

## Herman Charles Bosman (3 February 1905 – 14 October 1951)

is widely regarded as South Africa's greatest short-story writer. He studied the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain and developed a style emphasizing the use of satire. His English-language works utilize primarily Afrikaner characters and highlight the many contradictions in Afrikaner society during the first half of the twentieth century. The poet Roy Campbell called him "the only literary genius that South Africa has produced".

Bosman was born at Kuils River, near Cape Town, to an Afrikaner family. He was raised with English as well as Afrikaans. While Bosman was still young, his family moved to Johannesburg where he went to school at Jeppe High School for Boys in Kensington. While there he contributed to the school magazine. When Bosman was sixteen, he started writing short stories for the national Sunday newspaper (the *Sunday Times*). He attended the Johannesburg College of Education (which in 2002 was incorporated into the University of the Witwatersrand) and submitted various pieces to student literary competitions.



After graduation, Bosman accepted a teaching position in the Groot Marico district in an Afrikaans-language school. The area and the people inspired him and provided the backdrop for his best-known short stories, the *Oom Schalk Lourens* series (featuring an older character named "Oom Schalk Lourens"), and the *Voorkamer* sketches.

Over the school holidays in 1926, Bosman visited his family in Johannesburg. During an argument, he shot and killed his stepbrother. Bosman was sentenced to death for the crime and was sent to Death row at the Pretoria Central Prison. But his sentence was later reduced to ten years with hard labour. In 1930 he was released on parole after serving half his sentence. His prison experiences formed the basis for his semi-autobiographical book, *Cold Stone Jug*.

Bosman then started his own printing-press company and was part of a literary set in Johannesburg, associating with poets, journalists, and writers, including Aegidius Jean Blignaut. Needing a break, he then toured overseas for nine years, spending most of his time in London. The short stories that he wrote during this period formed the basis for another of his best-known books, *Mafeking Road*.

At the start of the Second World War, he returned to South Africa and worked as a journalist. During this time he translated the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam into Afrikaans.

Bosman lamented the fact that Johannesburg neglected its heritage. In *The Standard Theatre* he complained that the city's residents:

"will pull down the Standard Theatre like they have pulled down all the old buildings, theatres, gin-palaces, dosshouses, temples, shops, arcades, cafes and joints that were intimately associated with the mining-camp days of Johannesburg. Because I know Johannesburg. And I am satisfied that there is no other city in the world that is so anxious to shake off the memories of its early origins."

Bosman's second wife was Ella Manson. The couple were renowned for their bohemian lifestyle and parties, which featured witty conversation and usually ended well after midnight.

From 1948 to his death in 1951 Bosman was employed as proof editor at The Sunday Express, but in addition he was contracted to write his weekly Voorkamer story for The Forum magazine.

His last wife was Helena Lake (née Stegmann). After a housewarming party in October 1951 Bosman experienced severe chest pains and was taken to Edenvale Hospital. On admission he was asked for his birthplace. He replied, "Born Kuilsrivier – Died Edenvale Hospital." He was discharged and collapsed at home a few hours later. Bosman died as he was being rushed to hospital. He is buried in Westpark Cemetery in Westdene under a triangular headstone that reads "Die Skrywer, The Writer, Herman Charles Bosman, b 3.2.1905, d 14.10.1951."

## In the Withaak's Shade – Herman Charles Bosman

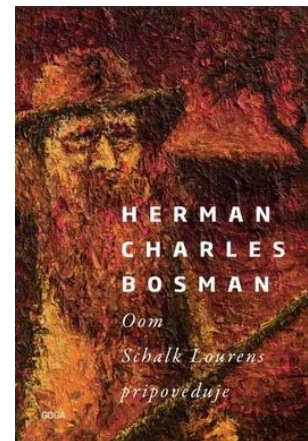
LEOPARDS? – Oom Schalk Lourens said – Oh, yes, there are two varieties on this side of the Limpopo. The chief difference between them is that the one kind of leopard has got a few more spots on it than the other kind. But when you meet a leopard in the veld, unexpectedly, you seldom trouble to count his spots to find out what kind he belongs to.

That is unnecessary. Because, whatever kind of leopard it is that you come across in this way, you only do one kind of running. And that is the fastest kind.

I remember the occasion that I came across a leopard unexpectedly, and to this day I couldn't tell you how many spots he had, even though I had all the time I needed for studying him. It happened about mid-day, when I was out on the far end of my farm, behind a koppie, looking for some strayed cattle. I thought the cattle might be there because it is shady under those withaak trees, and there is soft grass that is very pleasant to sit on. After I had looked for the cattle for about an hour in this manner, sitting up against a tree trunk, it occurred to me that I could look for them just as well, or perhaps even better, if I lay down flat. For even a child knows that cattle aren't so small that you have got to get on to stilts and things to see them properly.

So I lay on my back, with my hat tilted over my face, and my legs crossed, and when I closed my eyes slightly the tip of my boot, sticking up into the air, looked just like the peak of Abjaterskop.

Overhead a lonely aasvoël wheeled, circling slowly round and round without flapping his wings, and I knew that not even a calf could pass in any part of the sky between the tip of my toe and that aasvoël without my observing it immediately. What was more, I could go on lying there under the withaak and looking for the cattle like that all day, if necessary. As you know, I am not the sort of farmer to loaf about the house when there is a man's work to be done.



The more I screwed up my eyes and gazed at the toe of my hoot, the more it looked like Abjaterskop. By and by it seemed that it actually was Abjaterskop, and I could see the stones on top of it, and the bush trying to grow up its sides, and in my ears there was a far off humming sound, like bees in an orchard on a still day. As I have said, it was very pleasant.

Then a strange thing happened. It was as though a huge cloud, shaped like an animal's head and with spots on it, had settled on top of Abjaterskop. It seemed so funny that I wanted to laugh. But I didn't. Instead, I opened my eyes a little more and felt glad to think that I was only dreaming. Because otherwise I would have to believe that the spotted cloud on Abjaterskop was actually a leopard, and that he was gazing at my boot. Again I wanted to laugh. But then, suddenly, I knew.

And I didn't feel so glad. For it was a leopard, all right – a large-sized, hungry-looking leopard, and he was sniffing suspiciously at my feet. I was uncomfortable. I knew that nothing I could do would ever convince that leopard that my toe was Abjaterskop. He was not that sort of leopard: I knew that without even counting the number of his spots. Instead, having finished with my feet, he started sniffing higher up. It was the most terrifying moment of my life. I wanted to get up and run for it. But I couldn't. My legs wouldn't work.

Every big-game hunter I have come across has told me the same story about how, at one time or another, he has owed his escape from lions and other wild animals to his cunning in lying down and pretending to be dead, so that the beast of prey loses interest in him and walks off. Now, as I lay there on the grass, with the leopard trying to make up his mind about me, I understood why, in such a situation, the hunter doesn't move. It's simply that he can't move. That's all. It's not his cunning that keeps him down. It's his legs.

In the meantime the leopard had got up as far as my knees. He was studying my trousers very carefully, and I started getting embarrassed. My trousers were old and rather unfashionable. Also, at the knee, there was a torn place, from where I had climbed through a barbed-wire fence, into the thick bush, the time I saw the Government tax~ollector coming over the bult before he saw me. The leopard stared at that rent in my trousers for quite a while, and my embarrassment grew. I felt I wanted to explain about the Government tax collector and the barbed wire. I didn't want the leopard to get the impression that Schalk Lourens was the sort of man who didn't care about his personal appearance.

When the leopard got as far as my shirt, however, I felt better. It was a good blue flannel shirt that I had bought only a few weeks ago from the Indian store at Ramoutsa, and I didn't care how many strange leopards saw it. Nevertheless, I made up my mind that next time I went to lie on the grass under the withaak, looking for strayed cattle, I would first polish up my veldskoens with sheep's fat, and I would put on my black hat that I only wear to Nagmaal. I could not permit the wild animals of the neighbourhood to sneer at me.

But when the leopard reached my face I got frightened again. I knew he couldn't take exception to my shirt. But I wasn't so sure about my face. Those were terrible moments. I lay very still, afraid to open my eyes and afraid to breathe. Sniff-sniff, the huge creature went, and his breath swept over my face in hot gasps. You hear of many frightening experiences that a man has in a lifetime, I have also been in quite a few perilous situations. But if you want something to make you suddenly old and to turn your hair white in a few moments) there is nothing to beat a leopard – especially when he is standing over you, with his jaws at your throat, trying to find a good place to bite.

The leopard gave a deep growl, stepped right over my body, knocked off my hat, and growled again. I opened my eyes and saw the animal moving away clumsily. But my relief didn't last long. The leopard didn't move far. Instead, he turned over and lay down next to me.

Yes, there on the grass, in the shade of the withaak, the leopard and I lay down together. The leopard lay half-curved up, on his side, with his forelegs crossed, like a dog, and whenever I tried to move away he grunted. I am sure that in the whole history of the Groot Marico there have never been two stranger companions engaged in the thankless task of looking for strayed cattle.

Next day, in Fanie Snyman's front room, which was used as a post-office, I told my story to the farmers of the neighbourhood, while they were drinking coffee and waiting for the motor-lorry from Zeerust.

"And how did you get away from that leopard in the end?" Koos van Tonder asked, trying to be funny. "I suppose you crawled through the grass and frightened the leopard off by pretending to be a python."

"No, I just got up and walked home," I said. "I remembered that the cattle I was looking for might have gone the other way and strayed into your kraal. I thought they would be safer with the leopard."

"Did the leopard tell you what he thought of General Pienaar's last speech in the Volksraad?" Frans Welman asked, and they all laughed.

I told my story over several times before the lorry came with our letters, and although the dozen odd men present didn't say much while I was talking, I could see that they listened to me in the same way that they listened when Krisjan Lemmer talked. And everybody knew that Krisjan Lemmer was the biggest liar in the Bushveld.

To make matters worse, Krisjan Lemmer was there, too, and when I got to the part of my story where the leopard lay down beside me, Krisjan Lemmer winked at me. You know that kind of wink. It was to let me know that there was now a new understanding between us, and that we could speak in future as one Marico liar to another.

I didn't like that.

"Kêrels," I said in the end, "I know just what you are thinking. You don't believe me, and you don't want to say so."

"But we do believe you," Krisjan Lemmer interrupted me, very wonderful things happen in the Bushveld. I once had a twenty-foot mamba that I named Hans. This snake was so attached to me that I couldn't go anywhere without him. He would even follow me to church on Sunday, and because he didn't care much for some of the sermons, he would wait for me outside under a tree. Not that Hans was irreligious. But he had a sensitive nature, and the strong line that the predikant took against the serpent in the Garden of Eden always made Hans feel awkward. Yet he didn't go and look for a withaak to lie under, like your leopard.

He wasn't stand-offish in that way. An ordinary thorn-tree's shade was good enough for Hans. He knew he was only a mamba, and didn't try to give himself airs." I didn't take notice of Krisjan Lemmer's stupid lies, but the upshot of this whole affair was that I also began to have doubts about the existence of that leopard. I recalled queer stories I had heard of human beings that could turn themselves into animals, and although I am not a superstitious man I could not shake off the feeling that it was a spook thing that had happened. But when, a few days later, a huge leopard had been seen from the roadside near the poort, and then again by Mtosas on the way to Nietverdiend, and again in the turf-lands near the Malopo, matters took a different turn.

At first people jested about this leopard. They said it wasn't a real leopard, but a spotted animal that had walked away out of Schalk Lourens' dream. They also said that the leopard had come to the Dwarsberge to have a look at Krisjan Lemmer's twenty-foot mamba. But afterwards, when they had found his spoor at several water-holes, they had no more doubt about the leopard.



It was dangerous to walk about in the veld, they said. Exciting times followed. There was a great deal of shooting at the leopard and a great deal of running away from him. The amount of Martini and Mauser fire I heard in the krantzes reminded me of nothing so much as the First Boer War. And the amount of running away reminded me of nothing so much as the Second Boer War.

But always the leopard escaped unharmed. Somehow, I felt sorry for him. The way he had first sniffed at me and then lain down beside me that day under the withaak was a strange thing that I couldn't?

But I also wondered if I hadn't dreamt it all. The manner in which those things had befallen me was also unearthly. The leopard began to take up a lot of my thoughts. And there was no man to whom I could talk about it who would be able to help me in any way. Even now, as I am telling you this story, I am expecting you to wink at me, like Krisjan Lemmer did.

Still, I can only tell you the things that happened as I saw them and what the rest was about only Africa knows.

It was some time before I again walked along the path that leads through the bush to where the withaaks are. But I didn't lie down on the grass again. Because when I reached the place, I found that the leopard had got there before me. He was lying on the same spot, half-curved up in the withaak's shade, and his fore-paws were folded as a dog's are sometimes. But he lay very still. And even from the distance where I stood I could see the red splash on his breast where a Mauser bullet had gone.

*"There is no other place I know that is so heavy with atmosphere, so strangely and darkly impregnated with that stuff of life that bears the authentic stamp of South Africa"*



## Questions

1. Bosman is poking fun at the work ethic of the farmer and farming community. Find three quotes that would reflect such. (3)
2. Establish the initial incident that starts the story. (1)
3. Establish the climax in the short story and explain why you gave this answer. (2)
4. This short story is full of mirth and humour. Explain why this is so. (3)
5. Not speaking Afrikaans would require of you to infer the meaning of some words. What do you think the following words mean when looking at the context in which they are found.
  - 6.1 mauser.
  - 6.2 voorkamer
  - 6.3 Veldskoen
  - 6.4 aasvoel
  - 6.5 Abjakerskop (5)
7. What two types of leopard does the author refer to and what do you make of this? (3)
8. Why is the protagonist able to create humour with the leopard looking over his body and his commentary about this? (5)
9. What evidence exists to suggest that this is a slow moving rural community where not much happens. (2)
10. From your assessment of the author's biography, why would he write about the Groot Marico? (3)
11. Describe Herman Charles Bosman's character. (3)
12. Research the term "Tongue in Cheek" and explain how it applies in this instance. (2)