

## **A Karoo Story**

Vlenter's Ferreria was something of an enigma. His suit seemed to have been picked up on the local dump after being discarded by someone who had been dragged through a wagebietjie bush.

But Vlenter was a bit of a shrewdie.

Old Kaspas Botha had a reputation of issuing cheques and always keeping just less than the amount of the cheque in his current account. So it was that Vlenter presented a cheque for forty pounds to the teller at Barclays Bank, Dominion Colonial and Overseas. To no avail.

Every day for two weeks Vlenter presented Kaspas's cheque and every day the answer was the same, "Insufficient funds." One Monday morning Vlenter, on receiving the same answer, enquired, "Tell me, how much has Kaspas got in his account?"

The young teller protested, "I can't do that Oom, it would be against the rules of the bank."

Vlenter leant over and whispered in the teller's ear, "Do you want me to tell Hermien's father what the two of you were doing behind the cattle shed last night?"

You see, the teller was a red-blooded collection of hormones that had made Hermien aware that she, too, was a collection of the same and so the Dominee's teachings had been placed on hold for a while in the urgency of the situation.

Vlenter was a bit of an amateur botanist and had heard that glow worms were spotted around the showgrounds at this time of the year. So it was that he had been wandering around the area when the pressing noises of the young couple, who were naturally blissfully unaware of his presence, had attracted his attention.

The lad suddenly appeared to be in competition with Tante Lizzie's famous beetroot! But, being a bright fellow, he instantly weighed up his options, "The bank will fire me if they find out but then Oom 'Stasiemeester' Verster has been nagging me to join the Railways. On the other hand, Hermien's father is well known for his short temper, his fierce belief in chastity before marriage and his prowess in the boxing ring."

Then Hermien's charms flashed before his mind's eye and his hormones prevailed. He excused himself and disappeared in the direction of the bins holding the ledger cards.

Luck was on his side; Aunt Emma had popped out to the toilet and left her precious cards unattended.

He took a hurried peep at the Kaspas Botha card. Quickly he replaced it and furtively slunk back to his box. On a piece of paper he wrote, "Thirty-eight pounds, two shillings and six pennies."

He handed the note to Vlenter with a sheepish crimson grin.

Vlenter's eyes sparkled, "Thank you, my boy, he chuckled." He strolled over to the counter where the deposit slips were kept.

He filled one out in the name of Kaspas Botha - there were no account numbers in those days, people were still people and not just numbers. Jubilantly he walked back to the young man and handed him the deposit slip and two crisp one pound notes.

The young man duly took the deposit.

Then Vlenter reached into his pocket and drew out the forty-pound cheque and handed it over with a look of complete satisfaction.

The teller duly handed Vlenter eight crisp five pound notes. Vlenter left the bank suffused in a satisfactory glow.

He smiled thinking of how the young man might agonise over the fact that Aunt Emma may become suspicious and question him about the deposit and subsequent withdrawal. However, he was sure the charms of Hermien would soon alleviate his fears.

Now Vlenter was also a regular at the weekly fresh produce market. He bought quite a bit and paid cash, on the spot. This was more than most of the town's folk could do, they usually had to rely on credit until payday arrived.

Naturally - dare I say naturally - the market folk would always comment disparagingly about his attire. They never seemed to be concerned about the fact that he paid cash. I suppose that they thought that no one would give credit to such a tattered old man.

Rumours were rife to the effect that Vlenters bought the fresh produce to resell to the volkies in the location.

"Can you believe it? Here is a white man actually trading in the location with the volkies. No wonder his clothes are so tattered, the volk always buy on credit and they never pay their debts."

Some people in the location entreated him to tell the town's folk that the fresh produce he bought each week was freely distributed amongst the more needy.

He just smiled.

So it was that on one memorable Friday morning market that Vlenters Ferreira arrived, deliberately late to ensure that everyone was there.

Now, here I must first tell you that in the early fifties sixteen pounds a week was a very good wage in this little Karoo dorp.

One by one the heads began turning towards the approaching Vlenters. The whispers, the nudges and the turned heads caught the eye of the auctioneer. His voice trailed off into silence as he stared open mouthed at the approaching figure. In the silence a great gasp of disbelief went up. Every single tear of Vlenters' clothes, and there were many, had a twenty-pound note pinned over it!

Then came the day that mutterings began in the congregation. The magnificent old Dutch Reformed church, an exact replica of St. Martins in the Field in London, was beginning to creak at the seams. Besides, the nuwe dorp had expanded to the extent where its congregation was a long way from the centre of the town where the old church stands. What's more, some of the prosperous businessmen who lived in the nuwe dorp were a little irked by the attire of the poorer folk who attended the old church. These blessed souls did not have the money to dress up for church and this made these pious rich souls decidedly uncomfortable.

And so it came about that meetings were held and that the Synod was called upon to bless an idea. There was to be a second congregation with its own brand-new church, in the nuwe dorp. The Synod, naturally in favour of any expansion, agreed and the gathering and garnering of funds began.

There were fete's and bazaars and tiekiedraais and you name its. The ladies baked and cooked as though their very existence depended on it.

A new dominee elect was identified and brought to the dorp to help with the collecting. He visited every sheep farmer in the district and everyone in the nuwe dorp.

All the divisions and jealousies of a small community were flecked open for all to see.

Some farmers were happy with the old church and would not give a brass farthing for the new one. The young dominee was a truly religious man, not hung up about poverty, images and reputations and so it was that he arrived at the Ferreira farm - the first visitor since Vlenter's father had died many years before.

Vlenter held out his hand as the dominee approached, "Welcome dominee, Jacob Ferreira."

"Neels Van Wyk, pleased to meet you."

They exchanged pleasantries while a Hottentot servant served genuine moer coffee and wonderful koeksisters.

After the repast the dominee broached the subject. "I was wondering if you would be prepared to donate something to the nuwe kerk?"

"Dominee, I have long since passed beyond the church. I cannot reconcile Christ's teachings with many of its policies and practices. But, be that as it may, I do recognise its value to some and that it does fulfil a need in the community - for that alone it would be my privilege to help in my own small way."

He took the dominee out into the yard, "You see that grey donkey over there? You can have it. I will take it to Friday's stock fair for you and you can ask the auctioneer to sell it to the highest bidder."

When news of this gift reached the ears of the populace, they once again vented their spleen on Vlenter by means of rumour mongering and surreptitious whispering, "How could he be so mean - a one and sixpenny donkey? Het die man geen skaamte nie?"

The day of the stock fair duly arrived.

After much haggling over, " . . . five shillings for this sheep..." and " . . . eighteen shillings for that cow...", " just the grey donkey remained.

"What am I bid for the dominee's donkey?" asked the auctioneer, rather sarcastically.

"One thousand pounds."

The man's mouth was still hanging open as Vlenters counted out fifty crisp twenty-pound notes and handed them to a beaming, but speechless, Neels van Wyk.

After all, one does not get any tax relief for a small donation - but the purchase of livestock - now that is something that is fully tax deductible.

**Ray Hattingh**