

# The Road to Waterberg

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An old acquaintance, Dolf Erasmus, met me in Nylstroom with a cart and four horses and for the first time in my life I entered Waterberg, the mystery region of my boyhood. From that wonderland, the hunters' wagons used to come to Pretoria to unload their ivory and skins at the trading stores: Giraffe-skin whips; sjamboks of rhinoceros and hippopotamus hides, cured until they were quite translucent, the sheen and colour of clear amber; rhinoceros horns and dried hides of all the big animals of the wild bushveld – blue wildebeeste, sable and roan antelopes, hartebeeste, giraffes and numbers of others we boys of the civilized south could only guess at.

And often live animals came with the wagons: small zebras, elands, ostriches, monkeys, and, in rude cages, birds of wonderful plumage. Occasionally we saw trek-oxen that had escaped the jaws of a lion, and the children of hunters told us hair-raising stories of midnight attacks and hair-breadth escapes.

There were three boys from Waterberg in the village school and the influence of their stories abides in my mind to this day. In all their tales loomed large Mapela "the black eagle", sitting on his insurmountable crags and holding Waterberg in continual fear. We heard from them of fortified farmhouses; of grim fighting throughout the dark hours of the night and the retreat of the impi at break of day; of dead blacks smothered in blood, with their shields under them, lying before the kitchen door and at the gate of the cattle kraals. One, Jan van Deventer, had emerged from a crowning terror to become a schoolboy in Pretoria. The farm had been attacked at night during the absence of his father. A faithful black had given his mother timely warning and she fled into the mealie lands with Jan. They lay there in hiding, heard the shouting of Mapela's warriors, and in the end saw their house burnt down and their cattle driven off.

Waterberg had thus always been associated with all the wonders of unpeopled veld, and to us who were born and grew up on the outskirts of the wilderness it represented the ideal theatre of manly adventure, of great endeavours and the possibility of princely wealth. Ivory was then what gold and diamonds

became afterwards, and stories were told of bold and lucky hunters killing twenty tuskers in one morning – the value of a principality of land in a few hours.

And even now, with trains roaring twice a day through a portion of Waterberg, with the great gold-city belching its smoke almost within sight – even now, with invading civilization marching across the hills in seven-league boots, Waterberg still holds its charm.

It was no more than an island of uninhabited bushveld bounded by the Limpopo. But small and cramped as it had become it was all the heart of man could desire. It was uninhabited by White men, and the wild animals were still there, all except the giants of the African wilderness – the elephants, who had gone to feed the insatiable melting pot of human civilization.

Dolf's horses had to be rested and fed before we started. It was decided that we should travel by night so as to reach our destination in the central hills of Waterberg somewhere about sunrise.

While we waited, darkness succeeded dusk and the little village sank to dreamy quietness. Lights began to twinkle through the windows. From one cottage came the notes of a piano and across the river the jackals howled incessantly. It seemed the very line of contact between civilization and the wilderness – the little “stream of Nile” serving as a common frontier. I could understand that night the feelings of the old Voortrekkers when they reached this far northern river. The geography of the north was still a mystery to them, but they all knew – they had constantly been told so by the parsons and other learned men in the Cape Colony – that if they travelled far enough they would reach the source of the Nile, and this surely was far enough; a year's journey! They had travelled beyond even the echoes of civilization. Across the blue hills they would reach Egypt and tread soil they all knew by repute – the Land of Bondage. For them it might turn out to be the Land of Promise they sought.

Dolf and I inspanned at midnight and the four horses at once fell into the steady pace which meant they knew a long journey and the road home lay before them. It was an intensely dark night and when we drove down to the drifts it seemed as if we were sinking into a gulf of impenetrable blackness. There was a splashing of water, a steep rise, and we were on a straight, white road through straggling syringa and boekenhout trees. Before us like a gapless wall lay a range of black hills. These, Dolf explained to me, were the barrier-hills of the first plateau.

Quite suddenly we rounded a spur and were right among them. In the dark it seemed a very maze of hills and streams.

Every now and then, from under the tent of the car, I caught sight of a constellation which showed we had swung round half the compass, but the road kept fairly level with the exception of the fords which we were constantly cross-

ing. And then there loomed before us the massive front of a range which quite clearly had no break. This was the final hill and this we had to climb – there was no gorge or pass. It was mounted by a zigzag road which the horses toiled up strenuously with frequent rests.

With the suddenness of a falling curtain, we came on to perfectly level country, thick with trees and apparently stretching without boundary in all directions. “Now look back at the hills,” said Dolf, with some of the pride of a master of a show.

They had vanished. Little mounds of tumbled rocks hardly visible in the night were all that could be seen of the maze of hills through which we had been travelling for what seemed an interminable time. We were again on a road that had apparently been marked out by a ruler. No wagons ever made roads such as these. Whether man travels by wagon or on foot, whether he makes a foot-path through the grass or a wagon way through the forest, the tracks he makes are always crooked and winding. The straight roads of Waterberg were made by the artillery engineers of the Republic before the War.

Of their own accord, Dolf’s team turned into the soft grass at the first out-span. It was a small spring at the top end of a vlei and our arrival was greeted by a whirring of wings. Wild duck were flying into the night.

I remember that when I emerged from under the cart tent I was caught by a sense of vastness which held me breathless for a moment. It seemed as if we stood on some mighty projection thrust out into the heavens and that below us the rim of the sky dipped all round.

It was the first sight of the starry heavens that held me spellbound and wondering. I felt like a wanderer visiting his homeland after many years, troubled and puzzled by that sense of strangeness which speeding time for ever brings. I realized how little one sees of the stars in big cities. The glaring lights, the smoke and soot of industry, the endless walls and roofs never permit more than a glimpse of some corner of the night sky. To get to know them through the year is a joyous knowledge not vouchsafed the city-dwellers.

In a moment, a swarm of boyhood memories were thronging my mind. It was during a month’s trek through Marico and a strip of the Kalahari desert to the Free State that I had first learnt to know and love the stars. Thereafter a great part of my life was spent in the open until the stars and their movements became as much a part of me, of my environmental knowledge, as the movements and light of the sun by day. It was a later stretch of years, spent in big cities and under roofs, that was responsible for the strangeness I now felt.

Even as my eye travelled from point to point of this glorious canopy of night, a chain of thoughts and emotions was released as if by some magic word – thoughts and emotions created in boyhood and long hidden in one of the dark pools of memory.

“When I consider Thy heavens . . .”

That arresting Bible phrase with its accompanying picture of the desert-dweller before his dark tents, his shadowed face upturned to the starry sky, once more emerged into conscious memory clear and vivid as when the impression was first made. “When I consider Thy heavens . . .”

A sense of peace and quietness, such as nought else within the circle of human experience can evoke, came from the velvet night in which the stars had their setting. It is not difficult to understand the mighty and mysterious influences on the affairs of men which has been attributed to the stars in all ages; not difficult to understand when one experiences afresh after many years of wandering the subtle but soothing effect of the Pleiades.

It was the time of the year and hour of the night when the Milky Way, stretching across the very zenith like a cincture of fairy lace showed, pendant to its misty intricacies, all the most glorious jewels of the heavens. Low down in the south horizontal lay the Cross, its three brighter stars rendered lamp light by the effect of our atmosphere. Just visible above the northern horizon hung the Pleiades, a dawn cloud, misty and vague, illuminated by a cluster of diamond points.

I lay on my back in the dewy grass – where the grasshopper could be heard faintly chirping in impatient expectation of the dawn – and watched and wondered and felt indescribably happy. Even Dolf’s horses, with champ and restless movement some yards away, could not touch that sense of peaceful exaltation which had obliterated all the troubles and fears and sordid hopes that constitute the civilized life.

“When I consider Thy heavens . . .”

Immediately overhead was Canopus, the star for some mysterious reason best known to us dwellers of the veld; observed by the Voortrekkers and their descendants who fix their knowledge of the heavens by its conjunction with other stars or constellations. Just beyond it, and marking the first broadening of the Milky Way, was Sirius, known and watched by the sons of men since the dawn of human intelligence. And further still, where the great white stream had broadened into a river threading those glittering intricacies, blazed forth the most glorious triangle in all the heavens: those blazing stars Betelgeux, Kappa and Rigel, defining the splendour of Orion, with Eridanus a paler pendant enhancing by contrast their greater glory. I remembered that just before daybreak we should probably catch a glimpse, in the north-east, of Algol – that everchanging mystery of the Milky Way – paled by dawnlight.

Fearlessly one’s thoughts expand until even the Throne of Saturn cannot satisfy their ambitious way. I could almost conceive, sometimes I think I can quite conceive, infinity. Beyond the uttermost nebulae, depths upon depths, I can travel free of all terrors of madness which lie this way in the light of day. I

can conceive our visible universe as a mere swirl of matter in a patch of abysmal space. I can see in our central sun and its attendant worlds a system so utterly small and insignificant that its sudden destruction would mean less to the visible whole than the withdrawal of a single atom of oxygen from the Seven Seas.