël saw him fall, and it made them gallop closer faster. The two farmhands also died in their saddles.

The two men quickly pulled their horses in, galloped down along the herd of cattle, turned the flanks around and began, together with their comrades, to drive the herd in a north-westerly direction, so that a large cloud of dust drifted down in the clearing.

On the seat of the ox-wagon, Ansie du Plessis heard the shots. She now saw the large herd storming away in the wrong direction...

It was shortly before sunset that same day when a rider on a large black stallion rode into one of the small streets of Kameeldraai.

Kameeldraai was in turmoil. It was swarming with farmers. On the small square in front of the small hotel, ox-wagons, carts, and ox-