Toil of Men

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TOIL OF MEN

BY

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BOOK I

WINTER

CHAPTER I

A MAN was at work digging a deep trench through sandy soil. He breathed hard, as with sturdy rhythmical swing he hurled spadefuls of grey earth on to the heap which grew higher and higher above him.

Heavy December gloom brooded over the land, a dismal pall of low grey cloud, shadowed in places with darker tints. Wind, keen as a vulture, sharp with rain, howled and roared across the wide landscape which stretched away southwards; in colour a muddy brown chequered with cold yellow, both brown and yellow fading at the horizon into the toneless grey of wintry fields. Here and there ghostly patches of withered brushwood or leafless hedges indicated the tulip fields and market gardens, between them the dull broken green of lines of cabbages and leeks. Faint silhouettes of labourers hoeing and digging were dotted over the bare fields surrounding the plot on which Dirk was at work. There was something melancholy in their attitudes seen from far in the dismal twilight which deepened and darkened over the land.

With muscles like steel, sweat standing in drops on his ruddy face, Dirk toiled at the trench under his feet, tossing up his spadefuls, cutting into the ground with the sharp edge of his pick. Great lumps of tenacious clay were every now and then sucked back into their bed with a gurgle, plastering him up to the knees in slime. His muddy *sabots* splashed about in the ooze; and, as he plied pick and spade with feverish energy, the hole in which he worked became rapidly wider and deeper, till thick dark water rushed through the soil, and foamed and bubbled about his feet.

Old Gerrit Hassel, known as "Flowerpot," Dirk's father, had come from his farm across the fields, and was now standing by the heap of dug-out soil, looking down at his son. The old man's long body with its slightly stooping shoulders, stiffened itself against the wind; his face, blue with cold, was peevishly wrinkled, in so far at least as wrinkles were possible on his smooth peasant countenance. It was round as a ball, set in a frame of grey hair wind-tossed under a dirty green cap; a heavy silver beard, reverend enough for a bishop, contrasted oddly with the childlike face. Rain pattered like shot on the brown coat below which the bottom of a smock flapped noisily in the wind.

Old Gerrit was really in high good humour; with quiet enjoyment and pride, he was mentally calculating the weight of each spadeful, as Dirk with his fine broad swing flung it above him out of the trench. Gerrit was immensely proud of his son's digging powers. Dirk was the only person he cared for in the least, and that merely because of the young man's capacity for silent, uncomplaining, unstinting toil. It put the father in a most excellent humour with himself, to see his son labouring there in the bitter wind.

Half a field's length away Piet also was digging. Piet had not Dirk's stolid, immovable, ox-like strength, and he was digging on an easier bit of ground. He sang, his voice audible from quite a long way off, now sinking, now carried away loud on a gust of wind. Heard close, the voice had a curiously merry note as it rang out in time to the swing of the spade; the words of the song came faintly to old Gerrit across the wintry fields.

"Ho! ho! He's pretty jolly!" murmured the old man, frowning at the rain which still fell from the heavy clouds.

Dirk heard nothing in his trench; he went on silently digging; loosening brown clods and lumps of livid clay, heaving them above him with rhythmical swing.

The *hectare* of land on which Gerrit's sons were working was burdened by a heavy double mortgage; fortunately, however, was situated right in the heart of the market-gardening district of Wiereland. The rest of Gerrit's land, which was let, lay towards the parish of Duinkijk. Duinkijk almost enclosed Wiereland and at one side extended to the sea, there joining the parish of Zeekijk. Zeekijk itself was a poor seaside hamlet, to which a few summer visitors, come for the bathing, communicated its only liveliness.

The *hectare* which Gerrit still worked was at the back of his house and farmyard, shut in on the right by the wretched habitations of the workmen and garden labourers. On the left it lay open, adjoining the market gardens and tulip fields which stretched on and on to a considerable distance.

The present season was the worst for the garden labourers of Wiereland; it meant unemployment and grinding poverty for the greater number especially of the married men. With the end of summer they became a nomad population, wandering hither and thither, picking up odd jobs, suffering tortures of gnawing anxiety and daily starvation. Gerrit, however, had his two stalwart sons, who kept him now by their labour as he for years had kept them. He was old, and after a severe illness of the previous year was too stiff and feeble for digging in the cold and the rain. Yet without his sons he must have done it in spite of his sixty-eight years, for he had no money to pay wages to hirelings. It warmed his heart now to stand there, his hands in his pockets, watching his sons work, without need to do a hand's turn himself. What a fellow Dirk was! ha! what a shoulder! what limbs! Jesus! just look at him there in his smock! That's a man for you! And Piet too—another sturdy chap! Hark, there he is singing again—noisy fellow! As for Dirk he never utters a sound—goes at it silently—bonk! pooff! bonk! pooff! there's work for you! Lord! what a spadeful! fifty pounds at each swing

—my troth! there's no one in the place who can dig like Dirk!

Old Gerrit shivered and was numb with cold. The wind bellowed, and groaned, and blustered over the flat expanse, striking him full in his blue-cold face. Jesus! It was cold and no mistake, standing there in the wind and rain! He must get indoors again.

Now Dirk was standing deeper in his trench. In front of him stretched the bare wintry fields, a dull brown expanse informed by a gnawing melancholy. From the yards and strips of garden, behind the Rozen and Bikker Street houses, which bordered Hassel's land, came the noisy flapping of garments hung out to dry. The little houses with their broken backed roofs looked dismal and sad in the winter twilight, their rickety gables standing out against the low leaden sky. It was the labourers' quarter; and the row of tumbledown hovels looked in the gloom like part of some great ruined wall, all the mean and squalid details fused into one shapeless mass by the gathering darkness. The rotting fences of yard or garden creaked in the blast. From Dirk's trench could be heard, like the roar of the sea, the wild rushing and howling of the wind through bare elms, which flung their naked arms in great sweeps across the sky, and swayed their giant stems like Titanic beings fighting in the upper air their battle with the forces of winter.

Dirk was about to drive his spade once more into the ground, when he saw old Bolk, who lived in the lower end of Wiereland, the most wretched corner of the township, hobbling towards them.

"Hallo! here comes old Flatnose! He's grown a bit stiff," said Dirk, peering through the elder Hassel's legs as he stood on the edge of the trench.

An undersized wizened man, clumsy in his wooden shoes, was stumbling and tottering along between the close furrows of the tulip fields. He was still some way off when he called out "Good-day" to the Hassels in a hollow nasal voice. Much out of breath, he came and stood, a small bowed figure, beside old Gerrit. His frayed dirty waistcoat surmounted baggy trousers of fustian, his threadbare jacket fluttered in the wind over a long blue smock. The dirty yellow face and neck were deeply seamed and wrinkled; a neglected stubble of hair powdered over the cheeks, suggested a peppering of peat dust. Heavy moustache-like eyebrows overhung a pair of weak grey eyes.

"Good morning. Nice weather," stammered Bolk in his nasal whine. "I've just seen Mustard Breeches coming along the dyke and he told me to come here. Have you any digging for me? any sort of job?"

Hassel cast a supercilious glance at the poor day-labourer who had made this sudden intrusion, and who now without waiting for an answer went on in the same voice—

"Hanged if I can get anything anywhere! Been a whole week out of a job. There's nothing going on, nothing!"

He looked like a gnome as he stood there, his feet stamping, his teeth chattering, his little body bent. He was one of the most miserably poor of all the Wiereland day-labourers; a shrunken grey-beard of seventy, who tried to conceal his age, cutting his front hair very short lest it should betray him. Never had he worked in his youth as now he must work, though tremulous with age, stiff and crooked and rheumatic after toiling inhumanly long hours in all weathers like a beast of burden. There he was, standing, wading, crouching, digging, picking; in biting cold, in cutting wind, in torrential rain, in the fierce sunshine of the open fields, when the heat seemed to have sucked every drop of moisture from his body, and he was ready to lick his very sweat to cool his parched throat.

In winter—somewhere about November—work almost came to an end. The gardeners had their sons to dig for them; extra hands were no longer required. Old Bolk might as well abandon the search for a job. Till March or even April he must loaf; hungry, embittered, knowing well enough that his stiffened, toil-worn body was useless in the market gardens or the bulb fields of Wiereland and Duinkijk. Not that he would refuse the hardest labour. At any chance offered him he would rub down his worn-out carcase, saying to his wife there was life in the old dog yet, and would spit on his claw-like hands—gnarled, knotted hands, their fingers twisted by the relentless toil of the cruel hours. He would dig, carry burdens, take messages, struggle as harbour porter. Into all his work he put a furious passionate energy, in mad fear—hidden deep within himself—that he would prove too old for it; each year meeting fresh humiliations with impotent rage, as a fresh batch of vigorous youths came forward to oust him from the labour market. Ah yes! people were sorry for him, or they pretended to be so; that put nothing in his pocket or in his mouth through the bitter starving winter-time. He lived at the cheapest possible rent; his home a little shanty with tiny garden in the poorest quarter of Wiereland—a shanty where there was just space to breathe, and room for a couple of chairs, a chest, a little table, nothing more. Here he had spent five-and-twenty years, content if he could but work and slave; here, childless, he and his sixty-eight-year-old wife had shrunk and withered; cheek by jowl with the worst riff-raff, the scum of the neighbourhood, who swarmed in filthy dens like dog kennels.

He had had some scraps from the *Diakenia* this year, hardly, however, good enough for the pigs. All through the winter he lived on these, with a little oil, a crust or two, occasionally a bit of green stuff begged from a neighbour. Day in, day out, this was his diet; until it grew towards April, when the township began to wake out of its winter sleep. Then movement, life, the sound of wheels, came with the unfolding of spring. As the soft sunshine gilded the brown fields and bare hedgerows, the market gardeners with one accord set to work sowing and putting their plots in order. Old Bolk bathed in the scent and glowing colour of the bulb fields; he was giddy with the joy of activity; he sucked in the soft spring air, and warmed his old bones, letting the sweet breath of the living soil permeate to the inmost recesses of his being. Now he felt himself still in request and good for something, for he knew better than the youngsters what had to be done in field and garden. Strength seemed to return. The spirit of emulation goaded him. He would be in the fields by three in the morning, working till nine, sometimes ten, at night, flower cutting or strawberry picking; then off to the wharf with the goods till eleven; then home and to bed, dead beat, scorched by the sun, sour with sweat. An hour or two he would sleep like a log; then at cock crow would begin afresh the unending round of plucking, digging, carting and unloading. At the conclusion of each such summer week, he would feel utterly exhausted. His hands, his wrists, burned and shook; he longed for Sunday, an island of laziness in an ocean of toil, when he could sit still all day, revelling in the long rest and quiet, sipping his coffee, chewing his tobacco.

Then a new week began; at something less than full pressure, however, for in the summer frenzy of work he could still earn his nine *gulden* a week, and put one or two of them in his wife's gnarled hand to be saved for the bad time in winter. Thus he toiled; till summer's ferment of life, and the burning kisses of the sun, had turned the gardens, bulb fields and orchards of Wiereland into a glory of colour; till in the busy township the fever of toil came to its latest stages, and the quays of the little harbour were crowded with gardeners, peasants, horses, dogs, carts; and there was an incessant going and coming of boats and barges, unintermitted rush and bustle, haste and press of work. Bolk took his part in it all, and saw each year with ever-new anxiety the waning of the summer.

By degrees the rattle of vegetable carts and fruit waggons ceased, the gaily-coloured baskets of green stuff disappeared. Bells no longer jingled on the tram which ran down towards the sea, carrying the trippers, the bathers, the children, who for a time had filled Zeekijk with life and noise. Darker and heavier the cloud masses rolled across the sky, and chill showers pattered through the moveless foliage of autumn.

Then at his work in the fields, the gathering silence and shadow warned the old man of the extinction of the township's short fever of life—the passage of all things into decay. The landscape paled and faded; the belated splendours which showed themselves in hedge or garden had no power to move the old man, rather seemed to lessen his hold on life. The air was still perfumed with the aroma of strawberries and of green leaves; but in every fibre of his being he felt that life was sinking, that work was done. For himself, for all around him, remained only the winter death-sleep; the hunger, the idleness, the cold.

Now, when he came home at night, he no longer smiled at his old helpmate. He was silent, or muttered his apprehensions in low grumbling. The flower-pots stood empty on the window-sills; nay, in the whole squalid, dismal, little street there was not one flower. Everything was dead; the gardens, the bulbs, the trees. He himself was weary and numb, sad and dead. Everything spoke to him of misfortune and catastrophe. Everything was grey. He had nothing to do. Nowhere was there movement or life.

Now it was winter; winter black and bitter; black for him, though snow sparkled in the sun; winter, the accursed season, the mad riot of cold and storm which fastened on the land and made Wiereland a desert.

Bolk could earn nothing, and his old wife must beg from door to door.

That she should beg—that filled him with shame and passionate resentment, for he was a man with strong feeling of pride and honour, one of the old stamp who longed to work. But in all his misery one thing remained to him, his trust in God, an unquestioning blissful trust in a Higher Being. All through the dismal time, he would be at Church each Sunday, drinking in greedily the sweet, half-comprehended words of consolation which told of the life hereafter; hoping, always hoping, till this barren greyness should be overpast; patiently waiting till God should visit him in His own good time—till at last, somewhere in heaven there would be a little place for him, where he could rest in his peace, without wage but also without care, always with a quid to chew, always with work that he liked to his hand if he wanted to do it.

To-day, old Gerrit like the rest had nothing for Bolk, and could only suggest his finding a little weaving somewhere. But, dear Lord! what could he do at weaving? Not the sixth part of what he used to do; not the seventh. What could he earn? possibly five cents. And the stooping hour after hour sent all the blood to his head. He had tried it last year; suddenly everything had seemed to turn round, and he had fallen against the wall. The youngsters had laughed. No, weaving would not do. The young ones were his masters at it. No one would give him a job.

Then what? what? This was the question that gnawed at and harried him unceasingly. If it were summer! But good God, December! Early December! What was he to do? Where was he to find food?

Old Bolk stood watching Dirk's sure and easy digging. How he wished he had the fellow's job, for he could still dig, yes! with the best of them! But Gerrit soon showed he had nothing to offer old Flatnose.

"There's no room for you, Bolkie," he sneered, "you are never in luck's way. I'm sorry, but you aren't wanted. Too many folk nowadays! and you're one of the too many. All the work's over. I'm sorry for you."

Each word was felt by Bolk like a blow in the face; the lines grooved by anxiety seemed to deepen under them and the old head sank lower and lower. Never had he realised as now that he was no longer of any account! Deeply depressed he stood looking into the trench, noting the heave and swing of Dirk's body as he drove his spade into the ground, and forced it farther by mighty shroves from his *sabots*, pressing, loosening, and lifting, with tremendous energy, till the drops stood out on his mud-splashed forehead, and his body exhaled steam and odour of perspiration. The wind blew keener every moment and Bolk's face was flecked with blue numbed patches. Unconsciously he stamped his feet more vigorously, and loosening some of the dug-out soil, sent a shower of it down upon Dirk. The latter swore, and looked up savagely as if he wanted to kill the old man.

"Damn the fool!" muttered Dirk under his breath, throwing out the fallen sand in great spadefuls, while the clayey mud bubbled and foamed round his feet.

"You've turned the fifth spit now, Dirk; do you see water?" asked old Gerrit.

"Yes. It's here sure enough," answered Dirk, staring out of the trench past his father, panting and resting for a moment, leaning on his spade. Piet came over from his trench, curious to know what Bolk wanted. There was no hurry about the work at present.

"Give us a quid, father. Well, Flatnose; nothing to do? No digging?"

In his high wading-boots tied round his trousers just below the knee, Piet stood close to Bolk, stooping to him like a young giant, merry in his youthful strength. He had the muscular development of the lad brought up to field-work from his infancy; the broad loosely knit body, dressed in fustian and a brown smock bespattered and smeared with clay. He stood grinning at the unhappy Bolk, careless, ignorant of his anxieties.

"How are your children, Jaan? doing well?"

Bolk had no children—neither boy nor girl. It was his greatest grief. He never spoke of it; could weep if he heard it alluded to. Here was this young blackguard making a jest of it! Ah! if he had sons!

"Children! children!" he murmured, staring into the trench. "If only I had children! My God, if only I had them!—a couple of good workers—I shouldn't be starving now!"

There were tears in the quavering nasal voice, and Bolk angrily turned his back upon Piet.

Dirk returned silently to his work. The afternoon gloom was deepening over the fields. More workers were to be seen than in the morning, silhouetted against the leaden sky. The air grew heavier with rain; gusts of wind blew in mad dance across the empty expanse of the dead, brown land.

"Can't you get some chopping from Neelis?" asked old

Hassel perfunctorily, while he looked with intimate self-satisfaction at his sons digging in the heavy clay.

"They chop all they want themselves," said old Bolk, his eyes watering, his grey hair blowing in disorder round his neck. "Good-day," he said abruptly, and hobbled away, looking more shrunken than when he had come, stumbling over the wet furrows to a neighbour of Hassel's who was digging at a short distance.

"Now he's going to have a try at Ronk," said Piet; "Ronk was out at seven this morning. He's a good bit of a fool, and may take the old beggar on." And he laughed ill-naturedly, watching Bolk's retreating figure.

"I'd like to know who saw Ronk at seven!" echoed old Gerrit incredulously.

"I saw him. I was in the loft getting the fodder, and I saw him pass the window. It was dark as pitch outside. Beastly job!"

"Ugh! It's cold enough here," said old Gerrit, his teeth chattering, as he thrust his hands deeper into his pockets, and wrapped his clothes tighter round his body. How pleasant it was for him that on these bitter mornings the job of feeding the cattle belonged to Piet!

The young fellow went back to his trench.

"He don't seem to feel the cold," muttered old Gerrit. "Young blood! young blood! But how sour old Bolk looked, standing there whining and grumbling! Well, I'd better get home," he thought, shivering, "I'll be a bit warmer after a bellyful of food. If only the wife weren't so stupid! She forgets everything. Lord! it's amazing how she forgets!"

He made his way slowly towards his house.

At three, Dirk and Piet eased off work for a drink of coffee; then at it again till four, while the greyness deepened over the plain. Twilight closed round the quiet workers, and a violet-grey gloaming covered the fields. The labourers' cottages with their little garden plots showed like pieces of the superincumbent cloud masses hewn off and deposited on the sombre earth. Fainter against the waning light were the outlines of the lonely stooping workers, fading into the general greyness with the fall of night. Toiling to the last moment they dug on, while darkness gradually crept over the fields and swallowed their crouching forms. Evening melancholy spread over all. The sounds of day died away and ceased as darkness stilled the common life.

CHAPTER II

I

IT was St. Nicholas' Day and there was great stir in Wiereland. Servant-maids ran hither and thither through the streets, with packages, baskets, boxes, of all sorts and sizes. Carts drawn by dogs came rattling down the main street. Two tipsy gardeners with a mason as comrade zigzagged backwards and forwards across the tram-line, filling the aristocratic quarter of the town with noise, holding on to the railings in front of every house, and swaying from side to side in imbecile jollity. They slapped each other's shoulders, they stove in each other's hats like clowns at a circus, they vociferated and sang, till all the maids ran to the windows to see what was going on.

From side streets came the clatter of little wooden shoes, for the children had a holiday, and were going round, flattening their noses against the pastry-cook's windows, which were decorated with marvellously ugly confections of coloured sugar. In all the lesser streets and in the square before the station—the shopping quarter—there was bustle and excitement unwonted at this hour during the little town's winter sleep.

The sky was pale blue; gleams of sunshine, wan and wintry yet cheerful, threw a thin gilding over the scene; and the bare branches of the trees in streets or gardens, like naked arms stretched aloft, seemed to quiver in the sparkling air. It was real St. Nicholas weather. Every now and again keen blasts searched the streets, and yellowish grey clouds rose up from the sea shadowing the town. But the sun would struggle out once more, and throw a cheery gleam on roof and pavement, on the white aprons of the butchers and the holiday finery of school children and servant girls.

Old Gerrit clattered along through the fashionable quarter towards his house in the East End. He had just paid a debt for which he had five times been granted extension of time, and the creditor had become very friendly. Leaving the main street he made his way along crooked narrow paths and deeply rutted cart tracks towards the poorer quarter of Wiereland. All round were tumbledown little hovels of houses, with moss-grown roofs ready apparently to fall over the doorways. A single window divided by tiny panes lighted the interior—a veritable den for human animals. Great elms towered over these little houses, their mighty trunks swaying in the wind, which whistled and howled among the branches, filling the wretched district with moaning and roar of hurricane. Behind the wind came the thunderous chanting of the sea. Miry paths and roadways, littered with heaps of manure and rotting vegetables, meandered among the houses. Here and there an opening revealed extensive bare market gardens and meadows, waste and lonely, the silent winter melancholy of which induced a shudder.

Old Gerrit stumped on through Beach Street, a crooked lane somewhat less dismal than its neighbours by reason of its lilac and white gables and blue-black tarred palings. The trees here seemed to sing a slightly gayer song into the air above the mossy roofs.

Gerrit's home was in Bikker's Square, an open space edged by rows of little houses which stared at each other through the small-paned windows. Here the surroundings were less miserable and the houses were new and clean. A crier was standing in the road alternately calling and beating on a resounding copper basin. After each tattoo he loudly droned out his message—

"To-night, at six o'clock precisely, there will be throwing of dice for stewed eels at the Groote Hoorn!"

Then more banging on the copper basin, which glittered and flamed in the sunshine; after which he added in a mighty sing-song with obvious effort to cry down a rival now appeared on the scene,

"Black-puddings, and rabbits, and pig's trotters will be thrown for as well!"

In the living room of Gerrit's house sat Vrouw Hassel with her back to the stove. The booming of the crier's gong was in her ears, but she looked stupid and confused like one sleeping with open eyes. Behind her rose a faint smoke, and a slight smell of burning was beginning to pervade the room. As Gerrit entered he perceived that his wife's apron, hung over the stove to dry, had caught fire.

"Hallo! hallo! Wife—what are you moping there for? Your apron—look! It's smoking—can't you smell it?"

Vrouw Hassel turned in alarm, and snatched wildly at the apron. She had certainly been aware of a queer smell, but it had made little impression on her dull wits. She had entirely forgotten having hung the thing up.

She forgot everything nowadays. How was it possible? Her eyes filled. This forgetting frightened her and made her nervous. For a long time she had felt uneasily that something had gone wrong with her. What was it? It seemed chiefly in her head—but what it was she couldn't imagine.

Old Gerrit went to the stall to look at the cattle; then seated himself in his rush-bottomed chair close to the stove. He had kept on his greatcoat, and now leaned forward to the fire seeking for comfort and warmth. He felt greatly irritated. For a year now the woman had been forgetting everything. And this habit of crying and sobbing, with mumbled words of lamentation which he could not understand, made him quite savage. What on earth was she crying about?

Lucky he had Guurt—his daughter of twenty; the only daughter, thank goodness! If Guurt were not there the boys would never get their bellies filled, for their mother forgot the cooking as well as everything else. She seemed to have a devil in her.

Gerrit got angrier and angrier. He neither understood nor entirely credited her loss of memory. He thought that because she was growing old she wanted to shirk the house work. What did the ugly old jade expect? Where had she gone to now? She was blubbering away no doubt wherever she was. Yes, there she stood, crying at the back of the house.

He rose stiffly, flung his dirty green cap into a corner, and poked the fire, which was not burning to his taste. He raked vigorously so that embers flew out on to the little square of carpet, then angrily gathered up the burning fragments and pushed them under the grate, for he was mortally afraid of fire. He flung himself back in his easy chair, sitting deep sunk between the arms and composing himself for a nap. But sleep would not come.

Gerrit had stolen something this morning, and ever since had gloated over the thought of his spoil, till wrath with his wife had for a moment diverted his mind. Oh! he was a clever fellow! There was a long spell of winter before him and he had no work to do; so he could glut himself with the joys of stealing. At all times it was his keenest pleasure; but the impulse to it was strongest when work was slack. He was no longer capable of heavy work in winter; had indeed kept on at his work as long as he had for love of it—so people supposed.

Gerrit was a gardener. In summer he had charge of the garden at Villa Duinzicht which belonged to the Bekkema family, and he had work of his own on hand as well. The Bekkemas sometimes stayed at Duinzicht till October; when they finally moved into town, the garden was handed over entirely to Gerrit. But the widow Bekkema had died a twelvemonth ago, and this year he had new masters. The widow had been a good creature. She had such confidence in the gardener that every spring and autumn she had given him the keys of all the rooms and cupboards and chests, so that he could have everything under his eye. The new people, to whom the widow had left the villa, had kept Gerrit on, thinking him a worthy old soul with his venerable beard and ever-ready respectful smile. They were quite pleased with him; nevertheless gave him only the key of the garden.

Wiereland chatterboxes said old Gerrit had now no need to work for his living. They did not know he was up to his ears in debt. They thought that, weak after a serious illness, he still liked little light jobs to occupy his time. He said he just kept himself busy looking after a few flowers, tidying up, laying out beds, pruning and cutting; in the spring he managed a little sowing on his own land. All this was true. He was weak in the back, the doctor had told him he would never see seventy; but he must always be doing something. He felt uneasy, stupid, queer in the head, shaky and nervous, if he sat idle. Looking after the Bekkemas' garden quieted Gerrit's nerves. But there was one thing which never relaxed its grip on him. A deep desire, a passion, had him in its clutches. He required to possess everything he saw lying about which did not belong to him.

A couple of months ago, he had put the Villa garden in order for the winter. He had wheeled the big pots to the greenhouse, had raked over the leaf mould, had done some little job each day, taking his time about it and managing it all comfortably. One day he purloined a couple of barrowfuls of the mould—not that he wanted it; he was moved solely by the lust of possession. At first, the mould was not his; once he had got it to his house, then it was his, entirely! He liked that.

The new owners had arrived in summer. Gerrit prowled round the Villa, his hands in his pockets, enraged that, for the first time in forty years, the door was shut on him. The summer green seemed strange, so did the autumn glory of scarlet and gold which replaced it. He took no interest in anything, but stumped up and down the garden, cursing the new masters who kept him outside and robbed him of his keenest delight, the pleasure of ferreting about in other people's property. Passers-by envied his easy job. They little knew he was boiling over with bitterness and fury.

This morning his wife had cried because she had forgotten to get breakfast. The boys had stormed and banged on the table with their heavy workstained fists. Were they to starve? There was a regular row. The woman seemed clean daft; Gerrit gave her a blow in the face which nearly knocked her down. She said nothing, only gazed at him, with wide uncomprehending eyes. Suddenly she burst into uncontrolled sobbing. Later Gerrit could not get the scene out of his head. His thoughts were not pleasant. He was a luckless wight! Now just when he might be getting a little rest and leisure, his wife must needs go off her head! All day he thought of the whimpering old hag at home. His bitterness grew as he swept the fallen leaves into little garden heaps and dune-like ridges. He could hear her sobs as he worked, her hoarse, screaming, unrestrained weeping, her eyes fixed on him as they wept.

Suddenly a thought flashed through his brain that filled him with mad terror and anxiety. There was a possibility he hardly dared to face! Suppose his wife, his own wife, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, was acting a part; in order that she might have opportunity of playing the spy, of finding out what he was always doing down there in the darkest corner of the cellar? Cold sweat broke out all over him; a great lump swelled in his throat.

The doctor—ah, she had certainly betrayed him to the doctor! The doctor had been there one day sitting alone with her, no one else in the house. She was a cursed woman! And why on earth did that doctor never say what was the matter with her?

A passing boy saw old Gerrit leaning on his rake muttering furiously to himself. The boy shouted—

"Hi! Hassel! Flowerpot! You must go home quick! Your old woman's been waiting for you more than an hour!"

"Let her wait," called out Gerrit in answer, making uneasy pretence of jocularity, for his neighbours, every one in Giereland, knew that his wife had gone queer.

Again and again this morning the tormenting terror assailed him that the sick woman was finding out his secrets. The cunning slut! the worm! the she-devil!

Lately he had taken less care to hide his guilty passion, presuming on her forgetfulness, telling himself she was silly and would notice nothing. Gerrit's habit was to hurry over his raking that he might look round on the chance of finding something he could appropriate. As he passed the villa doors he gave them vicious kicks, furious that they should be locked against him, half fancying that they mocked him in their barred and bolted security. In the old days he had been able to ransack every corner. What hauls he had had during the good widow's lifetime! He had found ladies' shoes with buckles—bits of fine lace—ribbons—memorial wreaths—silver sugar-tongs—queer little figures. Every year something! And bracelets in the garden after a croquet party! And ladies' slippers—of silk—as soft and smooth as the fur of a mole; and girls' coloured skirts and petticoats; and ladies' petticoats always yellow and made of silk; very beautiful! And two parasols, red ones—Fine! And how clearly he could recall exactly how and where he had sneaked each thing! He seemed to live it all over again this morning. And the whole spoil was carefully hidden away in his own cellar close to the salt-meat barrel, shut off by lumber in a dark and dirty corner to which no one went but himself. There the spoil was! a little damaged, a little mouldy; but there it was, quite safe. A good thing his wife never put her nose into the cellar, but left him to see after it! A good thing Guurt was only too pleased to leave him the cleaning it up! There it lay, all his booty, nicely and quietly stowed away; he could gloat over it when he was supposed to be busy tidying the cellar. Sometimes so fierce a desire to look at the things would come upon him that he was utterly unable to resist it; he must go down to his hoard that very night while they were all asleep.

Since his illness Gerrit had slept badly. Often he lay awake half the night thinking, staring with wide eyes at the dark panelling of the bedstead. Yes! his treasure was all there. It might rot and spoil; no matter so long as he knew it was safe, knew it was his, for his eyes to see, his hands to handle whenever he liked.

The best was, not a soul knew of his thefts! He was the most respected gardener in the place. If the thought came to him,—in Amsterdam or wherever he might chance at the moment to be—that his loot lay there safe in the corner of his cellar—God's Christ! his pleasure was so great that his limbs shook and his heart beat like a sledge-hammer. But what a joke that none of them knew a thing about it! not even his wife. For years he had never seen Dirk, Piet, Guurt, any of them, disappear into the cellar without feeling a terrible anxiety. But they always returned without having noticed anything whatsoever; and then he was thrilled by a glow of delight carefully concealed.

Noisily old Gerrit drew his chair closer to the stove, hardly noticing what he was doing, but in his excitement feeling relief in moving something. His saw his wife hanging about between the byre and the kitchen, a couple of coffee cups in her hand, a harassed look on her face, her eyes red with weeping. Gerrit was dying for a look at his treasure; but he daren't venture it—Guurt might come home any minute. How he did enjoy himself in that dark den in the midst of his stolen goods! How carefully he had packed them all! But those infernal mice—he couldn't keep them out! he would like to bite their heads off! However, to-day, no, he mustn't set foot in the cellar—though a look, just one look would almost make him die of joy! What a fine glorious lot of things! What could he do with them? He didn't want to do anything with them; only to *have* them, to know and feel they were his—and that he had stolen them all from other people. Christ! how good it felt! Each thing he had stolen from somebody! Now it was all his; all his very own. How delicious that feeling of having got something which didn't belong to him! No woman had ever given him a pleasure to be compared with it. A sudden snatch—pouf! you've got it! Hide it away! Off with it to your own cellar! Then the talk; the foolish questions people ask you! Have you heard?—this has been stolen, or that has been stolen. You look surprised—you smile. Ah, the keen delight of the knowledge they would as soon suspect the robbed party himself as old Gerrit with his grey head and his good name!

"It's all yours, my boy!" you say to yourself while they're discussing the loss, "it's lying quite safe on its back in *your* house—and no one knows."

Then the pleasure during the first week's possession of getting up at night, stealing down to the cellar, lighting a lamp, looking at it! Sometimes when the desire is too strong you can have a look in the daytime too!

If this desire came upon Gerrit when he was out he had to give up whatever he was doing, come home, watch for his opportunity. The second night he would lie in his bed shaking with the mad yearning to handle his spoil. When all was quiet he would get out of bed quietly climbing over his sleeping wife, make his way down to the cellar with a wild light in his eyes, and get back to bed again without a soul knowing anything about it. He would lie with closed eyes, seeing it all again, remembering how all the things looked. He would see the gleam of the trinkets, the glitter of the spoons, revel in imagination in the colour and softness of the fabrics. For several nights it would be the same. After a week the desire would begin to cool. He would sometimes pass months without a visit to his treasure. But at night his thoughts always returned to it, and he remembered ecstatically that it was there just under him as he lay, and he could see it and handle it if he chose—things stolen some of them forty years ago; not one of them ever sold or disposed of—not one! All of them his very own! And not a person knew of this pleasure of his; of his nightly creeping to the cellar, his waking pictures, his secret passion, his burning, uncontrollable desire.

When quite a little boy he had amused himself with quiet stealing even under the most risky conditions. Now he only took what struck his fancy, but as a child he would make off with anything he found lying about. He was often detected, deprived of the stolen object, and soundly flogged. That was because he wasn't quick and clever enough in concealing his prize! As he grew older he became more cautious. He learned to wait with the patience of a cat watching a mouse till the conditions were favourable, then spring on his prey oblivious of everything but the consuming lust to have—to *have!* At first when the things were once his own he had no further feeling for them; presently he took to arranging his hoard with care and precision, and this awakened new passions in his soul. He could not analyse this lust for theft. He saw a thing—he took it, without thought or hesitation. By degrees he lost interest in everything else. His land was let down in cultivation year by year; his sons robbed him, his mortgage-interest and his debts grew, his income diminished. Nothing made him attend to his work; thieving was more to him than life itself—a secret and a terrible joy.

Once in a fit of fright and remorse such as sometimes attacked him in his younger years, he secretly confessed to the pastor that he had acquired a habit of taking things out of sheer love of possession and for the pleasure of the actual taking. The old pastor rated him soundly, asked, did he suppose him a fool? and showed him the door. Gerrit, in his peasant bashfulness and unpromptitude of speech, said no more. Soon afterwards the pastor preached in church against stealing, threatened all thieves with hell fire and denounced them as monsters of iniquity. This threw Gerrit into an agony of terror, especially as the stern old Dominie, an uncompromising disciple of the old dispensation, had fixed his eyes on him during the sermon. For a time Gerrit resisted temptation. Desire, however, ate deeper and deeper into him and gave him no peace. He seemed on fire. When he saw anything he coveted, the desire burst into flame. Then—the deed. When it was performed he felt relieved. A sense of well-being replaced that of heat and strain. His spirits rose at a bound. So it went on till the next attack.

The minister's denunciation prevented Gerrit's ever mentioning the subject again to a living soul, though at times he longed to do so. He knew he was enslaved. He was often full of superstitious terror. Yet his sin always gave him the same keen pleasure, and as the years went on it mastered him more and more. None of the neighbours knew; none suspected either his fierce delights or his sufferings from remorse and fear.

Every week he went punctually to church, as if drawn irresistibly to listen to what was in store for him. Every word of denunciation, every threat of punishment, he applied to his own case. So great was his fear of hell that sometimes he would hurriedly form a resolve never again to steal a single thing. Two days later when the thunder of the preacher had ceased to reverberate in his ears, the old passion would revive. It burned and swept all before it, leaving no room in him for anything but an anticipation of the delight to be secured by its gratification. Then sometimes for days he would have a slight swimming in his head, and at home would be emotional, almost affectionate, his very voice taking a gentler tone. At these times remorse would be inextricably combined with pleasure in thinking of his sin; fear of punishment to come, with half-fearful gloating over the passion which had him in its clutch. Sometimes he would see himself in a flash as he was; would realise that he was deceiving and betraying the world, his neighbours, the pastor, God Himself. This happened generally at night as he lay awake, with wide open eyes, through the long watches; fear would overpower him, fear of his evil-doing, terror lest he should some day be found out, seized in his cellar among his spoils, locked up, haled through the streets, his neighbours pointing at his venerable white hair, hooting and jeering, while the children pelted him with stones. In these nights of terror he felt himself threatened on every side; his senses became preternaturally keen; the faintest rustle would send a shudder through him. And he who had seemed entirely without nerves, who had thousands of times in the darkest nights of winter walked home from Zeekijk through the Duinkijk wood, now shivered and his flesh crept with panic as he lay trembling in a cold sweat, close to his wife, seeking shelter behind her body, feeling immense comfort in knowing she was there, a human being like himself, whose snores he could hear, whom he knew and who knew him.

Then as he stared out from the hollow bed-place, into the pitchy room, he would see hands with crooked, claw-like fingers snatching at him from amid green flames,—horrible knotted hands,—skeleton hands, pale and grey; and he lay shrinking into himself, quavering out a confession to the sleeping woman at his side. At these moments he told her all his wickedness—only she must keep it secret, *secret*, for the neighbours would stone him if ever they found out that the things were all hidden away—there—in the cellar.

Hearing in the silence his own trembling voice, full of despair and tears, he would stare fearfully into the darkness to see if the tongues of green flame were still there; if the flames and the skeleton hands had disappeared, his confession came to an abrupt conclusion. He lay still, angry with himself for having been afraid, apprehensive that he might have told her too much. Gradually his fears left him; bands seemed to be loosed from his head and limbs; his breath came freely; he was even relieved that he had confessed to some one. He resolved to say it all over again when she was awake. True, as he made this resolution he said to himself that she never remembered anything she was told. No matter! he would tell her; and then he would not be the only one to bear the knowledge of this guilty secret. He mustered his courage and gazed out all over the room. He saw the night-light on the window-sill, the shadows of the flower-pots and plants cast on the yellow blind, and his courage rose. Now he told himself he had been a worm to be so much frightened by nothing at all, he who had never done any wrong whatsoever. Thief? thief? No, he was not a thief. Thieves stole for money, he for the pure love of stealing. He was obliged to steal. Had he not often struggled against the temptation? It was too strong for him. It caused his very hands to burn and itch. And no one would ever catch him. He was sharper than any of them. Who was going to suspect him with his white head? an elder of the church, a man who never drank, who by years of hard work had managed to buy a bit of land—mortgaged, it is true. Why, every one spoke of his good nature, and his kindness to his unhappy demented wife!

Yet alone with her he could not keep his patience. She was always in tears; she forgot where she lived, forgot the names of her children. He could not stand it, and would beat her with anything that came to his hand. This made her weep the more, and her weeping infuriated him afresh, and he struck her harder in mad rage. She never remembered the cause of her weeping, and in a couple of minutes had forgotten that her husband had beaten her. She was conscious only of burning pain-spots on her hands and body.

The day before yesterday Gerrit had made off with a couple of bulb hampers, a pair of *sabots*, and a shovel. They belonged to a poor labourer; that troubled him a little, but oh! they looked so tempting! hesitation was short. In his harsh peasant mind, vengeful and obstinate, hard as the nether millstone, he argued that the fellow drank and didn't deserve anything better than to lose his goods. The shovel stood shining in the sun; the hampers and shoes were close by. Suddenly the blood seemed to leave his face, and he felt violent throbs all through his being. Something whispered—

"You must have those things, Gerrit. You must have them; must have them!"

His eyes took on a strange light like those of a cat watching a bird, with motionless body and gently moving head. His hands burned in his pockets; suddenly, scarce heeding if the coast were clear, he seized the prey. A fierce thrill of bliss made his heart thump, his ears sing. He hurried from the spot, looking straight before him, trembling with anxiety and joy; uneasy till he was at home and the prize safe in the cellar, to be gloated over to his heart's content. Again at night he visited it, weeping tears of joy over it there in his den.

Long he sat in the damp and the dark, in his red flannel drawers and vest, feasting his eyes on his treasure as he had done a thousand times before, by the light of a flaring smoky little lamp, saying to himself with quivering lips that it was all his—all his—that no living soul should take it from him; not Dirk, not Piet, not Guurt.

In the low dim cellar, his crouching form, all red, was like an apparition of Mephistopheles. Presently his excitement lessened, he became calmer; while his silvery hair and shaven childlike face with its rapt and blissful expression shone white in the flickering lamplight.

No, nothing mattered now; not his children, his wife, his rent, his debts, his mortgage. Only the rascally notary who had a reckoning against him for five hundred gulden lent, and interest at six per cent., stuck in his gizzard. And the doctor who wanted his bill paid—and the money he had been lent to pay his land-tax—Good Lord! the notary had been lending him small sums for thirty years at least! and now, now that the boys showed signs of wanting to work on their own account, now he comes demanding his money in full with thirty years' interest! By God! it was cruel! The principal and the interest together couldn't be less than two thousand gulden. Then there were the two mortgages, the rent, the money owed for three years' supply of brushwood for the garden. They'd sell him up—that's what it would come to! If his property fetched eight thousand, it was the very outside, and he owed every cent of that. But the bit of land was his still. So his thoughts ran on.

II

Guurt, Gerrit Hassel's handsome daughter, came in carrying a large white dish of pease pudding, and a smoking pan of onions and potatoes. She walked with a fine swing of her hips; and was surrounded by a halo of steam which diffused a welcome and appetising smell. Guurt was the prettiest blonde in Wiereland. She had a wealth of superb flaxen hair, a tall peasant frame with generously rounded outline, deep bosom, and broad hips. In strange contrast with this buxomness was the refinement of her small head, her delicate doll-like face, her wide, merry, almost mocking blue eyes.

Vrouw Hassel sat quiet and dejected, her tear-stained face close to the little window through which she stared at the bare gardens and dull yellow haystacks. Her soiled cap was awry, its strings hanging limp and dirty from her temples. A gust of wind swept the room, and the cuckoo of the clock, loudly and with much importance, announced twelve o'clock in a high soprano; prolonging the vibration after each call like a theatre clock proclaiming with thrilling sonority some hour of nocturnal crisis in a melodrama. Dirk and Piet clattered in from the byre behind the house. They set chairs at the table and sat down, work-stained and unwashed, dirtying whatever they touched, and crouching like hungry animals over their plates of food. Old Gerrit lolled in his arm-chair opposite his wife. Suddenly he dropped his head, folded his hands and mumbled a grace, the young folk and Vrouw Hassel gabbling something after him in an embarrassed manner.

The meal was entered on in gluttonous silence, save for the rattle of spoons on plates and dish as the latter was passed about. Piet ate fast, voraciously, never neglecting to dip his spoon in the dish as it passed him, and plentifully decorating his blouse with peas and grease. Dirk chewed slowly, dipping his spoon into the dish every now and then, and searching slowly and carefully for the chunks of meat. Gerrit worked steadily through his plateful of peas. Vrouw Hassel alone ate nothing, but gazed vacantly at the window, her eyes wet, while wisps of dirty grey hair straggled over her ashen face from beneath the ill-set cap. Around her the others chewed busily with unrestrained movements of teeth and jaws, eating to satiety like beasts.

Guurt came to the table, dragging up a chair for herself and pushing away Piet's arm as she hastily muttered a grace. "Can't you make room? You never leave anything for anybody," she grumbled.

"Boys," said Hassel, in a tone of some anxiety and annoyance, "to-morrow's the timber sale; who's to go to it?"

"You, of course," grunted Dirk, sucking his spoon and then dipping it into the dish which Gerrit had just refilled; "what else have you to be after?"

The old man knew he must go to the sale, though he had no liking for the job. When Dirk and Piet said a thing had to be done he dared not say no, for he was mortally afraid they might refuse to work for him. He said no more, but stared at his plate from which he had cleared the last morsels with great sweeps of his thumb.

"Now then, mother," burst out Piet in the loud sing-song of the Wiereland peasant, "what's the matter? I've got a crow to pluck with you this morning."

"What? What do you say?" whimpered Vrouw Hassel, startled out of her vacant stare.

Piet's mouth was full. He kept rummaging in the pan with his dirty fingers and stuffing fresh bits into his mouth the moment he had swallowed the last one. He tried to speak, but it was impossible to make out what he said. Plainly he was angry with his mother. She waited vaguely, but speedily forgot he had addressed her. After a minute or two, with a mighty concluding gulp, followed by a deep breath (Guurt, who sat next him, giggling at his Gargantuan efforts), Piet continued—

"For God's sake, mother, don't sit there looking like a great sheep! Curse it!—why haven't you mended my breeches? They've a hole big enough for me to fall through. You've forgotten, I suppose! forgotten that I wear breeches, you codfish! you idiot!"

"She doesn't know her head from her tail," said the old man contemptuously.

"And my black-pudding?" said Dirk, "is that ready?"

Vrouw Hassel listened anxiously, lines of distress gathering round her pinched nose and mouth. She understood they were saying something disagreeable; but she had no recollection of having ever heard anything about breeches or black-puddings.

"Yes, yes," she stammered despairingly. "Oh, children, I do feel so bad—so bad! I don't know what's the matter with me!" and she burst into tears.

"Now, now, woman! hold your noise! there's rain enough outside," snarled old Gerrit; and they all talked at once, saying she was playing a game, and making up these tales of her forgetfulness because she had left her work undone. She shirked; that was the long and the short of what was the matter with her! The poor thing sobbed quietly, unable to find a word in self-defence. None of them knew what she suffered! Not pain, no; but a queer smothered feeling in her head, a sensation of bands stretched across it—so tight, so stiff—and she could remember nothing now—nothing.

Her sobs became heavier. Guurt surveyed her with mocking eyes, which said—

"You take us for fools; but we know you are just as strong as a horse."

Dirk snatched a pipeful of tobacco, dipping the bowl into the tobacco jar, and Piet did the same. There was a short silence. Gerrit and the women folded their hands and mechanically murmured a grace.

"I say, old man —" said Dirk, "Christ! my wrist's broken! So 's my back. Burn me, if I know how to sit!" He broke off, staring at his hands, which were blistered by the spade. "We'll kill the pig to-morrow," he announced.

Father Hassel was not pleased.

"Too soon, my boy," he said; "indeed it's too soon."

"Well, I intend to do it. That's work I like. If I have another week of this digging game I shan't have any hands left. Jesus! I feel as if I'd been making asparagus beds with their cursed trenching."

Dirk's face was red with wrath at his father's daring to oppose him; his yellow eyebrows met in a frown, his cheeks quivered. Slaughtering was his passion. He loved plunging his knife into the folds of fat round the pig's neck, watching its struggles, hearing its screams and the death rattle, while his hands streamed with hot red blood and his nostrils dilated to its reek. Unless he did the killing he would not eat the meat. He wrung the necks of the old hens that had given up laying. Guurt caught them, but no one was allowed to kill but himself. And Guurt looked on delighted, though sometimes she gave a shudder. She, with her girl's hands, was readier to kill fowls than was Kees, the redoubtable poacher, her eldest brother who was the terror of every one.

Piet in his dirty clothes and wading-boots had stretched himself for a nap on the floor close to the stove. Dirk sat smoking, blue wreaths curling about him as he gazed drowsily at the street. Gerrit shivered. He also was sleepy, having slept but two hours last night. Guurt alone laughed noisily, chattering to Dirk, who listened unresponsively to her gossip about the daughters of one of the neighbouring gardeners named Slooter.

"Annie's in an insurance. If anything happens to her father she gets a prize. What do you think Geert said? She said: 'I wish the old boozer was dead as a rat, then we'd get five hundred *poppies*!' Can that be true, Dirk? Five hundred? Wasn't she bluffing?"

"If five hundred's the figure, of course they'll get it," grunted Dirk.

"And Annie said she wondered why she never saw you now of evenings."

"Devil take her! She wants me now, does she? the pig! the hussy!"

"Well, it's rough on her. She never gets a cent from the old chap. Now he's a widower he's always after some woman or other. It's a perfect scandal. Just listen to this. At midsummer Annie and Geert wanted new shoes, and he wouldn't give them a farthing. But he came home drunk and started dancing, and his money all fell out of his breeches pocket and rolled over the floor. They picked it up like a pair of chickens, and grabbed at it and fought over it. He was so drunk he saw nothing. Ha! ha! what a beast! And what girls! They went off and bought their shoes. They're a nice lot."

"Seen Kees lately?" interrupted Dirk abruptly.

"Kees? No, I never see him."

"You don't, don't you? And his neighbour Grint, you don't see him I suppose? Nor his son. That's all over, is it? The young chap was very sweet on you, my dear!"

"What? that stick? that little slimy frog?" screamed Guurt, running off and drumming on the plates she carried as she ran.

"How can I get a wink with all this row?" shouted Piet, raising himself angrily on his elbow.

"Never mind. I'm coming to join you," said Dirk, throwing himself down on the other side of the stove. "Guurt! mind you wake us in an hour."

"All right," called the girl from the back door.

In an hour the young men must be back at their work, digging and digging till the winter dark closed down on the interminable fields.

Guurt went on noiselessly with her work. Her small "princess" head moved busily to and fro. She was the prettiest girl in Wiereland. Every one said so. She was quite aware of the fact herself. She was ignorant; but all the Wiereland youths ran after her and she had an exalted idea of her own worth. She intended to marry a *gentleman*; a gentleman with a nice house; a smart gentleman who wore rings and a good hat and a fine overcoat. She wasn't thinking of any such nonsense as falling in love with the gentleman. All she wanted was position; a rise in the world. If he tried any of his nonsense with her before marriage, she'd crack his skull for him. She wasn't going to carry on like the other Wiereland young women! All very well for them—they had to be accommodating, otherwise they'd get nobody. It was different with her—the prettiest girl in Wiereland. The *Apotheke* was courting her secretly—mum's the word, my lass! And the doctor, like every one else, wanted to kiss her. When she went to see him about her sore finger, he wouldn't even look at it till she had given him a kiss—the beast—a man with a wife and eight children!

One gentleman gave her this and another gave her that. The girls she frequented were all mad after the gentlemen; she'd seen some queer goings on; oh yes, she had! But that sort of thing wouldn't do for her; she wasn't going to make herself cheap. A bit of fun was all very well; she liked putting on her best clothes and going to the theatre. She liked exciting the young men, leading them on, and making them think she was to be had for the asking. But presently a good thumping box on the ear was very efficacious in cooling them down.

Such was the pretty twenty-years-old Guurt, with her fine-lady's head, her splendid hair, her fresh laugh and merry blue eyes; the fine lines of her face, the tall massive well-knit young body. She was the most desired maid in all Wiereland; but the one from whom no man, gentle or simple, could boast that he had obtained a single serious favour. Full of animal passion, excited by her physical charm, they pursued her; she coquetted, played with and fooled them to the top of her bent, keeping a perfectly cool head and knowing exactly how far she intended to go.

Herself little moved by passion, she was waiting for some man with wealth rather than brains, preferably an official with a comfortable berth. She had one in her eye; a well-dressed, scented, fair-haired fellow with a seductive moustache; above all with plenty of money. She felt she must capture him at all costs, his scent, his money, and all the rest. He also wanted to make a capture. He wanted her body; nothing more. Guurt rejected all his advances, making him ever keener in pursuit by her carefully prepared airs of innocence. He had lost his parents, had led a fast life, and now had settled down to an official post which might some day lead to a burgomastership. He had been on the look-out for the daughter of some rich gentleman farmer, willing to tie herself to a worn-out rake; but suddenly he was fired with this passion for Guurt, for her aureole of fair hair, for her *petite* and refined features.

It was a case of giving much and getting little. He received no favours from Guurt, who refused him even a kiss. If he wanted her, he must marry her; so she told him. He was thirty, his own master; with only himself to please. But her family was more than he could swallow; the rough, coarse brothers, the dirty slatternly mother. He hesitated; and she felt his hesitation. Cunningly she endeavoured to increase his ardour by emphasising in every way her physical attraction while still keeping him at arm's length. She was successful. But she had to own that she found the young man very captivating; his cuffs were so extremely beautiful; so was his fair curled moustache cloven in the middle; his soft blue eyes, his easy good nature. Yes, she liked everything about him. But the thing she liked best, his greatest charm, was his money. Every gulden of it acted on her as a magnet. Guurt understood thoroughly how to excite him! She could make her every physical beauty tell, till he was beside himself with desire; only he could not yet screw his courage up to the point of marrying her.

Now she flirted with the young fellows in Wiereland and Duinkijk, and with the clerks in the Government office, till he was mad with jealousy. She used the others simply to draw the one man on; to show him she was displeased, to show that she had many suitors. Like a village Carmen, rustic but full of a rude cunning, she had drawn on young Jan Grint the market gardener's son, till she had completely turned his head; then when he became serious had shown him the door. Jan wrote letters full of lover's nonsense; she was his first sweetheart, he would cut off his hands if only she would have him, and so on. Guurt was not thinking of Jan at all. She smiled; she walked with him, if the rich one was near to see; but Jan Grint was a clodhopper and must not touch her with one of his dirty paws. Jan was attractive enough with his coal-black hair and bright dark eyes; but her head was full of the idea that she had got to be a lady, and rich, rich, rich. Everything and everybody that stood in her way she would thrust aside.

As for her family, she didn't care a rap for them! She had never known a strong affection for any one. Dirk was a tippler; so was Piet. Brutalised, stunted by toil like uncomprehending beasts of burden, the brothers and the sister saw in each other only coarse appetites and lusts. Guurt regarded the two young men only as sots, fornicators, gamblers. The *toiler* side of their nature had no meaning for her. Nor did she care for her father. He had never said a loving word to her in his life. His thoughts were a sealed book. Her mother was just an imbecile, everlastingly crying without knowing why. Only for Kees the poacher had the girl a liking; chiefly because he did not strike her as did Dirk and Piet. No, no: if she wanted to make anything of herself, she must marry a gentleman. Once married she would care for nobody, she'd be a lady. She'd live in the town, and she'd keep the man well under her thumb.

And then, if you please, Guurt, you'll have servants of your own! was the refrain with which her meditations always ended.

Meanwhile, no pranks like those of the other girls! No walking alone with him in dark lanes, no sitting about behind bushes. If once you gave yourself away, he'll be off. You may whistle for him but you'll never bring him back.

A respectable girl was Guurt Hassel; respectable she must remain.

CHAPTER III

I

NEXT morning at ten o'clock old Gerrit was at the gate of Jonkheer van Ouwenaar's country place to attend the sale of timber and brushwood. Through the alleys of the wood and past the nobleman's ugly castellated mansion the small market gardeners of Wiereland and its neighbourhood came singly and in groups. They chaffed each other sardonically on being given the free run of the private grounds as if friends of the haughty Jonkheer van Ouwenaar. Two of them grumbled noisily that such a cold raw day had been selected for their "invitation"—irony of poor devils who felt their poverty only too keenly. Now, as purchasers, they could stump about where they would, their wooden shoes depositing clods of earth and mud on the trim paths; but in the summer, when the alleys of this self-same wood seemed full of a golden vapour and everything quivered in the sunlight glow, they must keep at a respectful distance, stiffly-worded notice boards warning them off the shady recesses, whose beauties were reserved for their betters.

Like hungry animals seeking their prey, the market gardeners crept and clattered through the underwood. Their dark figures looked dismal in the grey of the winter morning. They greeted each other with grim peasant jests; smoking, chewing, shivering, their hands in their pockets, they bustled hither and thither. The brushwood was stacked in numbered lots ready for the sale, rows of barked saplings dividing the lots. The peasants, stooping and creeping about, kept meeting each other and separating again as they made their way through the thick undergrowths and over the rough hummocky ground. Now and then a yell would come from some one slashed in the face by the recoil of the springy branches forced aside by the man in front of him. They were in a hurry to examine all the lots before the sale should begin. Hassel walked with Taffer, the latter one of the smaller gardeners, who had once been caught poaching on the great man's land, and was consequently not permitted to buy any of the wood. He had come to look on only. Near him limped lame Karner, formerly a specialist who raised new varieties of peas and beans. Neither was he allowed to buy; for he had not yet paid for the last two years' purchases. He had complained bitterly to the notary of the prohibition; spoke of his bad year, his crops ruined by the game, the rabbits, the insects, the mice, the cold winds, the soaking rains. His newly broken bit of land was a failure owing to the peat; every one in the place, he declared, knew him for a sober man! He might have spared his breath. The notary would not give him credit. For the Jonkheer held his agent responsible for the money, and he must pay it in whether the purchasers had paid or not. Karner knew this was the case, and that the agent had often been cheated by the gardeners, who had left wood on his hands, and had gone off and dealt elsewhere once he had given them credit. "But bring a couple of sureties," said the notary, "and I will consider the matter." So Karner was now hobbling about trying to find some one to go surety for him. First he tried Hassel, but was met by a flat refusal. Now the notary and his clerk were standing on a mound at the corner of two of the alleys, and were evidently going to begin the sale. There was no time to spare: he must find somebody!

He hurried to Wipper, one of the bigger men, a Roman Catholic, who with pious hands plucked the bread out of the mouths of the little ones. Karner found no help in that quarter. Breathlessly he implored Wipper to be his surety for just a couple of gulden's worth of wood for this one year. Wipper put on an air of righteous indignation, inwardly flattered that the miserable heretic should come begging to him.

"That's good!" he said in the swelling sing-song common in Wiereland; "what does your business matter to me? Surety for old Buttermilk? I like that! Go to Geldorp! he's the man with money to throw away!"

Karner peered anxiously through the branches to see if the sale had begun. The notary was not visible. Clearly there was no help in Wipper—the bloodsucker, the thief—rolling in money and not willing to hazard two guldens! Anxiously he scanned the faces of the peasants as they passed him. Whom could he ask? His eye fell on Kees Hassel, the poacher. Kees was the man to help, if only he had any money himself! But he was poor as a church mouse, and every one knew it. The peasants waited beside the first lot, gossiping and chaffing each other. Barend Swart had dislodged a hedgehog from its lair among the leaves.

"Look, fellows!" he shouted. "Look!"

Old Koo Bergert thought they would tease the creature.

"Let the beastie alone," he said, "let it alone! They're fine mousers! Let the poor little thing alone!"

"It's a lazy beggar," said Barend; "why doesn't it run away? I'm blessed if I can see its snout! Look here! a bit of a dig in its back—Hallo! what a mug! just like the priest in Peter Street!"

This was meant for Koo; for Barend was a hot Protestant and fond of his gibe. Koo irritated him with his sanctimonious "Let the beastie alone." Barend was not going to hurt the brute;—hadn't he once seen Koo himself so angry with his dog that he had squeezed its poor paw in the door just for cruelty!

On all sides, through the undergrowth and along the paths, could be heard the voices of the peasants. From a rough, winding, and tangled side-path came old Gerrit with the unhappy Karner, who had not yet got his surety. On all sides he met only derision and insult and the proverbial good counsel of the egoist.

The gardeners were still bending over the hedgehog, the living ball of prickles which Barend, his hand protected by a wisp of leaves, was poking and prodding that he might make it run. The animal straightened itself out and disclosed its little black head, but seemed too much frightened to escape.

"Hi! Barend!" called out a peasant, as he joined the group. "What's that he's got? a polecat?"

"No, no, my friend," said Barend, "it's the priest of Peter Street, look—just look at his snout! like him as two peas. See! he's crossing himself for fright."

"Is he? I'll tell you what, you'll stink of the beast for an hour at least."

"There's nothing doing to-day," he went on, joining Hassel and Karner, who were standing on their toes trying to see over the heads in front, while a number of grumblers stamping hard with their numbed feet, asked crossly if the sale was never going to begin.

"There's nothing worth having," said Reldering again, coughing as he spoke, "it's all naked stuff, alder. What's the good of that? no side twigs. All too thick or too thin. Cursed naked stuff."

"Wouldn't take it as a gift, I suppose," said Hassel with an ironical grin.

"Of course it's cut on purpose for you," sneered Barend.

"Devil thank them then," grumbled Reldering. "Five per cent. for credit, and ten per cent. commission to the notary, that's what we poor devils have to pay!"

"It's always been the same," said a little man in a tone of great respect for the powers that be, "and Mr. Notary has to pay two and a half per cent. to Government."

"Hark at the sneak, preaching to us! You skunk! If the Jonkheer sees you, he'll have you chucked out of the gate."

"Not he! Not he!" cried the little man, red as a turkey cock, "my money's as good as yours any day."

"Pfui! Pfui! miserable atomy!" said Barend, curling his lip at the little Papist. Then turning to the others he went on, "Seen Lieshout of Dunke Lane? He's digging now—without a pound of manure on his land—He's as poor as a louse. Nothing to eat and not a cent for manure, and working himself to death digging; fifteen acres and not a barrowful of dung!"

"What'll you give for his next crop?" said Kwaker, "a quarter per rod? I wouldn't give a cent. Dear dung, cheap crop, eh?"

"It's his own fault," said Koo Bergert quietly, spitting out his tobacco juice and looking at the ground, "he drinks."

"That's just like you Papists," burst out Barend; "his own fault is it, you cur? And hasn't the notary got him tied up over the bits of money he's advanced him? Hasn't Doctor Troost been at his heels for three years? Has he been able to pay? And hasn't the doctor sneaked a mortgage on his little bit of ground, so as to bleed him dry? He's a scoundrel that doctor, a vampire. Sucking the blood out of every one round here! Got everybody under his thumb, he and the notary! His own fault, you say? If he drinks, it's because he's driven to it."

Barend spoke loud and furiously. All this had long been smothered in his breast and he had not dared to utter it. Now he could not help bursting forth and telling his mind to the sneaking Papist.

"His own fault, his own fault," droned the red-faced Koo again, "he's drinking up his bread and butter."

"His own fault be damned!" roared Barend, red also; "I suppose there's never any drinking among you fellows! Mum's the word if it's one of you. But if it's a wicked Protestant then it's his own fault! I say there's lots of you also who can't dung your land and who drink like sponges. What's that you say, Reldering? what's that?"

"I say let the sneak talk—the dog fish! Papists may drink as they like so long as they take off their hats to the church. *From* the church,—*to* the tavern—that's their road."

Barend calmed down at this. His hands still protected with leaves he stooped to the hedgehog and gave it another push, which his wrath and agitation made more violent than he intended. The hedgehog again unrolled and showed its ape-like little face flecked with black spots. Barend kicked it gently back to its nest of leaves and threw more over it to wrap it up warmly against the cold.

Now the notary's voice with its would-be aristocratic drawl was suddenly heard, and his silvery grey hair gleamed through the thicket.

"He's got to business," said Hassel, advancing, "see, the Jonkheer van Ouwenaar's with him."

"Ugh! but it's cold!" grunted one of the peasants, beating his chest with his arms like a cabman.

"I'm cold as a stone," said another; "let's stay in the wood; it's warmer."

"What a set of mollycoddles you are," came from a third as a troop clattered along the path, with arms swinging. The notary's voice was weak and husky; he followed the string of peasants with Jonkheer van Ouwenaar; then, attended by a young clerk, went round summoning the buyers; the gardeners all came jumping and stumbling over the rough ground like a flock of black geese. The notary had a communication to make, and the men stood round him in a ring to listen. In black broadcloth, surrounded by poor devils in cotton and fustian, he gesticulated with gloved hands, addressing his audience in a tone of false camaraderie, now and then smiling at the Jonkheer and shrugging his shoulders, as if to say, We understand each other. The Jonkheer stood quietly by, with his air of aristocratic aloofness. The peasants suggested a thicket of human saplings, with their tall thin frames, their anæmic complexions, their faces seamed, their bodies gnarled by incessant toil. The notary read the conditions of sale. The peasants pressed up a little closer, and the Jonkheer backed a step or two with a slight lifting of his small blond moustache, that he might get away from the close stuffy smell of the mud and sweat stained garments; a plain intimation to the crowd that they must keep their distance.

"Now, my friends," said the notary patronisingly, "you know the conditions; payment next August, five per cent. for the cutting, ten per cent. for us."

"Got to pay, have we?" shouted a wag from among the peasants; "that's something new. There never was anything said about that!"

The notary smiled graciously, and nodded to his clerk who was to conduct the auction, a fellow with a bullet head, and cunning, swift, darting eyes, who had been servilely waiting for the signal. His expression and the nervous movements of his hands suggested the cringing and tail-wagging of a whipped cur.

A board with Lot I painted on it in tar was now displayed, and the whole throng started forth, hurrying, clambering, pushing each other as they made their way through the underwood, each man anxious to get first to Lot I and secure a place close to the auctioneer. Assembled round the board marking the Lot, they formed a circle of strangely contrasted faces, all, however, pinched and wizened with the cold. At the outside only eagerly thrust out heads could be seen. On every face was the rapt look of the bargain hunter; many seemed discontented and hostile, many more were worn and deeply seamed. Some were bearded, some quite smooth, some pock-marked, some thin and sharp-featured; some belonged to mockers, some to pious simpletons. There were Shakspere foreheads, Mirabeau noses, Dante chins, sharp, stern, devout. There were hyæna jaws, bull-dog mouths, ill-shaven upper lips surrounded by lines suggestive of an angry baboon.

In a mechanical sing-song, the clerk began—

"Now, friends, what shall I say for this lot? twelve? Twelve is bid. Twelve, thirteen, fourteen—fourteen is bid: fourteen, fifteen, sixteen—sixteen is bid: seventeen, eighteen—eighteen—eighteen is bid: eighteen. Have you all done? For the first time, the second time—for the third time—have you all done at eighteen?"

And he looked round the circle, lest he should have missed a nod from some one at the back or on the path outside. The last bid had been that of a market gardener named Van Oever, who now swaggered up to the clerk to get his bidding-fee of a quarter gulden.

The lot was not yet sold, however. The auctioneer knew his employer would not be satisfied with the price: so he bid ten gulden above Van Oever and then bid downwards, slowly looking round the circle after naming each figure to see if the lot was claimed.

"Still twenty quarters above Van Oever; nineteen, eighteen, seventeen, sixteen, fifteen, fourteen, thirteen, twelve, eleven!"

Then lengthening the pauses amid breathless silence, "Ten—nine—eight——"

"Mine!" called out a hoarse voice from the back, behind the auctioneer.

"Ijzerman's lot, and good luck to him!" said the clerk, without looking round, having recognised the voice.

The notary, without interrupting his talk with the Jonkheer, jotted down name and price in his notebook; then at a comfortable distance followed the little procession of peasants to Lot II.

In the group were now seen two or three ragged itinerant vendors ostensibly with baskets of cakes, in each of which, however, was a jar of gin wrapped up in red cloth and some glasses. On the occasion of the annual Brushwood Sale, the Jonkheer and the notary were conveniently shortsighted. One of the cake-sellers, a ragged fellow with a rascally countenance, followed close on the heels of the troop of peasants, drumming on his box to attract their attention. The branches, pushed aside by the men who preceded him, swept back and slashed his face, which he could not protect, both his hands being engaged. With muttered curses and grunts of pain, he made his way, calling incessantly and gesticulating to attract the peasants and induce them to throw for cakes—or rather for gin.

"Play up! Play up! Six throws for twopence, under or over! Play up! Under nine or over twelve! Play up!"

As he scrambled over the hummocks and across the rough tracks of the forest at the rear of the procession, he was careful to exhibit the mouth of the gin jar; sure that its attractions would prove irresistible once it was really seen, he knelt on the muddy ground and divested the jar of its protecting cloth. Then passing with it in and out among the peasants, paying special attention to those who as highest bidders had received the customary *plot geld* quarter gulden from the notary, he strove to outdo his rivals in thumping his box and rattling his dice.

"Sweet cakes! sweet cakes! under or over! Play up! play up!"

For hours the peasants crowded round the notary's clerk, tramping with him hither and thither through the wood from lot to lot in the grey chill of the December air. His raucous voice seemed tireless. After each sale he rattled the twenty-five-cent pieces in his pocket and graciously handed out one to the highest bidder, who was always prompt in claiming it. His shabby black overcoat was buttoned tight across his chest. His "For the first—the second—the third time—" struck the ear with increasing sharpness. Now and then he rubbed his throat; at the opening of the bidding for each lot his "Now, friends, how much shall I say?" resounded in harsh, raven-like tones far and wide through the wood.

The circle of buyers had grown smaller; but cries were still heard round the cake and gin sellers; and thirsty folk would still leave the ring, take a hasty throw at the dice, and gulp down the prize with much smacking of the lips.

The dull December gloom deepened, and the company still tramped about; sometimes they came to little clearings in the wood, where the mist seemed to hang thicker and heavier, sometimes to mossy paths which struck away through the grey-brown brushwood.

Silence had descended on the little procession of peasants as they marched in dull resignation with muffled beat of wooden shoes on the soft ground, and clatter of wood on wood as ditches were crossed by small plank bridges. Behind the thinly-clad, blue-faced peasants came the Jonkheer and the notary talking together much at their ease.

Suddenly one of the peasants cried out angrily, "He *is* a good chap this Jonkheer!—neither a bite nor a sup——"

"That's it!" said his neighbour. "At Roomela when there's a sale they give you bread and coffee. This fellow says to himself, 'Feed a pack of dirty gardeners? No, thank you!'"

"Well, then, why don't you buy your wood at Roomela?" sneered a third.

"I try to, but they haven't got exactly what I want."

"Well, look at the notary. He hasn't had anything either. He has to run round as well as we."

"That's a lie! He gets a bellyfull! He always has partridges and long-ears sent him."

"I believe you! But this Jonkheer's a mean chap; we always used to have coffee. The head gardener gave it to us. But one fine day the Jonkheer came round and saw us all sitting and eating in the potting shed, so now, this year, not a scrap of anything!"

The conversation was interrupted by the clerk, who was in a hurry to finish. There were still thirty lots to be disposed of.

Old Hassel walked just behind Notary Breemsma, who turned now and then to address him with a friendly remark, or to make some joke about his shiny old green felt hat, which, with its rim cut clean off, fitted close to his silvery head and pressed his grey locks tight round his neck. Suddenly Gerrit saw the notary's handsome gold pencil-case drop unperceived from its owner's gloved hand, while he was engrossed in talk with the Jonkheer. Hassel, who had gazed at the pretty thing for two hours with greedy eyes, had long lost all interest in the sale and hardly remembered why he had come to it. He saw the pencil-case fall on a patch of sand between the damp bushes and the leaf-strewn path. He pretended to look for it, trembling with joy as he pressed his heavy shoe on the spot where he knew it lay, and contrived to hide it among the leaves just before the notary observed its loss. The tall thin Jonkheer walked on, and presently halted at the junction of two paths, tapping a sapling with his cane. Finding himself alone he looked back in surprised annoyance, wondering why the notary had loitered. Old Gerrit, trembling with joy and with fear, joined energetically in the search, but made a sudden grab under his foot and transferred a handful of sandy mud to his greatcoat pocket. With lightning speed his fingers probed the sandy mass. Yes, he had it! It was there, long, slender, hard.

"It's done! It's done!" thought Gerrit, hardly able to contain himself. His voice shaking, he asked Breemsma if he had found the treasure, then scraped the ground close to where the notary stood unwilling to dirty his hands.

"Thank you, Hassel, thank you very much," said the notary, pleased by his zeal. "The devil! I thought I could lay my hand on it in a second!"

"Odd how things hide themselves!" said old Gerrit, stooping, raking with his fingers, rubbing down clods of wet earth into mud, with great show of zeal; his heart meanwhile thumping with joy at his successful capture of the prize.

The pencil-case could not be found. The notary himself had searched in the wet earth, after which he rubbed his dirty fingers on the branches with a look of keen disgust and annoyance. He was sensitive to the Jonkheer's impatience. Van Ouwenaar would not wait; and far in front the clerk who was anxious to get home shouted in a voice the worse for wear—

"Thirteen—thirteen is bid—fourteen—and twenty quarters more——"

Breemsma was angry; with the ground, the underwood, the pencil, the wet dirty earth. But what angered him most of all was the humiliating brutally contemptuous look on the face of the Jonkheer. He was a beast to point out his notary's inferiority, before all those wretched peasants! Breemsma must get on, or the Jonkheer would show him the rough side of his tongue, as he had done once before when he had been half an hour late at a sale. He recollected a rain of insults on that occasion while the peasants had stood round grinning, and the recollection was not pleasant. A cursed nuisance to lose his gold pencil-case. Nor was there any one he could blame for it! He must go on as if nothing had happened, laughing and capping stories with the Jonkheer.

Otherwise he would certainly lose his client. Half a dozen of his dear professional colleagues were anxious to step into his place. He must give up the search.

Hassel read what was passing in the notary's mind, and said slowly, as if relishing each traitorous word—

"If you leave this spot, it means losing the thing altogether." The notary smiled uneasily and hurried away, his face flushed with stooping, to join the haughty Jonkheer at the tail of the peasants' procession.

II

When Hassel said there was nothing he required in the lots still to be sold, he came away with two other of the gardeners by a short cut out of the wood. After half an hour's scrambling through the undergrowth and across wet sandy ground, he was breathless and weary. They came out at Wiereland harbour. Groups of idle or unemployed persons stood at the street corners or before the public-houses. Among them Gerrit saw his son Kees, the poacher. The old man would have liked to stone the fellow, so irritated was he at sight of his hollow cheeks. Already to-day he had come across him at the sale. Bah! The broad quay looked dreary and colourless, its rows of bare melancholy trees vaguely reflected in the dark and muddy water. Behind the quay ran the railway embankment, cutting off the view of the wide-stretching Wiereland *polder*.

The little harbour seemed asleep; a few boats and barges lay against the quay wall, their reds and greens inconspicuous in the wintry twilight. Old Gerrit made his way into one of the little drink shops, and swallowed silently and at a gulp a glass of sugared schnaps. Then he hurried homewards full of joyful excitement, fingering in his pocket the pencil which he had not yet ventured to draw forth.

Guurt had put her father's dinner in his bed to keep warm. He sat down to it the moment he got in. His wife's imbecile face put him out of temper. She sat without seeing him, staring vacantly out of the window, at the cobbled pavement, at a dirty child who clattered by in wooden shoes, at a draggled hen wandering aimlessly up the road, at a passing pedlar, and farther away at the deserted garden with its broken fence, dull yellow haystacks and patches of recently dug ground. Gerrit soothed his irritation by remembering his prize and the exciting incident of its capture. He sat over his food till four o'clock, then smoked pipe after pipe in his arm-chair.

Piet and Dirk came noisily in from the fields shivering with cold. They lingered by the kitchen fire at the back of the house, peering through a small window which gave upon Willemae's smithy in Bikker Street. Their mother and sister sat with them, for it was the winter custom in Wiereland to sit round the kitchen fire till the half-past five supper, and thus to economise candles.

In the warm dusk the faces of Vrouw Hassel and of Guurt were every now and then illuminated by a red glow, as the smithy fire, blown into a blaze, sent a quivering glare on the opposite roofs and gables till the tumbledown cottages seemed on fire, the glare rising, falling, vanishing, and casting weird shadows on the little street. At times figures stepped out of the side streets into the glow and at once assumed a Mephistophelian leer as the red light played on faces and hands. Quite suddenly the figures vanished as they passed out of the glare. Presently the fire would die down, and for a time the little street would be enshrouded in the colourless gloom of the winter evening. Guurt could not stop watching for the glow to light up the blacksmith's head as the bellows roared at their work. She heard the muffled sound of his hammering on horse shoe or glowing tyre. She delighted in the sparks and shafts of light that played round the figures of his assistants. Then all melted again with darkness, as the forge came to its rest. In the faint and flickering afterglow she could see only vague forms flitting about among wheels, parts of waggons, iron implements, outlined in black by the falling darkness.

Vrouw Hassel saw nothing, though she stared into the street; the spasmodic glow gave to her vacant countenance, to her thin hand pressed against her mouth, an expression of terror. Guurt, when the ruddy brightness played on her golden hair and delicate features, was like a dancer in a fairy ballet, or like Elsa singing in the limelight. Then the vision of the two women's heads, the vision of monstrous ugliness and of strange, scarce earthly beauty, would be swallowed up by the black darkness of the little room. The cuckoo clock ticked loudly on the mantelpiece. When the smithy fire had died down the vague form of the smith could still be seen working at his anvil by the light of a feeble jet of gas.

Mother Hassel was very quiet to-day. Her head was a little clearer, and she was able to realise her own suffering; suffering she must bear alone, for none of those about her could understand it. She had always had good health; though never a clever woman, she had been a good manager and housewife. Two years ago, however, she had begun to feel a strange, crushing oppression in her head, as if it were enclosed by burning bands; sometimes what seemed fiery darts would pierce her brow till her whole brain felt on fire. She grew nervous and tearful. Her memory failed; she forgot everything, even the simplest household duties. No one believed in or understood her suffering. Guurt cared for no one but herself, as Vrouw Hassel very well knew. The sons were coarse louts who at all times had treated their mother with insult. But Gerrit her husband was the worst. He was intolerably cruel; malignant, devilish. He beat her often, but secretly, anxious that the neighbours should not know it. She had no notion what was the horrible thing which was afflicting her. Generally she could not think at all; her head felt so heavy, so thick, sometimes as of full of water, always oppressed and tight.

Now she sat muttering to herself, burning pressure in her brain. A sob rose in her throat but she mastered it, afraid of crying aloud lest she should he abused and sworn at. She lived in constant apprehension of an angry voice, a push, a blow. At this very moment she was expecting a blow to descend out of the darkness on her poor muddled head. So keenly she expected it, that its not coming surprised her from her vacant staring with momentary consciousness. But the heavy cloud quickly settled down on her again, and she heard what was going on around her without being fully aware of it, as in the condition which precedes sleep. Uncomprehended pain gnawed her. She knew uneasily that things were wrong, that she would go on forgetting and that she could not help it. She dreaded Guurt's spitefulness, her husband's furious outbreaks. She never knew what it was they wanted her to do. She was in a condition of perpetual fear. When they struck her, she soon forgot the blow, but it left her in a state of painful uneasiness and nervous misery. She had in her brain an unintermittent restlessness and excitement, like that following the effort to recollect a well-known name, which is on the tip of the tongue, which is ringing through the ears, yet will not be remembered. For two years this had been going on; month by month she had grown worse, more dizzy, more forgetful, more painfully uneasy, less able to explain her uneasiness. The doctor was called in. He ran up a long bill and sent numberless bottles from his dispensary. A young consultant was summoned, and the two expressed their want of comprehension of the case in a great many long words. The consultant muttered something about *dementia*, but when Gerrit asked what that might be, he shrugged his shoulders, and said only "You must have patience." So far, they had almost refused her the medicines, her family believing little in the reality of her illness.

The poor thing made the greatest exertions to keep anything of importance in her memory. She dug, she chiselled it into her brain, desperately, passionately, breaking out in perspiration all over as she struggled to keep fast hold of it. Yes, yes! she had it still! It was there still. But gradually the effort of attention would relax, her thoughts would wander; the important thing would slip out of her mind leaving no trace. She could recall nothing about it; her head swam, heat and oppression returned. At last her will itself relaxed; there was nothing left but dull and gnawing misery, then suddenly athwart the darkness which had closed down upon her, she would hear a shout, see an angry face, a fist shaken at her, curses would ring in her ears, her son's voice or her husband's roar in furious abuse of the unhappy creature who had neglected this or that of her obvious duty. She could remember nothing; it all seemed new to her, and she realised painfully that once again her memory had played her false. As time went on she asked with ever-increasing despair, what would happen if all this continued? She was unable to defend herself, unable to explain. When those furious figures stood round her, storming, shaking their fists, she could only stare fixedly, feeling suffocated, smothered; shuddering at each reproach; as if she were an old and helpless rat harried and tormented through the bars of a prison.

This afternoon, sitting in her corner in the twilight, she felt slightly calmer. For the moment, no one was scolding; the gathering darkness seemed somehow a protection. Things had gone better to-day. She had remembered more, she had felt clearer in her head, she had resolved to dismiss the doctor and cure herself; she had looked after the food and the household management. Now she felt almost happy.

Stillness reigned in the close dark kitchen. The smithy was silent. Dirk and Piet snored in their chairs. Guurt sat motionless thinking over a jaunt she had had with two of the Government clerks, very young, very smart, who had impressed her deeply. Appointments with these young fellows belonged to her plan of campaign; she wanted to stir up jealousy in the heart of the man who was the real object of her pursuit. Her visits to the Wiereland Harmonic Society or the theatre, her evening strolls with her admirers through the market gardens and their dark surrounding lanes were all part of her game. If she exposed herself to Wiereland gossip, what matter? She knew what she was about. She had a cool head and would never throw herself away.

Old Gerrit stumped about between the granary and the byre. "Hi! Guurt! the lamp!" he shouted, his voice echoing through the darkness, among the dim half slumbering forms of

Vrouw Hassel and her children. Guurt lighted the lamp at once and placed it over the stove near the byre, disappearing again quickly. It was pleasant sitting there in the dark, building castles in the air!

Gerrit poked the fire in the stove which stood on the flagged path leading from the cow-shed to the back room. A blue flame flickered and sputtered among the twigs making darkness visible in the vast, cavern-like stall, lighted only by small round windows high up and now lost in the twilight.

Old Gerrit had to milk the cows, his only regular evening work. He brought an armful of hay and spread it under the heads of the animals in the stall. The dark chill emptiness of the loft whence he had fetched the hay was detestable and even alarming to him; but in the warm cow-shed with its mingled odours he felt comfortable and at home. The byre had been built for and had once contained twenty cows; now owing to lack of pasture the stock was reduced to two.

Dirk came slowly from the kitchen, yawning, his hands in his pockets.

"Did you get anything at the sale, father?" he asked, lazily watching as the old man stamped backwards and forwards.

"Nothing worth getting. Poor stuff. Alder."

"That all?" Dirk stretched himself and yawned again, then leaned against the wall under the lamp, his big form faintly outlined in the yellow mist which made its way into the stall by the round windows.

Guurt was at the pump, which also was on the pavement near the stove. Ring! ring! ring! went her wooden shoes on the flags, the pump handle rattled, the water swished as it streamed into her bucket. She stood close to the fire; now her hand, now her cheek, now a fold of her petticoat, lit up by the red glow. Feeble lamplight shone on the gutter of the stall and on the cows, casting thin camel-like shadows on the wall. From the gutter, the pathway, the stall, the barrow, came the stink of dung. Guurt went away, and quiet fell with the cessation of pumping and the clattering of *sabots*.

Gerrit had brought the milking-stool, and placed it between the warm bodies of the two cows, gently patting their hindquarters as he did so. A pleased lowing resounded softly, mournfully, through the shadow. One of the cows turned her head, the other gently pushed it away. There was an undertone of quiet munching and chewing, which sometimes ceased suddenly, and after a minute went on again, as the sound of a mower's scythe might come to a listener through the gloaming.

Gerrit lazily fastened the hobble round the first cow's hind legs and took his seat on the stool, the milk pail held tight between his knees. Soon the sharp singing note of the milk striking the inside of the pail was heard. Piet had come and was leaning against the wall beside his brother. He wanted a couple of glasses of the new milk. The shadow of old Gerrit's profile was clear cut upon the cow's flank. As he bent farther over to reach the teats, and held his bucket more tilted to catch the milk, his shadow vanished or was grotesquely elongated on the animal's hindquarter. The second cow stood very close looking round now and then, in pleased anticipation of her own milking.

At last the old man had finished his task. He rose stiffly from the milking-stool and rinsed the dirt off his hands in the warm milk. Dirk and Piet began a rough horse-play, sparring, closing with each other, breaking away, and pursuing up and down the vast, dim cow-shed, the little lamp casting monstrous shadows of huge heads, noses, Goliath hands on the brown walls. At last they stopped, out of breath.

"You're a pair of idiot children," said old Gerrit angrily. "Get the bucket and clear away some of this mess. The gutter's choked up. D'ye hear?"

Piet was laughing with Guurt as she worked hurriedly.

"Bother the old fool and his grumbling! There's time enough to-morrow," he said, leaping about the byre again. Dirk, however, grim and unsmiling, refused to join him.

Guurt went back to the pump, and Piet, nearly overturning the lamp, made a fresh attack on his brother, who pushed him away, throwing him violently against the wall. Then Piet idly followed Guurt to her washing-up.

On wintry evenings, when these young folk had no work nor any place to which they could go for drinking or dicing, they were puzzled to pass the time. They would stand about, yawning, stretching, smoking, for hours. The ammoniacal vapours of the byre, the scent of hay, and of the warm, sweet breath of the cows had some stimulating effect which prompted the rough horse-play. The animal nature of the young men seemed unconsciously to gain the upper hand in the presence of the unrestrained self-expression of the brutes.

"That's a nice game you're playing on your young man, Gad-about," said Piet. "I suppose you're trying him. Oh, I saw you out with that pasty-face clerk chap!"

"That *is* a lie!" cried Guurt, scrubbing noisily.

"It's God's truth."

"I say it's a lie. I never went out with him! I never did!"

"What's the good of making a row? You know you keep a dozen fellows on hand."

"You never saw me with him! Never! never and never!" screamed the girl, advancing towards her brother, scrubbing-brush in hand, one arm akimbo, her hair falling in disorder over her face. Pausing to take breath she went on more quietly, "No, no, Pietje, you're mistaken—quite mistaken. It was Annie you saw. She's a nice one—she is—oh, a minx! You know she's in an insurance, and if her father—beastly old boozer as she calls him——"

"We've heard all that before," interrupted Piet.

Guurt, however, talked on about Annie, while Piet watched his father out of the corner of his eye, and Dirk leaned silently against the wall. When the girl had talked herself out, Piet resumed where he had left off.

"You lark about too much—you with your doll's face. You'll never get a husband! You'll die an old maid. You've too many chaps on your string, making fools of them all. It don't pay."

"I say you're lying!" cried Guurt, again turning on him from the sink, where she had been stooping over her washing.

"Gently! gently! Ha, ha! look at this very proper young woman! A different fellow on every finger, and making fools of them all! Jesus! Dirk, you're showing a nice mug! Are you a polecat in a trap?"

"Let her alone," grunted Dirk, "she don't hurt you. Let her be."

Old Gerrit, much pleased with himself, had ended his milking. Now there was nothing to do for the rest of the evening, and he had that pencil-case safe and sound. The cows snuffed and tossed the hay, seeking the linseed cake which they got at this hour. Dirk brought it from the store near the mangels in the granary. Gerrit broke it up, put a few morsels in the beasts' slobbering mouths, and dropped the rest among the hay, watching them till they had found it. When the cake was eaten he cut thick white slices of mangel and dropped these also in the manger. Then he sat watching the creatures feed, but not thinking of them. He was again living through the pleasure of finding the pencil. He remembered the whole scene. How foolish the notary had looked! How cleverly he had snapped up the treasure with the handful of sand and leaves!

Guurt brought the milk-pans, their glaze shining in the lamp-light. She strained the milk into them from the pail. The cat crept up, put her forepaws on the rim of the pan, and lapped nervously, shrinking and looking round at every sound. On the wainscot the lamp threw immense black shadows of her whiskers and her pointed ears.

III

It was half-past five by the clock in the Hassels' living-room. Mother and daughter had cut great chunks of rye bread and thrown them, with cheese, on the bare table. The coffee boiled over. A little oil lamp sputtered and stank. Chairs were pulled up noisily, grace said, then each crumbled his lump of bread in the palms of his hands. Vrouw Hassel poured out the coffee.

Coffee was her only solace. The doctor had forbidden her to drink it, but she had forgotten that. She must have her coffee! She drank and drank all day—trying, it seemed, with the hot sweet liquor to wash away the evil thing which had settled down upon her. She would drink thirty cups a day. Nothing so comforted her, so dulled the edge of her misery. The little white coffee-pot, with its brown stains all down its sides, and its bottom blackened by the flame, stood all day over the reeking lamp. The pot was filled and refilled with water, giving at each filling a weaker, paler, muddier brew. Then more coffee was thrown in. Thus coffee was made everywhere in Wiereland; in every gardener's or labourer's cottage stood the smoky little lamp with the stained and blackened coffee-pot.

"Give us some more!" growled Piet, thumping his cup on the table, and shoving it towards Guurt.

She laughed, joking him coarsely on his greed, and filling his cup to overflowing.

No sound was heard but the ticking of the timepiece and the unmannerly guzzling and gobbling. A few low noises came from the cow-shed; the rattle of a chain, the faint, pleasurable gasps of chewing the cud. The atmosphere of the stove-warmed room was drowsy: there was winter sleepiness in the swing of the pendulum, the ticking of the cuckoo clock.

Vrouw Hassel sat quiet and lonely, huddled in her chair, her dirty gown much creased. Dull grizzled hair straggled in wisps over her faded, expressionless, grey face. She gulped down mouthfuls of coffee, and aimlessly fingered the corners of her dirty apron. Suddenly tears glistened in the bloodshot eyes, as if lime had gone into them. Lines of anxiety and fear appeared round the wide, thin-lipped mouth—always melancholy and overhung by flabby and wrinkled cheeks. The woman seemed endeavouring vainly to follow what was going on round her, to keep in her mind the words which she dully heard. Her children were again scolding her for something she had forgotten. The most vociferous was Guurt: in her own bounding, full-blooded youth and health she had no feeling for her mother's suffering.

Vrouw Hassel was rudely shaken out of her short-lived cheerfulness. At once her sight and hearing weakened: she could take nothing in. The words she heard seemed to run together in her head: she was all on edge with apprehension. She was conscious only of a dull, confused murmur of voices: behind it a shrill singing deep in her own ears. Every few minutes she swallowed sups of the coffee which was her only comfort, her one friend who never shouted at her, never abused or frightened her.

Again the room settled down to drowsy peace. The furniture, though poor, was neat and well polished. On the mantelpiece was a border of light red stuff, fixed in its place by copper nails. The stove was black-leaded; the floor black also, but with trodden coal dust. At the end of the room was a mahogany linen cupboard, its surface red-brown and glistening. The walls were yellow, hung with little ornaments made out of hair, and chromos representing kings and queens in magnificent furs, blue Swiss lakes, and other gay subjects popular with the class to which the Hassels belonged. Beside the stove and the coal-scuttle was a copper standard with fork, tongs, and shovel, all highly polished and apparently contemptuous of the sooty work-a-day poker which had been thrown on a chair. A little table, fringed with crochet work and covered with photographs, stood in a corner of the low-raftered room: just behind Vrouw Hassel was a caged turtle dove which kept up an incessant cooing like the distant sobbing of a child, the cage swaying as its inmate hopped about. The cooing stopped, the bird put its head under its wing, and was about to roost, when Guurt suddenly pulled the cage into the light and waked it up. The mournful little sob recommenced—"Koekeroekoe, koekeroekoe." Guurt thrust a thick finger through the bars and scratched the dove's neck, the feathers of which had a green and violet sheen. The creature's eye brightened with pleasure; putting its head on one side as if listening, it began again its sad "Koekeroekoe! koekeroekoe!" till the girl pushed away the cage so suddenly that the bird cowered in a corner, its little wine-red eyes fixed with terror. Old Gerrit was asking his daughter a question in a tone of the greatest awe.

"Have you read anything more about Queen Fillemientje?"

Guurt, automatically filling Dirk's cup, answered with her mouth full, in an unintelligible drawl.

"Now then, clumsy!" said Dirk, jogging her arm. "The cup's running over, don't you see?"

Guurt's attention was absorbed by thoughts of the rich and mighty queen.

"If she gets married, father," she said, "I suppose she'll have children. Will she nurse them herself?"

"Mind what you're doing, do!" shouted Dirk. "You're scalding my foot!"

"I'm not."

"*She* don't care!" grinned Piet.

"Oh, you drive one silly, you two! Mother! you don't know anything about it, do you?"

Vrouw Hassel, unaccustomed to questions, started up in terror.

"No, no," she stammered, "I don't know anything about it."

She frowned, vainly trying to remember what Guurt's question had referred to. Ah! she was just as forgetful as ever! The disappointment of this relapse made her weep. But she managed to suppress outward sign of her emotion save for a slight quivering of her wrinkled cheeks.

Violently, Dirk started up, and pushed his chair back to the wall with a noise that set the dove trembling, and made Vrouw Hassel jump nearly out of her chair. He clattered out of the back door and disappeared into the street. Guurt pored over the newspaper, trying to find something about the queen. Hanging over the girl's bed were full twenty portraits of the queen taken at different ages. The mental pictures Guurt formed when she thought of Her Majesty was all gold and jewels and brilliant lights, in the midst of which Wilhelmientje sat perpetually on a lofty throne. Guurt did not understand much of the accounts in the papers, for she was seldom able to grasp the meaning of an ordinary grammatical sentence.

What she read she met in an obstinately unreceptive spirit; it did not fit with her conception of queen and court, consequently had no reality for her. She worshipped riches and luxury, and could see nothing but the glitter of gold. The descriptions in the papers were dull, disappointing, colourless. Still she tried to puzzle them out. She poured more coffee for herself. As she did so her mother's trembling hand pushed her cup over also, begging for more.

Dirk returned and threw himself down by the stove. Old Gerrit stooped over his tobacco jar, slowly filling his pipe and ramming it with his fingers. Guurt crumpled the paper and threw it aside; she couldn't make head or tail of it. She asked merrily—

"Have you heard that rich Duinkijk fellow has shot himself through the head?"

"You don't say so!" cried Gerrit, pulling away at his pipe.

"He has, the butcher told me. Every one's full of it now. He shot himself dead."

"I heard he was broke," said Piet triumphantly.

"What lies people tell!" snapped Guurt.

"A lie? I heard it too!" said Dirk.

"Who did you hear it from?"

"From Kees."

"Kees? Kees?" growled old Gerrit, "the beast! he's been on the booze again—for that matter he's never sober!"

"That's a lie!" shouted Dirk, banging his great fist on the table.

Gerrit pulled away at his pipe in quick nervous puffs, surrounding himself with a cloud of smoke. He made no rejoinder. Dirk looked ugly. It was foolish to have said that about Kees; Dirk would never allow a word against him.

Guurt, tired of quarrels, hurried on with her news.

"That fellow in Bikker Street—the Social Democrat—he and his mother have had to clear out. He's in debt to the butcher, the baker, the shoemaker. They've got to go, bag and baggage. They're to be sold up to-morrow."

"That's the wrong end of the stick," grinned Piet; "he's been going with Mie the mason's daughter. She's big; and he's had a good hiding from her brother, and daren't show his face in the street."

"All a lie!" cried Guurt, clapping her hands. "Mie isn't big, and she's away in service at Amsterdam."

"What does that matter, Sis?" asked Piet teasingly; "does no one ever get in the family way in Amsterdam, eh, innocent?"

"Piet!" whispered Guurt, changing the subject, "take me to the theatre, do! there's such a fine piece on."

"You're mighty polite all of a sudden! Want to get something out of me! not so easy, my girl!"

"I never have any fun! Be a good boy, Piet—take me. There's a murder in it—a frightful one. I love a murder!"

"It's not the sort of piece for you, Guurt; you'd cry."

"I won't cry. I do love a murder. There are fights and every sort of horror. I'll pay for you, Piet! A fight with knives. Geert Grint saw it last year. Now do come! you'll love it! It's called—give me the paper, mother, quick! it's called *Lesaare the neat-herd.* Five acts. The murder's at the inn—the palace watchmen are roused——"

Guurt was dancing, and her tone that of a suppliant. She delighted in horrors. At every Wiereland brawl she was to be seen looking on—in the front row, so to speak. Flowing blood thrilled her with spasms of savage joy. She gloated over each detail of a murder, an accident, a ghost story; the more frightful, the more gruesome, the more gory, the better for her.

But Piet was obdurate. This was a Carnival night; he meant to perambulate the town, larking with the girls, and having many drinks.

"You're a brute," said Guurt. "Very well, I'll go alone."

Dirk sat quite still, his head against the stove pipe. His clothes reeked of dirt and sweat. He smoked quietly. His grim countenance was like that of a sleeping watch-dog. His red lashes, conspicuous in the lamplight, had a fierce and savage air.

Guurt never thought of appealing to him.

IV

Dirk and Piet went out about eight. St. Nicholas had put on white to visit the little town; towards evening snowflakes began to fall from the leaden sky in myriads, settling down silently, and transforming houses and trees as with a magician's wand. The dimly lighted streets were, however, full of holiday-makers. A constant stream of shouting children and loud-voiced elders flowed towards the main street; respectable townsfolk, lively lads and girls, all with their shoulders whitened by the snow, which lay also on the houses and in the streets, deadening all sounds. The grass-grown square before the station was now a vast white sheet, ghostly under the black sky. The far side was ablaze with lighted shop windows displaying brilliant coloured goods, the admiration of troops of children who were unceremoniously pushed about by their elder brothers and sisters. Gangs of shrieking servant girls and gardeners' daughters fled helter-skelter from the snowballers, black imps hurtling white projectiles, who now and then rushed noisily through the crowd scattering it to right and left.

Shouting and violence on the part of boys of all ages shook the little streets out of their winter quiet. Even the town notables sauntered sedately, smiling with indulgent contempt at the bedecked and glaring shops, sometimes stopping to please their children by admiring the dolls which lay prone in their gorgeous attire, the toy furnaces and cooking stoves of burnished copper, the horses' heads resplendent with spangles of silver and gold.

By half-past eight, however, all the gentry had gone indoors; the common people were still in the streets, noisy, out-at-elbows, tipsy, rowdy; the sons and daughters of the market gardeners, the labourers, the rag-tag and bobtail of Wiereland, trampling the white sheet of snow with their clumsy *sabots*, and giving free rein to their animal spirits in horse-play, and coarse, unashamed love-making.

From Cloister Lane, a winding alley which opened on the station square, came the sound of children's voices, singing in chorus; a joyous troop appeared marching in procession, headed by a masked and white-bearded figure of Santa Claus wearing a robe of silver paper decked with red stars and rustling discs of gold. Santa Claus was attended by a boy with blackened face, his eyes picked out in white, grimacing, and snowballing everybody and pretending to be a cannibal. Santa Claus carried a lantern which threw a flickering radiance on the child faces surrounding him, and made dancing shadows on the snow as the little company wound its way between the rows of trees and across the vast whiteness of the square. Detached bands of children carrying torches and beating drums fashioned out of iron pots, came by singing the carol of the Three Kings—

"Three Kings! Three Kings!
List to what your suppliant sings—
A fine new hat I beg to-day,
My old one's ripe to throw away!
Father of me, he will not pay,
Mother of me has no money, I say,
So here behind the rose-tree fair
To you, Three Kings, I make my prayer."

An empty room at the back of one of the shops was packed full of young people all in their best clothes, their faces shiny with unwonted washing, all crowding round an improvised counter and busy with dice. The dice-boxes passed rapidly from hand to hand.

"Come! Who'll have the last box? Ten cents!" shouted the ragged personage behind the counter, a fellow named Kim, who during the day sold stale vegetables from a barrow, and earned an extra trifle by presiding over the dice often till far into the night, and enticing passers-by to join in the gambling. Behind him stood the pastry-cook, his master, wearing a white apron and cap, his hands folded, smiling good-naturedly as he watched the throwing.

"Why don't you begin?" shouted a man in the crowd impatiently.

"One more box, just one more!" cried Kim in a drawling sing-song, anxious to get the full complement of entries.

A hand was thrust out from the background, the dice-box was seized and the throwing began, the dice rattling with muffled sound in the narrow wooden receptacles. Jans Brielle threw nineteen.

"Nineteen thrown—nineteen!" said the hoarse voice of the ragged croupier; and he gave the dice to another player who thrust out his box impatiently. Again the muffled rattle.

"Sixteen thrown—nineteen wins. The highest throw wins two pound of smoked eel, or six pound of Santa Claus cakes."

"Twelve thrown. Nineteen wins—Jans, you are going to win!"

Again and again sounded the rattle of the dice, while the crowd pressed closer and the players greeted their luck with curses or hurrahs.

The damp coats of the men, the dresses of the girls, exhaled a rank odour which blended with the smells of fried fish and sugary cakes. Little streams of water trickled from the players' hats; now and then some one uttered a loud shriek, or an oath, on becoming the victim of a snowball.

"It's yours, Jans! You'll get it! Six pounds of 'sweethearts.' What will you do with so many? Six pounds!"

Piet Hassel, while thus rallying Jans Brielle, was defending himself from the assaults of a bevy of giggling girls who were trying to tickle his nose with a Santa Claus cake.

Jans was a sturdy young woman, rather pretty, though coarse in expression, and with shiny red cheeks. She laughed and answered Piet,

"You're jealous, are you, codfish?"

"Don't you flatter yourself! But, I say—six sweethearts! it ain't respectable!"

"Seventeen thrown!" shouted Kim, drumming on the counter, "nineteen wins."

"Codfish? Codfish? You're a cat," said Piet, half-angry with the victorious Jans, "you're a wood louse, you're a black beetle——" He went on with a string of uncomplimentary names, each of which was greeted by the crowd with a roar of laughter.

However, the throwing was over, and Jans had won.

"Which'll you take? the two pounds smoked eel, or the six pounds '*speculaas*'?"

Jans would have liked the cakes, but she was afraid of Piet's jests and the laughter of the bystanders. Hurriedly she claimed the eel.

Now a party of sixteen lads burst noisily into the shop, closed round the dice-man, and snatched up the dice-boxes. One of them, a red-haired lout with a face like an otter, flourished a bag above his head, crying, "All our stuff goes in here!"

Throwing began without delay, the sixteen ousting all the other players, who grumbled blasphemously. As soon as won every prize was thrown into the bag with much cheering and noise. The band had already stormed ten dice rooms; this was their eleventh.

"Who wants the boxes for the next throw?" sang out the dice-man; "three currant loaves, or four pig's trotters!"

He had been upset by the entry of the riotous sixteen and his voice shook.

Other candidates pressed forward and tried to get rid of the gang. A mason took eight boxes for himself and four girls he had under escort. The sixteen, however, snatched the boxes away and again the prize fell to one of them.

The otter-faced youth with the bag roared like a madman, waved his bag and tore the trotters out of the hands of the assistant girl behind the counter. The sixteen cheered and yelled, frightening quieter gamesters into the background. Again and again the bag opened to receive black-puddings, eels, tarts, chocolate, and rabbits. Frightened girls were dragged into the ring and forced by the gang to join in the sport. The pastry-cook, his face white as his baker's cap, looked on helpless and enraged. His wife plucked at his sleeve and implored him to keep his temper; and the dice-man shouted on in his hoarse monotone—

"Who'll have a box for the next throw? Three rabbits, or two pounds of the best black-pudding."

V

Piet Hassel, stout uproarious Wierelander that he was, had been in and out of near every drink shop on the quay, and had found a party of his particular pals at Schilderts: Hendrik Gelder, known as the Hare, Jan Sik, Kees Slooter, Kol, and sundry other poor devils of working gardeners and florist's men. With them were a couple of cigarmakers, and a seedy clerk from the tinned vegetable factory. Though the occupation of the latter was genteel he preferred for associates the lowest roysterers of the place. All Wiereland knew this particular drunken gang. They were quarrelsome even among themselves. Kol and Slooter were Catholics, Sik and Gelder, Protestant; ready to insult and assault each other the moment they had tasted their liquor. In Wiereland, sectarian enmity though concealed from sight was always smouldering. Often it burst quite suddenly into the fiercest flame. The poison ferment was at work in every class from the lowest to the highest; its existence was, however, ignored. This was natural enough, for the two parties of Catholic and Protestant were equal in numbers, and no man could afford to be altogether independent of his neighbours. Now and then the leading bigots would burst through their self-imposed restraint, and stifled passions would be allowed free vent. Piet and his pals were friendly enough when sober. Every night they met in some drinking den. The first business was a stroll in the dark lanes behind the market gardens to meet the girls. The proceedings were shameless. There was no old-fashioned rustic sweethearting; it could not survive the coarse jests, the ribaldry of the brutish majority. Partners were freely exchanged and animal enjoyment was seized or bought.

After the girl hunt, back they went to the tavern, where they sat gambling at round tables. Hither came, nightly, this noisiest gang of Wiereland roughs; hither came also many of the town workpeople. The mutual hatreds of Catholic, Protestant, Jew, were held in leash for a moment in the hot steamy atmosphere, reeking with fumes of schnaps and gin. The men drank to satisfy a brutal appetite; they drank also to expel thought of the furious, never-ceasing toil, to drown care in light and laughter, to assuage misery and pain with a liquid that ran warm and glowing through their veins. Nowhere was there such drinking as in Wiereland, whose taverns and streets seemed always full of yelling, raging, despairing, or maudlin sots. Their wives and children were left to starve and freeze in nakedness at home, while they spent their last stiver in drink, for the benefit of greasy, prosperous publicans, shuffling about among the spittoons in carpet slippers, smoking huge pipes of strong tobacco, hail-fellow, well-met with the lowest of their customers.

On St. Nicholas' night Piet's gang went the round of the taverns. All the drink shops and dancing saloons had the Mayor's permission to remain open for extra hours. So the gang lounged up and down the snow-clad quay, on one side of which was the smooth black water, with its dim forms of masts and hulls; on the other the dark mass of the railway embankment. Now and then the door of some dancing saloon would be flung open; snatches of music, the sound of voices, the thud of feet would be heard,—all, however, deadened by echoless snow.

Dancing was the favourite amusement in Wiereland; the populace swarmed like a shoal of herring into long narrow booths where the lights were suspended from the rafters and long benches were ranged round the sides; upon these perspiring couples sank breathlessly for short rests, in an atmosphere of tobacco smoke and hot humanity. Mostly young people and all of the lower class, crimson with the passion and frenzied exertion of the dance, they stormed over the floor in time to the shrill intoxicating music; they flung themselves about madly with great kicking and stamping and whirling of petticoats. Piet and his troop had pushed themselves into three of the dancing booths but had been driven out by the crowd. At last they made successful entry into the largest booth, following in the wake of a contingent of habitués. Piet surrounded by his friends established himself behind a red-bearded policeman, grimacing ludicrously at the man's unconscious back. The policeman looked round; Piet and his comrades plunged into the midst of the dancers—a gay-coloured vortex of whirling couples, of flaming scarlet blouses, white skirts, and glistening head-dresses. Piet was hemmed in on every side as the girls swung past him on their partners' arms, abandoning themselves to the intoxicating pleasure, the men stiff and upright holding them very close and tight. The gang were quickly separated. Gelder alone remained near Piet in the centre of the living, glowing maelstrom, unable to take his eyes off the glinting white under garments as the girls whirled round with flying skirts. Piet seized Gelder by the waist and they started on an absurd puppet-like waltz, stumbling round the room with many collisions and embracing each other like a pair of lovers. Roars of laughter, shouting, and coarse jokes pursued them, and the dancers combined to upset and bring them to the ground.

"Look at those low creatures!" said a flushed and panting girl to the policeman, making eyes at him and even tweaking his beard. Thus the dance went on, to the accompaniment of much human noise as well as of trombone blare and toot of horn. The players were on a raised platform at the end of the room; they were dimly seen through a cloud of dust; their puffed cheeks suggested toy balloons blown up to bursting point and seen through a ruddy haze.

Before the bar crowded troops of girls, all very hot, all wearing bright colours, all with sparkling eyes full of the "joie de vivre." They were strong thick-set damsels of the true peasant type; and they drank huge glasses of beer slowly, and with infinite gusto. Close by these girl topers whirled the dancers through the fœtid atmosphere. Many of the faces were drunken, showing imbecile smiles and red excited eyes. Ever louder grew the noise, ever wilder the frenzy. The beauties flirted and coquetted, aping fine-lady manners, distributing their favours sparingly. Half-tipsy couples lolled in corners, shamelessly embracing. Others, worn out and drenched with perspiration, sank panting on the benches and fanned each other with handkerchiefs reeking of cheap patchouli. Presently having recovered breath, their faces paling and flushing by turns, they would spring from their seats, and plunge once more into the vortex.

New arrivals crowded the entrance in ever-increasing numbers. There was no longer room for motion, and whole groups of dancers, hemmed in and jammed together, swayed and stamped to the music without possibility of stirring from the spot they occupied, the girls held in painfully close embrace by their rude partners. The wilder, the more excited of the young women, frenzied by the dance and the touch of their sweethearts, now wore an expression of sensual passion in the lines about their eyes and mouth. They urged their partners on with hoarse cries, or breaking loose from the throng dragged them to the door as in a stampede of buffaloes. Quarrelling followed. Village party spirit broke loose; no Duinkijk or Kerkervaart youth was allowed to dance with a Wiereland girl. Voices began to be raised in fury; oaths, foul names, and coarse jests were freely exchanged.

Close to the band was a group of big fair-haired girls tipsily kissing their partners. Anne Donke and Griet Karsen, the strapping daughters of two Wiereland gardeners, were vying with each other in making love to Ring the lead-worker and Wenke the smith. Crowded together on the benches were a herd of boys, twelve to fourteen years of age, each with a great mug of beer. They were all shouting and larking together, encouraged by some of Piet's gang, who found amusement in the drinking, boasting children, as they chewed plugs of tobacco, swore lustily, flung indecent chaff at the girls, and rolled and leaped like monkeys, their young eyes fixed in a drunken stare.

Piet Hassel wished for a row. He had concerted his plans with his pals; they must have a fight. He set the ball rolling by a sham quarrel with a Duinkijker, one of his friends. At once others joined in, taking sides hotly. Shaking with laughter Piet and his confederate effaced themselves as soon as the rest were involved. The smouldering ill-feeling between the villages burst into flame. Passions long restrained rushed to the surface. A Kirkvaarter and a Wierelander came forward as if anxious to fight, but at a loss for a pretext. The Wierelander shouted—pointing his remark with a coarse and insulting epithet—

"Outside your filthy hole of a town is a notice-board, saying 'Humanity ends here; beyond this, the beasts.'"

"Beast yourself, Wierelander! and to hell with you! Duinkijk for ever!"

Yells and furious threats on all sides, the Wierelanders pressed forward, but the swaying champion of the rival town continued to shout—

"Duinkijk for ever!"

"Hold your jaw, dirty lout, or I'll give you a lick!"

"You will, will you? Do it! Filthy muck bucket!"

So the compliments went on, the crowd growing denser round the champions, till the policeman was set in motion by the exasperated couples who wanted to go on dancing.

"Now then! Now then! Behave yourselves! Quiet now! quick! Clear out, you two, one this way, the other that!"

The incipient row was checked, the expectant crowd dissolved, the whirl of dancers again stormed through the booth. Piet suddenly dived into the vortex, kissed half a dozen young women under their partners' noses, and made for the door, closely attended by Rink, the giant from the Polder.

"Who loves me, follow me!" cried Piet.

Twenty fellows understood the signal and rushed out. On the quay they could fight and get drunk, no man hindering.

The snow was still falling, softly, in myriad flakes; the little harbour was scarce visible. A wherry moored against the quay-side showed a green light half-mast high. Near it was a street lamp, the murky radiance of which fell on the faces of Piet and his companions as they collected round it. Piet and Rink plumped themselves down with outstretched legs; the rest sat in a circle enclosing them. Behind were the vague forms of white houses, trees, carts, baskets; a little nearer the low roof of goods sheds, faintly illumined by the street lamps.

Piet produced a great bottle from his coat pocket; Rink furnished a glass. Bottle and glass passed round the circle. Dimly seen the shouting, gesticulating crew suggested cannibal feasters. Passers-by looked at them apprehensively and hurried away.

The mayor with two policemen appeared on the scene. By this time the bottle was empty, and half the men had risen to their feet and were asseverating blasphemously that Piet and Rink had not served the liquor fairly. Piet, always ready for battle, returned the curses with interest.

Suddenly Rink caught sight of the mayor and his policemen.

Common cause was now made against the enemy. The whole crew took cover under a market cart, made muddy snowballs, and hurled them at the officials. Piet was in his element. He snatched up a stone, and with it hit the shorter of the policemen on his helmet. Hail of snowy projectiles followed softly thudding against the uniforms. As they threw the snowballs the gang retreated. Pale but resolute the mayor gave chase: suddenly turned, however, and bade his policemen halt. After a short consultation they again advanced, but showing drawn swords. With defiant whistles, cat calls, noisy shouts from Rink of the Polder, the gang again entrenched themselves behind a row of carts and baskets close to a large wherry.

One of the policemen gained the quay. Noiselessly a great snowball struck him on the mouth. He blew his whistle. Two new policemen appeared, charging with drawn swords.

Screaming women rushed from the dancing booth; young men, anxious to settle old scores with the police, joined Piet's band.

"At them!" shouted the policemen.

The girls, dodging under the carts, ran for the wherry, pushing each other in their hurry to cross the slippery gangway.

Packing cases, baskets, showers of stones, pieces of wood, rotten cabbage stalks were hurled at the attack.

Piet and Rink shouted orders to throw the policemen into the water.

Suddenly the entire gang sallied,—advancing upon the mayor and his force of four,—armed with spades and dung forks which they had discovered in a hut near the goods sheds. In the van of the tipsy rout pressed several noisy girls, also half drunk, their clothes wet with melting snow, large flakes perched on noses and eyebrows. The policemen had sheathed their swords.

The mayor felt he had been rash and showed signs of weakening. He ordered his force to present a more peaceful front. Observing this hesitation the rioters redoubled their efforts, discharged fiercer hail of snowballs and cabbages and stones. A policeman advanced to parley.

"Now then, boys! What's all this about? Have you lost your senses? Just take yourselves quietly home!"

With their shadows flickering on the snow, the rioters looked like the swarming dragons in a Chinese ghost play. They muttered, they growled, they threatened. Presently they formed up round the lamp-post, whence came the murky glare of feeble yellow.

"Curse you!" shouted Rink, "didn't you begin it? Ugly devils! I'll skin you and roast you alive, the lot of you!"

"Steady now—steady!" said the policeman soothingly.

"Steady, steady, says Mr. Mealymouth!" cried Piet, mocking. "Look here now, imp of the devil, if you and yours don't wish for a ducking—get out of this—Right about face! Quick march! Run!"

The whole gang shouted in chorus, and the girls came back from the wherry. A fresh hail of snowballs descended on the little company of police, who now quietly retired.

"Put your skewers up!" called the rioters after them.

"Come and take them!" returned the smallest and pluckiest of the policemen.

"Cluck! Cluck! Cluck!" cried the women.

"Throw the devil into the water!" yelled the men.

"Wring his neck!" roared Rink.

One of the girls darted at the little policeman, pulled his beard and jumped back among her companions, protected by the forks and rakes of the men. Rink was swinging a huge hammer and looking exceedingly truculent. The police, however, feared him the least of the crew, and the spokesman came quite close to speak to him.

"Now then, Rink—you're the boss, aren't you? Just you get Hassel to go home."

"Bash his head! Knock him down!" yelled Piet.

Rink, bemused with liquor, succumbed to the policeman's flattery.

"Curse it all—shut up!" he cried. "I'm the boss. I!"

Muttering and sputtering he continued to wave his hammer: suddenly snatched a fork from a girl at his side and hammered its prongs till the sparks flew.

"Off with you! The chap's right—off with you, devils!" And he advanced, threatening his friends now and brandishing the dung fork. "Come on! Clear out! Or we'll all be run in!"

The policeman clapped him on the back.

"That's it, Rink! That's the style."

Piet, however, remained obstinate and denounced Rink as a traitor.

"You dirty Transvaal seagull! Stinking badger! English scoundrel!"

"Hold your noise—I say—I say—" stammered Rink, who was head and shoulders taller than any of his comrades.

"I say you're drunk, man! damn it all! you're drunk!" said Piet.

The women had had enough of it and didn't want to linger in the cold. Small groups broke off from the band of roysterers and made their way singing and whooping along the quay, under the trees towards the back of the harbour, and the road to the Polder. Piet had soon only one or two companions, besides Rink, who was still disputing with and abusing him.

"Look here—I say, look here—" he maundered on, "you're a dirty cur—that's what you are. I tell you to your face."

"And I tell you, you're a scoundrel. Put that in your pipe."

"You're a regular Chamberlain, that's the gospel truth."

"Jesus! that's all right," said Piet, tipsily delighted, "I'm a cur, and you're a scoundrel. Eh? what? Well, comrade, give us your hand, that's all right! You're a rogue, and I'm Chamberlain."

With this prologue to a reconciliation they tottered towards each other, clinging, however, to the lamp-post, smiling and trying to shake hands.

Piet spent some time in vain efforts to wipe some heavy snowflakes from his eyebrows. Then the last contingent of the allies began to meander over the railway line towards the Polder.

Rink made his way alone, staggering and stumbling along the river bank. His voice sounded weird and melancholy across the snow-clad meadow land, as he sang with tipsy unction a maudlin song.

Piet, left alone with the lamp-post, had collapsed and was now sprawling in the snow, unable to rise, holding gentle converse with the cobble stones. At last came ministering angels in the form of two policemen, one of them his enemy of an hour before. They carried him away, unconscious.

Now the quay was wrapped again in the silence of winter. Round the solitary lamp the snowflakes shone faintly in the feeble light, while beyond the huge mysterious mass of the embankment stretched the vast expanse of the snowy Polder.

CHAPTER IV

I

KEES HASSEL—Kees the Poacher, as Gerrit's eldest son was called by all Wiereland and Duinkijk, was walking in his clattering *sabots* down the narrow but very decorous Beek Street in the hamlet of Duinkijk. The neat respectable little houses were still in the slumber of early morning. Now and then a farm cart loaded with manure or faggots rattled up from the cross streets; two labourers following a waggon-load of vegetables slipped and stumbled on the frozen roadway. A couple of gardener's boys, out of work, ran along shouting, and stopped at the chemist's to throw snowballs at his sign. This represented a man yawning; his tongue protruding foolishly from a red and cavernous mouth, which was soon beslobbered with the snowballs. It seemed full of foam and the figure's goggle eyes appeared to open wider than ever in idiotic anxiety, while the boys shouted and grimaced at their helpless victim. Kees was an ungainly giant, clad in a decayed green coat. He slouched carelessly along, swinging his arms and hardly seeing the boys' pranks as he passed. His clear cut intelligent features expressed complete indifference to his environment. He had very thin lips—mere lines, compressed like those of a fish, making the mouth set and grim.

"Klop! klop!" clattered Kees' wooden shoes through the decorous street where his name was a by-word of terror. He had the worst possible reputation; was considered capable of anything, murder included. Some said he had murdered two women, and been consequently in prison for two years.

Others declared that one night near the ruins at Braale he had shot two gamekeepers, cut off their heads and carried them off in his poacher's sack. Catholics crossed themselves when they saw him.

Kees laughed at the police, and defied gamekeepers. He was stronger than even Rink of the Polder, and no one dared fight with him. His skill as a poacher was unrivalled. He generally worked alone, and in pitch darkness, allowing himself not even a lantern. Yet sometimes he went out in bright moonlight, for he was an absolute dare-devil. There were nights when not a soul ventured abroad, when bitter winds howled through coverts, when shuddering blasts were blown on foghorns, and the superstitious Wierelanders lay shaking in their beds listening to the din of the elements; then Kees would come home at midnight laden with spoil, shivering and wet to the skin, yet disdaining a thought of discontent.

Thus legends had grown up in Wiereland about Kees' life and doings: every one repeating the legends added some little embellishment of his own. In the harbour taverns disputes were common as to whether Kees had or had not at last been laid by the heels. In the middle of such dispute he would sometimes himself appear quite unexpectedly, and would be greeted with a certain timid friendliness.

Kees had never been seen drunk. They said he drank on the quiet; in public, no one could ever tempt him to more than a single glass. The Wiereland gentry, who mocked at the superstitions of the populace, discussed amusedly the stupid talk and the fairy tales about Kees; they had no feeling for the unconscious poetry of the poor which underlay the legends. Yet even they had a certain respect for the calm, silent, gigantic poacher, with his fierce grey eyes, grim, sombre, slow and steady.

Among the poor the stories went on growing. He had been seen one stormy night close to the ruin, finger on trigger, waiting for old Nick. The Wiereland children had fearful pictures of Kees in their imaginations. The neighbourhood of his hut—which stood back from the Zeekijk Road, lost among the bleak Duinkijk sandhills—was certainly haunted. Especially among the Catholics fearsome tales of murders and of ghosts passed from child to child. If they met Kees at night after listening to these stories, they certainly saw a blood-red shadow cast by his body even in the gaslight.

Kees knew of the tales, and that he was shunned as a leper. He remained imperturbable, cool, inaccessible. A touch of the gigantic in his nature, gave him an unfaltering self-confidence, quite indifferent to slander. Taciturnity and love of solitude were inborn with him. He was laconic, indeed, always would prefer to express himself by look rather than by speech. He kept his feelings to himself; he needed no man's sympathy and would fight all his fights alone. For instance, no one had even heard him express his deep-seated wrath with his wife.

As Kees clattered down the winding, snow-covered street, angry thoughts made him quicken his pace. At the back of his mind—a clear-sighted, even an honest mind, notwithstanding its obliquity—he perceived that his neighbours shunned him, not because of his poaching but because of his personality. They avoided him because they were superstitious and afraid. His nature was vehement; naively turbulent and violent, like that of an animal. It was the nature of an unconscious rebel, and burned in revolt against all he knew of humanity in Wiereland. He understood nothing of Socialism; was indeed prejudiced against it. His longing was for the freedom of the wilds, for room to breathe, for the light and air of the dunes. He asked nothing more of life.

Four weeks now he had been out of work; was hungry himself and furiously resentful that he could not get food for his nine children; especially for the little cripple, his only son, who was the dearest, the only link binding him to his home.

As he walked, he was absorbed in painful thoughts about the feeding of his household. His great strength seemed to stand in his way; it was superfluous; gladly would he exchange it for bread. His head swam; there was a gnawing in his empty stomach. He cursed fate that he had no money to buy shot, and consequently would have to go poaching in company, would have to join men he despised in work he hated; for he did hate it, though every one believed it his greatest pleasure. He cursed the Wiereland and Duinkijk poachers, who were moved only by gluttony, who boasted of their exploits, and were not driven to them by bitter hunger, and by detestation of those who brought them to it. Shivering, chilled to the bone, he gazed about him as if searching for help. His children—his termagant wife—once more he must return to them empty-handed! What was he to do?

He lingered with covetous eyes before the window of a cake shop. One snatch, and he could seize its contents. No, curse it! He could not bring himself to that. Jesus! he was ready to do anything, but not just that! He could feel himself being seized, forced to give up the bread, taken by the neck, dragged along. No, O God! he would not be able to bear it! He would take them by the throat, he would strangle them! Then, Good-bye. And his boy, his little crippled child, lying there helpless at home, would be left alone with his cursed mother — No, he must walk on. He must not look — not look. They knew him here in Duinkijk and kept their eyes on him. He must never so much as look in at a baker's shop—never give them a chance of taking him and trailing him off as a thief.

He stopped again—aimlessly staring at the grey sky. The leaden atmosphere lay heavy on the gardens and houses, a dismal pall. The roofs and gables were hidden under the snow. Snug they were, the neat cared-for little villas of the bourgeois street. They had little front gardens, with shrubs and low fir trees, all snow-covered, white and still, their green hidden by the sparkling burden. Everywhere, all along Beek Street and in the cross lanes were the snow-sprinkled walls and white roofs with black and red lines of the gables; a pretty picture, in sharp contrast with the background of dull grey sky.

Presently a gardener named Westerling came out of a side street dragging a sled with a load of wood.

"Bad weather, eh?" said Westerling. He was annoyed at meeting Kees, but afraid not to speak to him.

"Yes, bad," said Kees shortly, his deep bass resounding in the little street.

"Anything on hand?" The man knew perfectly that Kees had no work. No reply. "Didn't I see you at Teander's last week?" asked Westerling.

"Two days' digging," said Kees. "That's finished. To-morrow perhaps I'll have some carting from the wood."

"I've nothing doing either," grunted Westerling, spitting.

"I'll walk on with you," said Kees.

They left the main street. Dogs barked from every yard, men and women with toil-worn faces stood before their doors, their heads almost on a level with the eaves of their wretched hovels. The lanes were mere pathways, crooked and dirty. The atmosphere was one of wretchedness and want. Behind the houses were squalid enclosures, covered deep in snow, with rotting fences, and a litter of broken pots and pans, old baskets, chair legs, pea-sticks, bits of sacking, rubbish of every description, all indescribably dreary under the snow. The men separated, Westerling pulling his sled along the beaten track straight on; Kees going up a cross lane towards Bakkerman's, and no sound breaking the stillness but the thud of his *sabots* and the occasional crowing of a cock. Arrived at Bakkerman's, Kees stood for a moment outside. The house—rather the hovel—stood opposite a row of others even more dilapidated than itself. About them was no touch of the picturesque such as often redeems tumbledown country cottages, or ruined huts in a forest. Here everything was just wretched and hopelessly ugly. Kees knocked on the frail door, the faded grey-green surface of which announced poverty within. Lifting the latch, stooping as he entered, he looked round for Bakkerman.

A thin slovenly woman came forward and said he was away. A troop of dirty and ragged children clung to her skirts.

"Get away, brats," said the woman, pushing them ungently back. Crawling round and over each other on the ground, they were like blind pups seeking their mother's milk with little muzzles eagerly thrust forward. Some of them cried, and the woman called angrily to the eldest girl in the yard outside—

"Take the little devils with you, Mie! Father'll give them something to remember when he gets home. *Kristus!* Hassel, they drive me out of my senses!"

Kees stood in the doorway not noticing the picture's misery; then said good-day curtly and turned to go. It was Bakkerman he wanted—about a little poaching business.

Destitution and squalor made no impression on Kees. He had grown up in it. His father had early turned him out for his unruliness, and he had fended for himself ever since; of a better, an easier life he had scarce even thought. The continual fight against hunger left him small time for thought. He didn't bother about others; they must look out for themselves. He had to feed his children—his sick boy. His strongest feeling was passionate revolt against those who wanted to catch him for his poaching. He was ready to murder any one who interfered with him when the bitter gnawing want that came with the Wiereland winter left not one dirty crust for the little ones. Poaching he considered stupid work in itself; that made him the more furious when he found pursuers at his heels. He knew he must restrain his wrath and his hatred. Often, however, his passions swelled so uncontrollably that for the moment he could hardly see; a black film seemed to cover his eyes, his fury burned as he thought of the men who had everything, lands and forests and money, yet grudged him the few small wild creatures which he shot to keep his family and himself from starvation. He could not talk about or explain it. But when he found himself tracked by the keepers, his fingers itched and burned to reach their throats, he was almost suffocated by his rage. He kept out of their way, fearing for their lives; sometimes he had lain for two hours in a ditch or a fold of the ground, making not a sound, bent double, sometimes up to his chin in water lest he should be seen. They came hunting after him along the woodland paths, and he watched them from his lair, able to hear their very breathing. He longed to shoot them down, the servile hounds! to call out that unless they let him alone he would cut their masters' throat and their own. His eyes red, his temples beating, a bloody mist floated before his eyes, and he levelled his gun. Yet when they had passed on, a shudder, fiercer than any caused by the long hours of exposure, shook him when he realised how near he had been to committing murder—as he certainly some day would do if he did not hold his passions by a leash.

For in that other event—what would become of his cripple child—his boy, his only son? What would the little one do without his father?

Smothering his rage, putting up his gun, Kees would go home soaked to the skin; he would lie hours in bed, with chattering teeth and shaking limbs till at last warmth returned and he could sleep. After a few days his fury would wear itself out, broken up by the harassing struggle with want, and the frightened look in the bedridden boy's wide eyes.

Now a different anger, fierce as the other and more lasting, would consume him, anger against churchgoers and creed-mongers. Those shops with the Roman Catholic images in their windows! No, he could not laugh at them as did his neighbours, mocking at the Papists yet toadying them at the same time. Kees wanted to grind the tawdry rubbish to powder, and throw it like quicklime in the eyes of the Popish traitors.

What was his own faith he did not know. He never thought about it. He was an outcast with no good in him; but, at least, he refused to flatter and to lie. Working and eating—that filled the round of his life.

Kees had married; now he had eight daughters and one son. Lately he had begun to understand why his wife, once fond, now loathing, had never attempted to break off marital relations with him. Oh, he knew! She was a Roman Catholic, and the priests,—that father-confessor of hers!—it was their doing. Children! children! Every woman must bear children; and the more the better, that there might be more souls for the Church. He had fallen into the trap. But he understood now. He would beget no more children. He had nine; and a cursed bedevilled woman for his wife; and not a cent; no work. Ah, he was a fool! The woman had made him take her parents to live with them—the old witch Vrouw Rams, his mother-in-law, who was always abusing Gerrit and Kees' poor imbecile mother. What a fool he had been to consent! He must turn the pair out, the old hag first. She plotted and devised mischief with Wimpie's confessor. Let her live with her other daughter on the Polder. The old Popish witch was Satan's own child—a pretty addition to his household! He could split her head open. Hardly less odious was old Rams himself with his bronchitis. It maddened Kees to think he, *he* must see his children kneeling to foolish images, mumbling prayers; must have his house a hot-bed of Popish hatred and spite against other creeds, against his own creed,—if he had one! His wife had stipulated for all this before she would marry him. How had she been able to fool him so? She was clever, no doubt. She had led him by the nose. He had agreed to have his children brought up as Catholics; he had been eager to get the woman on any terms! Now he had a house where the everlasting mumbling of prayers filled him with loathing. His children were a troop of strangers, growing up hostile to him, maddening him with their Paternosters and Ave Marias.

His daughters he cared for little; the boy he passionately loved. He hated leaving the boy, he thought of him continually. Sometimes his thoughts were calm, oftener they were full of a burning inarticulate longing to see the child, to tend him and comfort him. In his life of perpetual struggle, empty of all tenderness, Kees had no name for these gentler feelings. He did not know what petting, loving, longing for, meant. He had never heard such words; had he heard them they would have had for him no significance. Yet wherever he was, the yearning for his little sick boy gnawed at him, continually, painfully; till he, the rough silent man, who feared nor death nor devil, could weep for the sufferings of his child, for the wish to kiss him and hold him protectingly in his embrace. The picture of the little cripple was always before his eyes as he wandered in winter over the endless grey expanse of the dunes, quite alone, cautiously setting his traps.

A cry of anguish, sharp as an axe, would sometimes force its way through the man's grim lips, when he remembered that starvation was held only just at arm's length, when he recalled with terrible distinctness how the ten-year-old child, bedridden for three summers with severe hip disease, was lying there patiently, in pain and in hunger. But for the boy Kees would have torn down the Catholic pictures and images and flung them out of his house. But the ferocity died out of him when the child looked at him from his crib, with his large, bright, brave eyes. For the boy's sake he bore everything, for the boy's sake he toiled and slaved; he felt in his being's every fibre that the boy was the only creature in the world who truly loved him. Yes, Wimpie loved him; in contrast with Guurt and Dirk who were just friendly. Old Gerrit was afraid of his eldest son; every one else avoided him, uneasy in the presence of his grimness, of his volcanic fits of rage, of his immense strength.

What most offended Kees was that the little boy still clung to his mother. Kees saw it and felt it. The feeling was sharp and agonising, like a dagger piercing the flesh. The child's glance at his mother was unmistakable as he lay there so patient in his little bed, singing and praying as she had taught him.

Bitter it was also that the boy was a Catholic, living in a world apart from his father's; that mother, grandmother, priest, and all the pious women of the place, came buzzing round his sick-bed, petting the child, spoiling him, crying over him. It was hateful to Kees that he could not snatch his son out of all that. But the Aves and the Paternosters had taken too deep root in the childish soul. It would kill Wimpie to be deprived of them. Might not even that be better for the boy? If he died—died? Ah no! The very thought froze the father with fear. No! no! Anything but that!

Distressed and apprehensive Kees hurried along, between a naked hedge on the one side, the bare market gardens on the other. Pale sunshine gleamed fitfully. Abbey Lane was bordered by pollard willows—like mocking demons, symbolic of gnawing misery, shaking gnarled and knotted fists in the pale air. Farther on were a few gardeners' houses, some straight, some askew to the road, as if turning away from each other ill-temperedly. Here Kees changed his direction and crossed the dune in the direction of Duinkijk. Presently a little cinder-path brought him to his yellow, one-windowed cottage. In front of it lay the embankment along which in the summer the tram ran down to the sea. Between the embankment and the cottage were groves of pine trees, at present wreathed with snow. Beyond the tramway lay Jonkheer van Ouwenaar's estate; wild duneland with plantations of spruce and fir standing out sombre against the heavy sky.

Ant, Kees' wife, stood at the door, her figure clearly defined against the background of the hut's dark interior. She was shaking some garments, the dust from which enveloped her in a tenuous cloud. When she saw her husband she went in, cursing under her breath. The low dark living room and a little "back-place" was all the cottage contained. The atmosphere was close and stifling, pervaded by the sickly odour of valerian. Half-naked children crawled about the floor, their faces smudged with dirt and grease. One little maid with fair curly hair sat by herself, crying. In the darkest and farthest corner, pushed against the damp wall, was the wooden bedstead in which Wimpie had lain for three years. Over his head was a rough shelf with a few broken toys and coloured religious prints. Wimpie was humming to himself and beating with skeleton fingers on a little coloured cardboard box. His pale emaciated face with its prominent cheekbones and deep shadows was clear against its darker background. He smiled, and his wide mouth with its fleshless lips was like a deep fissure across his face. His blue eyes glanced about while his head lay motionless on the pillow. This was Kees' little Wimpie, who till his sixth year had been as plump as a partridge. How proud they had all been once of the bonny rosy-cheeked youngster!

Quite suddenly came this horrible hip disease, and wasted the child to a shadow, reducing the fat little limbs to mere sticks, distorting the right side. The slightest touch to his hip and he would scream with pain. For three years he had lain thus in his dark corner, growing and wasting simultaneously, while his sisters romped and shouted round his bed. Once the priest, forgetting the child's keen hearing, had said to the mother, it were to be wished the Lord would in pity take the little boy to Himself.

Wimpie, listening, had shuddered fearfully. But the thought of dying fixed itself in his brain and he lost his fear, and sometimes would sing softly to himself about going away to be with the dear Lord. Only he did not sing at night. If he woke up in the night he was still afraid, and did not want to leave his father and his mother.

Unless some one jarred his hip, Wimpie would lie singing the whole day through, oblivious of wretchedness, of pain and sickness. He could not see his white little face, its skin stretched tightly over the bones, its deep-sunk eyes glistening and weird, gazing out ghost-like from the dark corner. He did not know his body wasted as fast as it grew. The only thing that frightened him was the daily quarrelling of his parents and his grandmother. When these quarrels were in progress, a look of mortal terror came to the little death-mask of a face: he struggled till he had raised himself to a sitting posture, and then he cried and sobbed as if his heart would burst. And when Vrouw Rams, seeking to embitter her daughter yet further against her husband, would charge Kees with one crime after another, Wimpie, regardless of pain, would sit straight up, and cry in his pitiful little treble—

"It's not true, grandmother! It's not true! Father never did that! It isn't true!"

Sobbing, exhausted with exertion and excitement, he would fall back heavily on his pillow and lie for hours motionless, staring at the wall. Sometimes a whole afternoon would pass before he would begin to whisper prayers and to look at his pictures, turning them over one by one with his wasted fingers. At last he would sing again, first softly, then louder, his voice weak but sweet; singing hymns and folk-songs—till, when he was getting tired, he would stretch out his hand for his rosary and murmur litanies to the Holy Virgin and to Saint Joseph, and recite Aves and Paternosters. This was the hour when the feeling always came to him that soon he would be with the dear Lord.

Kees had paced up and down for some time before he dared to enter his house. When he did so he went straight to the little bed, bent his big frame and kissed the suffering child. Much moved, but unconscious of the cause of his emotion, he sat down by the window. Wimpie was thinner; he looked as if one could blow him away. But he smiled. There was still hope.

Weary, bored, depressed, but no longer hungry, Kees sat long by the window, staring at the pines and the naked willows and at the dreary muddy path which led to Zeekijk.

A little wizened old man, Rams, Vrouw Hassel's father, sat by the hearth, his feet on the hob, beside a stained old coffee-pot. The pot sang gently, and sent out little curls of steam. Rams was huddled in his chair, his body bent, his legs stretched out; he stared vacantly at the crucifix on the tiny mantelshelf. His chin moved like that of a cow chewing the cud, as he shifted his quid from one cheek to the other. A soiled and rimless green cap sat crooked on his head, a red neckerchief met the front of his greasy fustian waistcoat. Over it he wore a shapeless greatcoat with two dirty copper buttons. Now and then a fit of coughing seized him, shaking his whole body, giving a look of anxiety to his sallow countenance and frightening Wimpie. Sometimes the old man seemed about to be suffocated; but he took a fresh quid of tobacco, and immediately the cough subsided he resumed his former attitude, staring at the crucifix, so that Wimpie was reassured.

Tethered to the table leg was a little grey goat, bleating feebly. An emaciated hen appeared from the yard and strutted about the living room among the few and dilapidated chairs and stools. Children, with hair red or tow-coloured, crawled barefoot over the stone floor round the goat, their noise rivalling that of the old man's cough. Wimpie played quietly with his toys and pictures, disappointed that his father sat so quiet by the window not talking to him. Ant had been sulky for two whole days. She had sent three of the little girls to the nuns' school, disobeying her husband. Kees had stormed and cursed, saying he would not have them in that viper's nest. If they must go to school, there was the National. Ant had answered with her cold sneer, "They are Catholics. They are of my faith. It is not your concern where they go."

Kees flung himself out of the house in a fury, realising his powerlessness; cursing the day he had been befooled by a pretty face. The damned woman was his master now. He had spoken of all this to one person only, the district clerk at Duinkijk, the only neighbour who did not seem to mind some acquaintance with the redoubted poacher. The clerk told him nothing could be done. He had married on that understanding, so now he must put up with it.

Kees had not really hated the Roman Catholic religion till he saw his children being brought up in it. He had thought himself quite indifferent to any religion; but now the children were becoming so utterly unlike himself in habits and ideas that loathing filled his soul and bitterest resentment. As he sat listless by the window staring at the surrounding winter nakedness, conscious that hunger was again gnawing him, he suddenly heard his wife speaking from the back in a kind of snarling whine.

"Do you know there's not one cent in the house? Holy Mother! How can I get food? Just you tell me! Why haven't you found a job? Christ!—what's to become of us?"

His shoulders bent, Kees stared on at the window, biting his nails, saying nothing. The woman went on—

"Curse it! I suppose I'm not worth wasting breath on! Look for yourself what there is in the house. And you shooting hares every night! Christ! you're a fine fellow, turning them all into drink and leaving me and your children to starve! That's what Vrouw Liese says, and Vrouw Smit and Vrouw Teunis. You'd better put me and the children out of your way at once."

She burst into angry sobs, holding her dirty apron to her eyes. Kees could hardly restrain himself on hearing her vile accusation. He had not fired a shot for four weeks. He had not a farthing to buy powder or shot. He could have struck the woman; but his eyes fell on Wimpie's great frightened eyes, and he saw the quiver on the thin little face. For the child's sake he must hold himself in, smother his wrath. Biting his nails harder, he said quietly—

"You don't give me a chance of spending my breath. You do so much talking yourself."

"But there's no one gives us anything now," sobbed Ant, "they all drive me away! They say 'Your man's trying to make a fool of me. Bring the money if you want the goods.' Sanse and Klaas, they are all alike. They say they can't feed the whole place for nothing. How's it going to end?"

She had come nearer and now stood close to Kees, her bosom heaving with sobs. Her loose fair hair fell over her face, and she tossed it angrily away from her reddened and swollen eyes. The goat bleated, the children played, well accustomed as they were to their mother's scoldings and tears. Ant was a tall, thin woman, with large bones. Her face wore signs of worry and ill-temper, also of cunning. Nevertheless, even now when she was disfigured by weeping, she was by no means devoid of feminine charm. Her throat was shapely, her lips sensuous and soft; her grey eyes were distinctly agreeable. She stood staring over her husband's head and through the window at the dreary winter landscape. Kees started up suddenly, restraining his irritation by an effort as he felt the threat and the challenge in her tone and attitude. From a little basket under the chair he snatched some rings of potato peel and threw them to the goat. With little silly leaps of delight the animal tried to reach them, held back by the rope which the children had tied to the grandfather's chair. Now they dragged the creature angrily from its prize, the cord cutting into its slender neck, its nostrils quivering, its little face frightened and anxious as it was pulled across the floor, stiffening its legs in resistance, and scraping its feet over the tiles while it bleated in feeble protest.

Ant was enraged by Kees' calm. Better he should storm at and abuse her than speak in that quiet mocking voice and look at her with those terrible eyes. He restrained himself for Wimpie's sake; she knew that. He idolised Wimpie, though he cared nothing for the other children. This his love for Wimpie put a weapon into Ant's hands, for she could wound him by saying that he, and none but he, was killing the child. She had never, however, quite ventured to say this; she was cowed by her husband's ferocity and his gigantic strength. The words burned on the tip of her tongue; she wanted to spit the gibe into his face, she wanted to hurt him—the brute who treated her old mother as a piece of dirt, who abused her religion, who blasphemed against the Lord! God in heaven! How had she come to marry such a wretch? She was bound to him; she could not, she might not, free herself.

Her soul on fire, Ant went back to her work, passing backwards and forwards between the living room, the yard, and the back-place. The baby had fallen asleep on the stone floor; now she put it to bed in its narrow cot. Her figure was sometimes quite dark: sometimes it was lighted up by the grey light which came in through the opened door. At last Kees spoke slowly.

"There's no digging at present, but to-morrow I may make something by putting up faggots. They're all shy of me because I go poaching. They won't give me work. I've borrowed a gun for to-night. Hold out a little longer, and if I have a good night——"

"Hold out—hold out!" interrupted Ant, her voice broken with anger, "that's your talk every day of the week. God's Christ! isn't there any one you can get something out of?"

"I spoke to the coalman. He'll let us have five sacks——"

"We can't eat coal."

"And I can pick up some firewood. I've got half a sackful already. Next week I've got some saws to sharpen for Teunis. I'll ask him for an advance."

"You can't fill our bellies by sharpening saws next week! That's foolery! We must have something *now*, I tell you. Now!"

Kees felt his anger seething in him again. What could he do? Nothing. If he did get anything she mocked and sneered none the less. He had walked himself lame and could find work nowhere.

"You might ask Dr. Troost," said Ant, with slight diffidence.

"Dr. Troost!" shouted Kees, so loud that old Rams jumped in his chair and began to cough violently, "Dr. Troost! Shut your mouth, woman! I'll never ask that fellow for anything. I'd sooner split his skull. The scoundrel! He has got every one here into his clutches."

As he spoke ferocious light came into his eyes and the expression of his mouth was murderous.

"You're mad," muttered Ant, frightened. She knew Kees hated Dr. Troost, who had practised in Duinkijk and Wiereland and Zeekijk for forty years, and boasted that he had helped all the gardeners round with money and good counsel. He was rich. The neighbours had just been telling Ant of his riches. They made her dizzy merely to think of. Why had Kees this odious antipathy to Dr. Troost? She insisted on having him to prescribe for Wimpie, and to bring her babies into the world, no matter how much her man objected.

Wimpie lay with his face to the wall, sobbing with terror. The little girls clustered round his bed, frightened also and very quiet. Ant walked off to the back. Old Rams spat nervously into the fire. Kees sat staring straight out of the window. It was too early to start for his poaching. It was too light. Three times this year, when driven to it, he had gone poaching by moonlight; each time he had been nearly caught. Those keepers were so anxious to catch him; they did not mind about the other poachers, but to catch Kees meant to them honour and an extra wage.

He rose slowly and went to the yard to get firewood to dry; then again sat down staring moodily at the winter dreariness. Ant returned and stood at his side.

"Look again, Hassel," she sneered, "perhaps you'll be able to find another cent."

His eyes flashing, Kees sprang to his feet, towering like a giant in the low-raftered room. The wife retreated from him panic-struck.

"Cursed woman! Do I let my children starve for the pleasure of it? Have you no eyes? Can't you see I'm wearing myself out? You ugly cat—you are driving me mad. You mind your own business and see your children don't stink, and take them to your praying shop when you've got them clean!"

"Mind your business, you blackguard!" shouted Ant. "Look after your father and your dirty beast of a mother, and don't spend every cent you lay hold of on drink, you filthy brute!"

"Take care what you're saying!" said Kees, not knowing how to smother his rage longer, even for Wimpie's sake. The boy suddenly burst into loud sobs, and Ant observed that at the sound Kees instantly put fresh restraint on himself. She knew that she could storm on with impunity. When Kees attacked her religion her hatred increased tenfold. Raising her voice to a scream she poured out a torrent of abuse.

"You and your family are all born for hell! You're all blasphemers, outcasts—sinners——"

"Wife—hold your tongue—hold your tongue!"

"I won't—I won't hold my tongue!" and rushing at Kees like a mad woman she shook her fists in his face. Wimpie, anguished and terror-struck, wept on. In her fury Ant stumbled over the goat, which was lying behind old Rams' chair; the animal sprang from side to side bleating piteously and trying to escape from the cord. The children all clung to Wimpie, in silent agony of fear. Dientje who was nine, and eight-year-old Jans returning from school and from an errand, stood trembling in the "back-place," afraid to enter the room. They had been to the cobbler's, but he had given them nothing; the baker had refused them bread; only the coal dealer had allowed them knobs to the value of six cents. The baker had grinned and said to a maid servant who was in the shop, that he wasn't going to feed a poacher's brats. The children seeing their parents in a quarrel were afraid to deliver their messages.

Suddenly the little yellow-haired Jans ran to her mother, and at once the whole troop of girls, dirty, ragged, malodorous, followed their sister and clung to their mother's skirts. She, however, shook them off, flinging them from her as if they were so many animals, in her passion not seeing the beseeching little faces as the frightened children stood looking from her to their father and from him back again to her.

Human nature could no longer stand the strain and exhaustion mingled with excitement as she went on, her voice shrill but shaking—

"My wretchedness and my poverty are not sin; the dear Lord knows all. But for giving myself to a vile beast like you—for that I shall be damned to all eternity! There is no hope. I shall burn in hell. My child—pray for mercy!"

She turned, and passing the little girls, threw herself on her knees at Wimpie's bedside, repeating wildly—

"My child! my child! pray for my sin. Father in heaven, forgive my error!" Then she burst into tears, and sobbed, burying her face in the coverlet. Wim, crying himself, had raised himself pitiably on his elbows.

Kees, overwrought, fury boiling in his breast, stood by the window, his back turned to the light. His whole gigantic frame shook. Suddenly he snatched up a heavy billet of wood from the hearth, and with one spring which made the children scream with fear, he was standing over his wife, the weapon uplifted.

"Woman! get away from my son! away—away!"

Kees was now in the very madness of rage. Was she going to make his Wimpie pray against his father? that God would be merciful to herself and forgive her for having married Kees, her husband? Wimpie's father, but a rogue, an outcast, a foul and abominable sinner!

No, he could no longer contain himself. He must strike her down, must strike the cursed woman.

But Ant sobbed on, her head buried in the coverlet, heeding not the threatening figure standing over her with furious eyes like a very personification of vengeance. She did not look up. What did it matter what he did to her?

And again Kees held his hand; for out of the dark corner he saw Wimpie's great eyes turned upon him, full of beseeching, full of fear. And through the stillness came the child's weak voice.

"He is my father. I pray to God—for father."

A shudder of deep emotion shook the tortured Kees and wild joy surged up in him. He knelt beside his child, drawing the little skeleton face to his, and throwing away his murderous weapon. Then he spoke in a faltering voice, as if excusing himself to the child.

"Wim—little boy—your father does not drink. He has no money. He wishes to get work, but no one will give it to him. No one will have him—no one! The only thing for him is to die."

And Wimpie answered between his sobs—

"No, father, not to die—I'll pray—I'll pray."

Half fainting he fell back on his pillow. The girls began to talk again in whispers. Ant, who had heard the boy's stammering words, was all unconscious that his supplicating look had saved her from the blow her husband had already aimed. Nor did Wimpie know it; but only Kees.

Ant was again indignant. Rough and savage as he was, Kees had some demonic power over the boy who unchangingly clung to him. The father had bewitched her treasure, her only son. Wimpie's gentleness and love must be the result of possession by an evil spirit. Moved by Satan he had to speak the words he spoke. Ant's furious and ignorant bigotry, aided by the promptings of her mother and her confessor, had convinced her of this. Wimpie was possessed. She saw—or imagined she saw—that the child struggled against the evil influence. He was continually enduring a horrible martyrdom. When he took his father's part, she said to herself, "Poor boy—the devil has him again. He is *forced* to say those words. He is very unhappy."

And she would kiss him and tell him what she thought, and say, "Never mind, darling. You cannot help it."

And Wimpie would cry miserably, and try to convince her that it was not as she thought, but that he *really*, *really* loved his father. Ant, kissing him vehemently, would answer, "Yes, yes, dear! I understand. My darling, my little treasure, God will surely free you from this devil."

At last Wimpie would feel quite dazed. What was she saying? What did she mean?

The boy was thus powerless to bring his parents together. Ant knew that Kees loved him, but she did not believe that the child loved his heretic and blasphemous father. She left Wimpie's bedside and hurried into the kitchen, still unsoftened. She called angrily to Dientje and Jansje, who were sitting uneasily on the broken bench—

"Look out for yourselves! Your father has just tried to murder me. He'll cut you up into little bits, the villain, the liar, the heretic!"

Kees sat on silently by Wimpie, stroking the little face with his great dirty hand, so gently that he scarce seemed to touch the boy's emaciated cheeks. Wimpie lay very still, lines of suffering round his lips which tried to smile, while the great eyes gazed out from the darkness of the corner where he lay. Old Rams had not moved. He spat his tobacco-juice into the fire more frequently, and muttered to himself—

"Herd of swine—herd of swine."

At one time old Rams had been a great reader of newspapers; now the priest limited him to a little local Roman Catholic sheet, made up chiefly of advertisements, and not, it was hoped, inflammatory to his restless and inquiring spirit.

Rams obeyed his spiritual director, not over willingly. But he retained his old habit of muttering as he read, without saying of whom he spoke—

"Herd of swine they are—Herd of swine."

II

On the stroke of noon Wimpie crossed himself and recited an Ave. His mother came to his bedside, made a sign to his sisters, and joined in the prayer.

"Pray for us, Holy Mother of God, that we may be worthy of the promises of Christ." And with closed eyes they all crossed themselves.

Her eyes still red, her lips tightly compressed, Ant laid a few plates on a dirty little square table pushed close to the window. Dien and Jans brought some crusts and lumps of dough and threw them on the table. A few scraps begged from the neighbours had been stewing in a saucepan with a little rice, and were now dished. Old Rams, without getting up, moved his chair over to the table. The children had the crusts and the dough, a little heap being set before each. They sat staring at the food with ravenous eyes, but not daring to fall to till Ant gave the signal. There was always some little extra for Wim. He required plenty of good food, said Dr. Troost. The neighbours brought tit-bits for him; the goat provided milk, cow's milk being, of course, unattainable. The starving children waited for grace with what patience they could muster. At last the mother crossed herself, the girls copied her, and she made a sign to Wimpie, who recited—

"Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us——"

Here the mother and the hungry girls joined in—

"Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen."

"Amen" droned the children and Ant and old Rams with their heads bowed, their hands crossed upon their breasts, their eyes closed.

From his bed, Wimpie now recited the Ave Maria, his sisters murmuring it rapidly after him while Ant also followed slowly—

"Holy Mary—Mother of God, pray for us sinners now—and in the hour of our death. Amen."

"Amen," said the childish voices; and for a moment or two murmur of prayer was heard recited under the breath. Then the younger children peeped, but quickly shut up their eyes, for Vrouw Hassel's stern face was still set and her lips moved in prayer.

All this time Kees had been eating at the scraps from the saucepan, having smothered them with pepper to procure some flavour. He shivered with anger and a look of great irritation appeared on his face whenever Wimpie's voice rose, leading the prayer.

Now the children were allowed to begin their meal. Old Rams chewed industriously, his wrinkled cheeks falling at each movement of his jaw. Kees had shaken a few more potatoes from the pot. He said nothing against the prayers. Day after day he had forbidden them, but without effect. Wimpie could not help praying. The impulse of prayer had been born with him, and he had received it afresh in his mother's milk. The more Kees objected, the more ingenious were Ant's methods of heightening his annoyance. She made Wimpie lead the prayers for she had noticed how much Kees disliked hearing them from his lips. Ant herself ate next to nothing, just one or two scraps from the pot. When the children had finished they looked enviously at their father, who was still eating. He noticed their look and sung out—

"Who wants more?"

"You mustn't give them more," said Ant; "the rest is for to-morrow. They'd eat all night if you let them."

"Oh, mother—just a tiny bit more!" pleaded Grietje.

Kees, regardless of protest, rolled a couple of potatoes across the table. The children fought for them with shrill cries.

"It's mine! I won't give it up!"

"You shan't have it!"

"You beast! Mother, she's biting me! She's pinching!"

Ant banged the table with her fist.

"Be quiet, brats. You'll wake the baby—Griet, look if there's any coffee in the pot. Don't be putting your mouth to the spout." As Griet continued to do so, Ant stood up and boxed her ears; then seized Annie, who was sprawling over the table, and thumped her down on her seat with such vigour that the other children called out in alarm. Gradually the hubbub subsided. It was time to see after Wimpie's meal. With gentler voice Ant spoke to her boy, her darling, her only son.

"Will little Wim have his egg now? Will he? Come and have it on my lap."

"Oh yes, mother!" smiled Wimpie, glad to be in the party for a few minutes. She lifted him carefully from the bed, the child warning her of the points where she must not touch him. She carried him to the table and sat with him on her knee, taking every pains not to jar him in the very slightest degree.

Kees, who had not spoken to his wife since the quarrel, now stood by her side, while the little girls scrambled and fought for the fragments on their grandfather's plate.

The parents both gazed at Wimpie as if he were the only living creature in the world for either of them. He was pallid—almost green—his neck looked as if it must break with every movement.

A circle was drawn round Ant's lap within which the girls knew they must not intrude when Wimpie was there. Kees himself prepared his egg. He was pleased to think there was more for Wimpie on the kitchen shelf; the neighbours were always bringing him dainty morsels. Kees still believed Wimpie would recover though the doctor looked graver at his every visit. Ant fed the child, who ate slowly, now and then making a little moan of pain. Kees observed his great weakness to-day, and it seemed as if a cold hand clutched his heart. His Wimpie! his little child! his only son! Presently, with the utmost gentleness, Ant laid the child back on his bed, and arranged the sand bags which gave support to the diseased limb. Then the mother and the rest of the children knelt at the table, which had been returned to the middle of the room, and they recited more prayers, the woman's tone emphatic and shrill. Old Rams interrupted with his cough. Damp smoke from the hearth made wreaths round the kneeling figures. Wimpie lay in bed, telling his beads, and reciting the Twelve Articles of his faith with childish solemnity.

Kees had retired to the yard, unwilling to let Wimpie see his displeasure and his isolation. Once when the boy was still strong and well, Kees had told him savagely that he must stop his praying. The child had wept bitterly, kissing the Cross that hung round his neck. It had taken hours to calm him. Now Kees said no more, whether to Wimpie or to the others. While the exercises were in progress he exiled himself to the yard, standing in the cold, staring dully at the snow and the rubbish, the axle and wheels of a broken hand-cart. He shivered, thinking the prayers would never end; at last he went back indoors.

His wife informed him that to-morrow she had washing to do at Henkel's in Wiereland, and he must stay at home and mind the children.

"But I may have to go to the forest to-morrow to load brushwood."

"May have—*may* have!" sneered Ant.

"Can't your mother be at home? I tell you I may get a job."

"That's a likely story! I suppose you've an appointment with some woman!"

Kees said nothing. When the children heard that both parents wanted to be out to-morrow they were filled with dismay, for Grandmother Rams was a person who slapped and scolded continuously and was detested by every one of them. To-day was a red-letter day for the children, grandmother having gone to the Polder to visit her elder daughter. On Thursday mother always went to the Polder for a day's washing; then Dientje stayed away from school and father also was at home. But now Ant was going away on Wednesday too. Wimpie especially was distressed. When Vrouw Rams told vile stories about father, Wimpie always cried out that she lied: consequently, when the old woman was alone at home in charge of the house, she took her revenge. In presence of spectators she was affectionate to little Wim; he knew very well that was all hypocrisy. But he never told of the cruelty he suffered from her when she had him at her mercy. In the little sick body dwelt a soul very simple, and of inborn piety: the boy was quite unconscious of his goodness. Sometimes the little girls would report to their mother that Wimpie had cried dreadfully, and Ant, full of anxiety, would question him. He kept silence. For he felt strong to suffer, and was determined to forgive everything, now the priest said he would soon be with the Lord. A strange sad smile would come to his lips, and a look to the thin little face of older, deeper wisdom than was on the face of the woman who bent over him and lovingly asked him the questions. Terror, however, filled him at the thought of a whole day alone with the venomous granddame.

"Do you grudge my mother an hour or two in the Polder?" continued Ant, addressing her husband.

"She can stay there to all eternity for me."

"I know you hate her."

"Well—well—I'll stay at home. I won't trouble your mother."

Ant was relieved, but took care not to show it. She called Dien and Jans sharply. The children had been playing in the yard, their little feet slipping about absurdly in the great men's boots they wore—picked up out of the dust-bins.

"Here, brats—go off and look for scraps. Go at once. Turn the ash-buckets right over, but take care the policeman doesn't see you."

The children listened unwillingly. Yesterday and the day before Dien had been the whole length of the Polder road, rummaging in bins and buckets for cinders, bones, bits of wood; and collecting horse droppings in a little cart. She was worn out and begged that to-day she might go to school. Ant's only reply was to box her ears. Jans had searched the woods for a week collecting firewood from under the snow, all the time in terror of capture by gardener or keeper, who were always zealous in pursuit of any poor wretch stealing sticks. Jans put what she found in a big bag and carried the heavy burden on her back while rain soaked her to the skin, and the wind laughed at her few poor rags. Dien wore an old pair of boy's trousers under her frail petticoat, but Jans had nothing except her worn frock. Now they must start again in the bitter weather; they set out abusing their evil fate and each other with strange oaths they had picked up from their neighbours without in the least understanding their meaning. In summer there was sunshine and soft grass and the children had no dislike to these foraging expeditions: in winter when they were half-starved and always tired, there was nothing they more cordially detested.

CHAPTER V

KEES went out slamming the door, and made his way along the road towards the sea. He felt weak and shaky for want of food; the air, however, was reviving. He had accustomed his body to every kind of exposure, and hardship seemed merely to heighten its power of resistance. Poverty had made him sober: pure air, wide open spaces, the fragrance of the dunes, the constant communion with Mother Earth kept him sound and strong. His children were different; timid, nervous, sickly. He had noticed the like in many families belonging to this district; the children had headaches, slept badly, were apprehensive and cowardly. That had not been the way in his youth!

The dull seaward road stretched grey and lonely before Kees; pale December's stillness brooded over the fields. In the distance were the dunes lost in a violet-grey haze. It was too late to look for any of his companions. Where should he go? The fog seemed to get in between his clothes and his body. Suppose he went to Klaas Grint? Would Grint give him a job?

Slowly he made his way through the slush of the path soothed by the silence which enwrapped the whole wide sweep of fields and distance. He stopped before Grint's house and knocked at the door.

Grint's land lay behind his house and was mostly devoted to raspberry and strawberry growing. He was the cleverest and the keenest of all the market gardeners. During the winter six months he sat at home with his five daughters and one son weaving strawberry baskets, working his children to the bone to save expense. Vrouw Grint opened the door, smiling pleasantly.

"What? Oh, it's Kees! Piet's here too, and your cousin Hassel from the Hollow."

All the Protestant women of Wiereland liked Kees and admired his splendid physique and fierce grey eyes. Murmuring a reply Kees walked towards the little shed used as a workshop. Five girls sat close together on the floor, their backs against the wall, their legs stretched out and drawn up by turns. By the end wall squatted Klaas himself, while Jan, his tall eighteen-year-old son, sat almost against the stove opposite his father. Piet was hanging round Geertje, a pretty dark-haired girl with sparkling brown eyes, the very picture of bounding life and physical charm. Jan, son of Dirk Hassel of the Hollow, old Gerrit's brother and foe of twenty years, stood behind Piet, effacing himself awkwardly. The cousins were hardly acquainted, though they worked field to field through the summer and were rivals in the courtship of Grint's pretty daughter. The workshop was a winter refuge for garden hands and all other out-of works; there was a hot stove, and a cup of coffee for all-comers. Kees, tallest of the company, stepped into the circle and gave an easy greeting. His head nearly touched the roof. A small lamp hanging from a nail was placed just above Klaas Grint's head, casting a feeble light on the circle of seated workers. Talk was suspended for the moment as Kees entered, all sitting still, bent over their weaving. As the baskets were finished, they were thrown into a corner where was a rapidly growing heap. Every now and then some one would stretch forward to take an osier from one of the receptacles ready to the weaver's hands. In the poor light the bundles of twigs looked like great spiders crawling over the floor. The stove glowed fiercely, and Jan Grint, who was nearly roasted, stopped every few minutes to puff and to rub the sweat from his face with his sleeve. The quickly moving hands of the stooping weavers were now in light, now in shadow, as they fashioned the flexible twigs into little baskets.

'Have a drop of coffee, Kees?" called Vrouw Grint; "there's plenty more where it comes from."

"No, thank you."

"Coffee!" laughed Klaas; "give him the spirit bottle. They all tell me you drink, Kees; but I stick up for you, and say *I've* never seen you drunk."

Kees only shrugged his shoulders. He knew that Grint was foremost in spreading the scandal: but even had he been sincere in saying he defended his neighbour, Kees would have been annoyed to be defended by such a miserable wretch. The talk would not flow. Piet Hassel stood silent; Jan, his cousin, got still farther into the background. The girls kept glancing at Kees, tall Kees, the redoubtable poacher with the fierce eyes, as he stood there watching the quick play of their deft fingers. Behind the thin partition of the workroom the servant girl could be heard washing and wringing the linen, while she sang a little sentimental song with exaggerated expression.

"*Beside her s-i-i-ck child's li-i-tle cot*
The m-o-other si-its, all joy for-go-o-ot."

"That's how she squalls each washing day," laughed pretty Geert.

"Squalling? I call it lovely," said Trijn; "just wait for the second verse. God kills the child and the mother turns nun. After that comes the sad story of the young man (in six verses) who kills his girl for jealousy."

"I wish she'd stop her noise," cried Jan Grint; "she sings as if she was crying. She's got two children herself, and the father, Teun the nurseryman, has left her. She's for ever singing about 'her d-a-arling chi-i-ld,' and at home she beats her kids till they can't stand on their feet."

Piet was getting bored. He burst out with—

"You're a God-forsaken dumb lot! Why can't you talk? Say something, Trijn, or you, Geert—laugh or do something to amuse us! Come now!"

"Hush! Listen!" said Trijn, putting up her hand to get silence. And through the partition came again the accompaniment of washing and wringing and the song in the girl's tearful voice. Piet jumped up.

"*Bommelebom! bommelebom!*
Squinting Piet and Long John,
Pock-marked Toon and Lanky Grie,
We're all come out to-day for a spree,
And every chap has his girl you see!
Bommelebom! Bommelebom!

he sang at the top of his voice to drown the lament of the laundress. As he sang he beat time with his feet, Jan joined in excitedly, and the girls looked at each other, shaking with laughter.

"*Daisy—Daisy! Flow'r of my heart!*" sang Piet, but old Klaas shouted above the din—

"Now! now! You're none of you doing a stroke of your work! Sing if you like, Piet, but I will have them get on with their work!"

"That's like you, father!" said Geert, very cross; "we're not to laugh now, I suppose?"

"Laugh if you want to, but you must keep on with your work."

There was a silence, and the washing girl's voice sounded again through the partition. She was wringing the clothes violently and the song came in jerks.

"*Here must I p-i-ine,——deserted and in pain,*
For never——will my true lo-o-ve—come again."

Piet wasn't going to stand this caterwauling. So putting on the airs of the music-hall funny man, he roared out—

"To-night! In the Theatre Royal! Tragedy with drum and trombone music. Ladies in wooden shoes, six cents. Gentlemen, nine cents!"

The girls screamed with laughter, swaying backwards and forwards, and pricking each other with the stiff osiers of the half-made baskets.

Even old Klaas laughed, but he was angry with Piet for making the young folk waste their time.

"Now then! Now then! Go on with your work," he shouted, and the girls suppressed their laughter, frequently, however, glancing at each other and bursting into low giggles.

Kees looked indignantly at Klaas, who was working as if his life depended on it, and was like a slave-driver to the girls. Why couldn't he set a couple of men at the job?

"That's not women's work, Klaas! You ought to be ashamed of yourself! I say it's not fit for them!"

Kees had long bottled up this remark, but it had burst out at last. Klaas was furious. What business was it of Kees'? Clearly he was jealous that the work had not been given to him.

"That's my affair, my fine fellow," he said with pretended good humour. "You have your affairs, you know, and I have mine." He was pale with annoyance though he spoke quietly, and his nostrils quivered.

"It's a scandal! Look how hot they are! It's enough to break their backs. There's one with her hand on her side, panting like a pig. There's no other house in the place where women do this work."

"Isn't there? That shows how much you know about it. Perhaps in the old days—but now you'll see it in every other house. Piet Bengel's girls, and Molenaar's and Deuter's and Renke's—lots of them; and they work much longer at it than mine do!"

"All very fine," said Geert, "but they get a cent for every ten; and we—we——"

"No, they don't! no, they don't!" shouted Klaas, his hand outstretched to tell off on his fingers the number of market gardeners whose daughters made baskets.

"Hi! get out! Away with you!" cried Trijn to a pair of boys who had rushed in from school, and were bouncing about upsetting the baskets and the bundles of osier twigs.

"Get out!" screamed Klaas. "I won't have you in here breaking everything.

During the disturbance, Jo, Klaas Grint's youngest daughter, a golden-haired girl fresh from school, ran out from her place among the weavers. The boys seized her by the big mother-o'-pearl buttons of her jacket and dragged her off through the piles of osiers and of baskets.

"Oh, go away! go away! we don't want you!" roared Klaas, swishing an osier backwards and forwards in his excitement.

"Oh! Do look out!" cried Geert; "you've hit me on the nose!"

"I won't have them in here! We're stifling already! pouf! pouf! Wife! turn them out. Wife! where have you got to? Turn them out, can't you?"

The boys and Jo called at their loudest as if they had no concern in the matter. "Mother! Mo—ther! Father wants you! Father wants you!"

"Young devils! They upset the whole place! Where's mother, I say? Is she gone to Vrouw Doalwiek's again?"

It certainly was stifling in the workroom. Klaas was working feverishly, the sweat running down his face.

"I say, Kees," he said presently, "what do you make of this? My wife's got the devil in her. She sets the table dancing when she sits down to it. It jumps like a live thing. And at night she's frightened out of her wits——"

"*You* needn't talk, father," said Geert, "you're frightened yourself." Pretty Geert spoke demurely, going on with her work; but she glanced up at Kees, a smile playing round her mouth, then looked down again, showing only her fine mass of hair and her white neck.

"Oh Lord! my back's broke," groaned Cor. "Yes, Kees, father's just as frightened as he can be. He calls mother a spiritualist and says that's why she's nervous. But he's scared to death himself; isn't he, Jaan? isn't he, Annie? Isn't he awfully afraid?"

"Mother sees spirits," she went on. "No one else can see them."

"Oh, stop this silly rubbish!" said Piet. "I'm sick of it!"

"That's what I say, they're all making themselves crazy with it," said Klaas, delighted that Piet came to his support. "Spirits indeed! I don't believe a word of it! She'll turn them all crazy, or my name isn't Klaas. There's no sense in it! What do you say, Kees?"

Kees understood. Ant had told him that Vrouw Grint had been bewitched, that she was possessed. No wonder Klaas was angry. Kees, however, did not know what to reply. He stood leaning against the wall, his legs crossed, looking at Geert's pretty little nose. As she looked up at him, he smiled into her eyes. Ah! what eyes she had! What a pretty creature she was!

Piet noticed his brother's preoccupation and the greedy way in which his eyes devoured Geert. He was himself madly in love with Geert, so was Jan Hassel the cousin who was still hiding in the background. Piet could have stuck his dung fork into Kees. What right had he to stand there grinning at the girl? He had his wife. Was he going to take Geert from under his brother's very nose? the blackguard! She was smiling at him—the hussy!

Klaas looked up. "I say, Piet, have you heard about that architect in Beek Street? He's gone mad, and the police have taken him off."

"No, father, you're wrong. It's his brother in Haarlem."

"Not a bit of it, girl!" cried Klaas, wild that his stale crumbs of news should be spoiled by his children.

"It's the brother," said Jan, pressing the palms of his hands to the floor and stretching to relieve his fatigue.

"I tell you, I'm right, Jan. It's the Beek Street man."

They left him the last word, and work went on in silence. Heads bent low, hands moved in and out, crossed and recrossed, twisting the osiers this way and that. The heat was suffocating. Every now and then some one would reach out for the coffee-pot and drink from the spout, setting down the pot again with a sigh of satisfaction. Klaas was bursting with scandal and gossip. Discussing their neighbours was a passion with Wierelanders, who pointed their remarks with innuendo and with spite. Gossip was the breath of Klaas Grint's being; the desire to detract, bespatter, slander, was so strong that an hour's enforced silence made him bored and unhappy.

"Well, Kees, what do you think of the little saint on the dune? Church thrice a day! Oh yes! but yesterday our maid watched her for two hours, and she was gallivanting with the Apotheke, and with Loskruit, and with that chap who lives in Koose Street. They all went into her house one after the other. She thought no one was looking."

"Yes!" laughed Geert, wiping her face with her sleeve, "lanky Loskruit first at half-past nine, then the Apotheke at ten—yes, certainly she *is* a saint!"

"And her mother stood at the door keeping watch!"

"Well, what does it matter?" burst out Kees, "what does it matter? What business is it of ours? Let her alone!"

"Mother and daughter, a pretty pair," continued Klaas, "carrying on with any man who turns up! Those are your Catholics for you! Wearing out the floor of the church—and the man drinking himself to death!"

"Good Lord! And what have you been yourself, I'd like to know, you dirty sneak!" shouted Kees, leaving the wall, and standing at his full height, towering over the others. "We know your reputation, don't we? yours and your family's? Oh, you needn't worry over other people!"

"You needn't talk!" sneered Klaas; "pray, what do they say about Guurt, your own sister?"

"I don't care what they say about Guurt," said Kees quickly.

Jan Grint looked up from his work, shaking with suppressed excitement. Every one knew he was in love with Guurt, but that she despised him; knew of his unintermitted pursuit of her, his jealousy and madness.

"And you can't say much for yourself, Kees," continued Klaas. He spoke impressively, leisurely cutting off the end of an osier twig which had split while being bent in and out to form the basket. "I've always said, and I say it again, straight out, that you're a thief. When you go poaching, you're stealing."

"I don't steal. It's a dirty lie, you cur! I poach to get food. Are we to die of hunger? You sneak! You bloodhound! You have plenty to eat. Would you let your children starve? You bloodhound, you——you——"

Klaas was alarmed. Kees' eyes shot fire, and he stuttered with fury. His hands were working; he was ready to spring upon the wretched Klaas. The cowardly dog! The rich man's lickspittle! "You!" he went on, "I hope you get something for kissing their boots—the doctor's boots, and the notary's, and the deacon's! You ugly brute! You dirty badger! See, here's what I give for you!" And Kees spat noisily on the floor.

The girls were dumb, their faces bent over their work, their hands twisting the pliant twigs. Piet watched his brother uneasily, knowing the risk Grint ran in angering him. Nothing made Kees so furious as to hear his poaching called stealing. Klaas felt thunder in the air; he had a wholesome horror of Kees Hassel's mighty fists. The fellow was capable of murdering anybody. Was he not already accused of murder? He tried to soothe the man down.

"Well, I must admit you're not lazy. What I don't understand is, why you can't get anything to do."

"No, you couldn't understand. I shouldn't go hungry if I cheated and lied like you. You'd lick your landlord's boots just to get a farthing off your rent!"

Klaas shifted uneasily in his seat, nervously splitting and spoiling more twigs. He couldn't silence the fellow. Piet said nothing. Jan Grint, to hide his embarrassment, made up the fire. The girls worked on without looking up.

Suddenly Kees exclaimed—

"Come now, yes or no, have you a couple of hundred willows you want stripped—at a quarter-gulden the hour?"

Klaas dared not refuse, fearing a broken head if he did so. But a quarter-gulden an hour?—that was too much! Though to be sure he couldn't manage the job himself.

"Twenty cents," he said, instinctively trying to bargain. Kees was indignant. His fingers itched to be at the miserly wretch. But he thought of his home, of his own hunger, of Wimpie on his bed of suffering, and he restrained himself.

"Very well; twenty cents. I can't do it for more than three hours at a time."

"I believe you," laughed Klaas, who knew what osier peeling was, and felt elated at having got off so cheap.

It was a task to make the strongest shrink, at least in that reeking, stifling little den. To bend low over the rebellious twigs hour after hour till all the blood in the body seemed to have settled in the throat, while rivers of perspiration ran down the face—to draw and draw and twist, clearing the springy osier of its bark—to go on without pause or delay till everything swam before the eyes, and there was a hammering in the head, and the legs reeled——

But at any rate Kees earned a couple of quarter-gulden.

"Can you give me two more in advance?" he asked awkwardly, his eyes on the floor.

"Can't you manage with one?"

"The devil! Well, fork it out! I must eat."

It was cold and dark as Kees made his way home along the path over the dune. The dreary landscape was dotted here and there with naked willows. Night was fast enfolding the broad fields and covering the low-roofed hovels of the workers with her black wings. Some of the gardeners were still at their digging, spade and soil alike invisible.

"Good-night!" sounded across the fields as Kees passed by, and his calm answering "Good-night" was swallowed up in the gathering gloom. The leaden clouds hung lower over the ghostly land. Dim forms of gnarled and naked trees towered overhead. Kees had passed the workers; for the rest of his dreary way he was alone.

CHAPTER VI

FOUR lots of wood had old Gerrit bought at the Auction. In the misty grey of the early morning Piet and Dirk went to see after them. The snow had turned to slush and at Duinijk, where the roads were not metalled, the wheels of the carts made deep furrows through the mire. The brothers walked together, Dirk in *sabots*, Piet in high mud-boots. The fog hung heavy over the fields, as they tramped along towards Beeker wood, some two hours' walk beyond Wiereland.

They went straight to Lot 13, though Piet had at first refused to have anything to say to it, declaring the number unlucky. In every direction lay cut brushwood, and the hacked stumps of young ash trees. Lot 13 was of fair size and quality. It was nine o'clock. Piet had brought food, and now he made breakfast before starting work. There would be no way of fetching food in the course of the day. From all sides echoed the strokes of axes and billhooks.

Many of the gardeners were already busy. Cold wind blew through the undergrowth. The mist crept along the ground, which was littered with stout branches or the long slender stems of young trees.

The two men threw off their coats. They would soon be too hot even in their smocks. Piet hacked furiously so as to get warm quick; Dirk wielded his billhook, trimming the side shoots from the trunk of a tree which, not without difficulty, he had pulled from under a heap of wood. In an attitude of unconscious grace, he held up the stem, measuring it with his eye; then he applied his billhook to the best advantage so as to make the tree into four stout stakes. Afterwards he pulled out more tree trunks and great branches, swinging them above his head like a Cyclops brandishing his club. First, from each tree he sliced off the thick lower end with a couple of strong strokes that sent a quiver through his whole frame, and then *ket—flits*, *ket*, *flits*, cut after cut, sent the tough side shoots flying round him. One toss of the billhook removed the lighter branches and the twigs. Thus he worked hour after hour, his body steaming in the damp air, lifting, hacking, trimming,—throwing down the trimmed stakes on to green withes placed ready for binding them in bundles. This last task was performed by Piet, who looped and twisted the withes tight round the wood till he had made compact parcels, thrown when completed on the edge of the track ready for carting. Waggons laden high with the bundles of stakes and fine twiggy brushwood passed continually, their wheels sinking deep into the mud, already churned into a veritable mass.

On the other side of the road from where Piet and Dirk were working a man named Limmer was loading his cart. Attached to it were a pair of bony and angular horses, their backs hollowed by hard and incessant toil. They stood champing their bits with foam-flecked mouths, their heads drooping, their long lugubrious faces enveloped in the cloud of steam which rose from their bodies. The alleys piercing the forest on either side of the main track were filled with soft silvery mist; the vistas of trees seen through this thin grey veil were melancholy in their stillness. Flute-like and plaintive twitterings of little birds sounded through the air; sometimes from a distant farmstead came the despairing crow of a cock. In every direction the mossy ground, still wreathed with snow, was fouled and desecrated by the trampling of heavily shod feet and deeply scored by the wheels of the laden waggons.

Old Gerrit came to look on. With hands in pockets he stood watching Dirk at his work. Confident and friendly amid the furious chopping and hacking, a couple of vain little robins flaunting their bright red breasts and delicate legs, hopped about in the litter surrounding the woodmen; then one perched on a tree from which he surveyed the operations with a quaint air of wisdom, while the other sang its winter song softly from a fresh bound sheaf of the brushwood. Then with increased confidence in Dirk, they flew together again, and hopped and twittered at the young giant's feet like a couple of tame canaries, their orange throats gently swelling, their soft grey plumage ruffled by the cold. Gerrit got tired of the silence: that fellow Dirk would stand close to you all day and never utter a syllable!

"Have you heard Swart has hanged himself?"

"Which Swart? Barend or his brother?" asked Piet, amazed.

"The devil!" said Dirk, his composure shaken for a moment.

"Barend himself. Barend—who was always so ready with his joke."

"It's queer," said Piet, laughing nervously, and wiping his face with a corner of his smock.

Dirk left his billhook idle in the ash tree stump, and the three men stood silent and perturbed, each guessing something of the story which had led to the tragedy.

Swart had long been a comrade of Dirk's, and the news upset the young man strangely and gave him a lump in his throat, though it was no great concern of his after all.

"What was it all about, father?" asked Piet.

"There are various stories—hard to get at the truth. Every one's talking anyhow. He was a good chap—one of the best—I'll say that much."

"What are the stories?"

"Well," answered Gerrit, lowering his voice, "I believe the doctor knows the most. The tale is the poor fellow had borrowed from the notary, had one debt here and another there, and owed the doctor (who wouldn't have him in his club) two hundred gulden. He couldn't pay and that confounded doctor took a mortgage. You know Swart's land is poor, he had a bad year, and what with one thing and another got cleared out. Then the doctor comes on him and says he'll put him on the street if he don't pay up. Then he killed himself."

Men carrying bundles of wood, or tools, passed close to the Hassels.

"Hallo, Flatnose! Heard about Swart? Hanged himself this morning!"

"Hanged himself?" echoed old Bolk, stopping by Gerrit while the others passed on and vanished into the mist. "Hanged himself! Yes, but he didn't finish his job. Wife cut him down. Now he's raving mad—wants to run a knife into every one he sees. They've taken him to the asylum. A lively Christmas they're having with him. Keeps shouting the whole time, 'Scoundrel! You've ruined me and my children after me. You've stolen my bit of ground from under my feet!' Then he yells about mortgages—mortgages—mortgages—It takes five men to hold him down."

Old Bolk stood there in the fog, his shoulders bent forward. He was carrying a couple of wheels on his back and some spades under his arm. He was garrulous and happy now he had got a job. "I knew him," he rambled on; "he was a good chap, oh, very good. Now he's gone mad. I say, you fellows, got a drink? I'm dried up!"

Gerrit and Piet both went for the can hidden under some logs. Bolk drank the water greedily.

"Hold hard! Don't drink it all! There's no more to be had unless one walks two miles for it."

Piet snatched the can from Bolk's lips, which the latter smacked and rubbed with his hand.

Dirk had gone back to his billhook. Distant sounds of axes came through the mist, which grew thicker and greyer, blurring the figures of the woodmen.

Thus for five successive days of fog the brothers continued their monotonous task in the loneliness and silence of the forest. The work was nearly over. Limmer had begun a week ago. Now he was taking away the faggots from the great stack he had made at the roadside.

To-day there was a little sunshine, bathing the woodlands in a soft and evanescent glow. Limmer was standing on the path close by his waggon. Heelis the carter was inside waiting to receive the faggots. Limmer heaved up bundle after bundle, and Heelis packed them closely, himself standing higher and higher as the cart rapidly filled.

"It's the devil's own job to lift them," murmured Heelis; "fifty kilos at least they must weigh. I'll be hanged if I've ever had such heavy ones in my hands before."

Limmer grinned. When he did the tying up he made large faggots; that he knew. It was amusing to see Heelis scrambling and slipping about on the wet brushwood as he received the bundles. Krelis Limmer lifted them singly and rested them on the tail of the waggon. Heelis, with much blowing and puffing, dragged them into the cart and up to his own level, then forced them into their places. Now the cart was getting full, great pulls were necessary, and Heelis, who was a much less powerful man than his master, found the exertion very great, and cursed Limmer under his breath for having made the bundles so big. Limmer took no notice of the man's exhaustion, but went on heaving up the faggots till Heelis, slipping and stumbling on the top of the load, could hardly get them to their places. Limmer was not helping him at all, and he had grown quite purple in the face.

"Cursed if I can manage this one!" he cried, holding on to a bundle but not able to pull it up. "I say, give it a shove, Krelis!"

"What a handsome colour you are!" said Limmer, laughing, and went very slowly for a hay fork. Sticking the prongs into the bundle he thrust it upwards so suddenly that Heelis, who was still holding on, fell on his back, and nearly rolled to the ground.

"Curse you! that's not the way to do it!" he spluttered out as he scrambled to his feet.

Ten more faggots had to be loaded. Heelis was now able to look over the tops of the trees edging the path. The waggon, of the real old country type, with fine curving lines, and the quiet horses under their gay green and orange horse-cloths were less visible in the fading light. Heelis was allowed a short rest, then they got to work again.

Limmer was swinging up a large bundle when some of the sticks got caught in his baggy trousers. He presented a ridiculous spectacle, holding the great faggot above his head but entangled in the strong young branches, which dragged his clothing into grotesque folds and threatened to sweep him off his feet.

"Curse you! Don't pull!" he shouted to Heelis, who was leaning over from the top, wondering what was the matter.

"The devil! I can't get free!" said Krelis, wriggling violently.

"Never mind! Just hang on to it!" cried Heelis, chuckling with delight to be thus avenged for his own ill-treatment.

"Hold your tongue, wood-louse!" shouted Limmer angrily, the end of the faggot poised on his chest while he fought with the springy brushwood, looking like a caryatid in a state of furious activity. At last he was delivered, and Heelis pulled up the faggot, his foot uncertain on the damp and quivering pile of brushwood, which looked increasingly massive and imposing as the daylight faded.

"That makes sixty!" shouted Heelis. "I can't take any more."

Limmer, however, fetched another faggot.

"No! I'm damned if I'll take another! I don't want to roll off like Humert, do I?"

"Don't make a row. Three more and then we've done."

And Krelis, grinning unsympathetically, heaved up his load.

"I've got it," said Heelis, but he was quite unable to pull it up.

"What are you doing?" yelled Krelis.

"Give it a shove, can't you? It's too heavy for me," screamed Heelis.

Krelis seized the fork again, for the man's face was crimson and his eyes were starting out of his head with the effort to keep hold of the faggot.

"Hurry, Krelis! It's killing me. I shall drop it!" Then Krelis having pushed in the fork, he added a caution, "Don't knock me down this time. Softly! softly!"

Krelis knowing that repetition of his former joke would be certain to roll Heelis to the ground, pushed up the faggot steadily. Heelis, breathing hard, staggered with it to its place.

"That's the heaviest of the lot, the heaviest of the lot," he groaned.

Krelis, below, was also struggling for breath, leaning on the fork and rubbing his streaming forehead with a corner of hi jersey.

"I'm dying of thirst! What, not a drop in the bottle? Hi! Hallo! Have you got any schnaps there?" he shouted across the road to Dirk and Piet.

"There are just two drops," answered Piet, tossing the can to Limmer. "Is your job finished?"

"One more journey, if there's enough light. That devil on the top there has gone into a consumption. He's as weak as a bean-stalk."

Krelis' eyes were still haggard, and his face and neck were smeared with dust and dirt. Heelis on the top of the load was coughing and sweating violently, stamping the faggots into place, and trying to make the swaying pile more compact.

"Is the block free, Krelis?" he asked, looking anxiously at the swivel pulley at the tail of the cart which tightens the rope and binds the load firmly.

The rope was fixed in front and drawn taut over the faggots by Limmer, Heelis having thrown the loose end to him. Limmer put his whole weight on it, and pulled with all his might, Heelis directing from the top, scrambling backwards and forwards, pulling out a faggot here, pushing one in there, afraid all the time that the whole pile would burst asunder and throw him to the ground.

"It's as tight as I can get it! The devil! Come down, Heelis!" shouted Limmer, shutting his eyes for defence against the sand and mud which his tugs shook upon him from the faggots. Heelis crawled down at the back, very glad to reach *terra firma* again, and took the rope from Limmer, who with many swears was rubbing the dust from his eyes.

"Now then," said Heelis, "let's both have a go at it. We can haul a foot yet, I believe."

They both threw themselves on the rope, tugging valiantly till the top of the load had sunk several inches. Then Heelis fastened the cord.

"Done!" he exclaimed, puffing,

Krelis put on his coat, which lay on the faggots beside the road; Heelis his jacket from the back of one of the horses under the horsecloth.

"Are you off now?" cried Piet.

"We are."

"I'll come with you. Want to fill my bottle: my throat's as dry as a cinder."

The cart moved slowly forward like the hearse in a funeral procession, the wheels sinking deep in the mud.

"You'll have the whole lot over. Look how it's leaning," said Piet.

"Don't drive me mad, Piet! The last load went over twice. We had to load up every blessed faggot again. If this falls, I'll go hang."

"It's all right," shouted Heelis from the driver's box, glancing up at the load which towered above him. "It's holding well. There are only eight faggots too many."

The waggon lurched and lumbered along, its bulging load sweeping off faggots from the stacks waiting to be carted. Suddenly another waggon made its appearance from a side road, and turned into the main track to meet them.

"Hallo! Hallo!" sang out Piet, "what's to be done now? We'll have to unload!"

The rival waggoners swore at and scolded each other; the horses, surprised at the encounter, sniffed each other gently.

"What shall we do?" shouted Heelis.

"Yes, what shall we do?" said the opposition driver.

Krelis crept along between his waggon and the brushwood at the side of the track.

"Heelis! Draw as near this side as you can. Now, Rooster, draw to the other, right through the bushes. Piet and I will give a shove." The horses of Rooster's waggon, aided by Piet and Krelis, conjured and flogged by their master, plunged forward. The waggon moved on, crushing down the undergrowth at the side of the track, the heads and chests of the horses being swept and stung by the springy branches. Now Heelis set his horses also in motion and the two loads brushed heavily past each other, the men expecting every moment to see all the faggots come tumbling down in confusion. When the danger was over Heelis breathed freely and became even jocular.

"I say! next time you come upon us, just have the politeness to send a wire beforehand," he said.

"Right you are!" laughed the other, also overjoyed to have got by without disaster.

Presently Piet went off down a side road to a farm.

The waggon continued its slow progress, the wheels here sinking in the mire, there bumping over roots of trees, the load swaying alarmingly. Krelis had his heart in his mouth to the journey's end.

Piet returned slowly to the spot where he had left his brother. The mist was rising on all sides like steam, enveloping and obscuring trees and bushes. The tall trees bordering the road flung their arms aloft into the fog like melancholy suppliants. Young violet leaves were already up round the mossy roots.

After three-quarters of an hour's absence Piet was back at his work. Again to-day, distrustful of his sons, old Gerrit had come to look on, though often he felt it quite unimportant whether they neglected their work or not. Piet began hacking viciously at a sturdy young tree trunk, supporting it against his knee. It annoyed him to see his father wandering round, his hands in his pockets, spying upon his sons. He chopped away harder and harder. Suddenly his heavy short-bladed billhook flew out of his hand, glanced off the log and struck his leg, making a deep wound in the calf. With a sharp cry he hurled the tree to the ground. Dirk looked round, startled, and old Gerrit ran up quickly.

"Oh Lord!" groaned Piet, his voice shaking, "God's Christ! God's Christ! What torture! What a cut!"

He crouched in a half-sitting posture, and pressed his hand to his leg. Blood oozed up between his fingers, welling through the hole in his trousers. Dirk stuck his billhook in an ash stump and came over to his brother.

"What's the matter? Lie down and let's see what's happened," he said drily.

Piet could not speak. His head lolled forward limply, he supported himself by one elbow on the splinter-strewn ground, pressing his hand to the bleeding limb. He suddenly realised that the blood was flowing very fast, and wild fear of death overwhelmed him.

"God's Christ! Look at the blood—the blood! Stop it! Stop it!" He stared wildly, his face ashy white, his temples swelling. Dirk had come behind and was supporting his head and shoulders, while Gerrit took the chopper and with it cut open Piet's trousers and stockings to display the wound. The blade had entered the leg a little above the ankle, making a deep and gaping wound. Dirk shouted far down the mist-laden track, hoping that Krelis Limmer might be returning with his waggon.

"Hi! hi! Hee hi! is any one there? Hi! an accident!" The call echoed through the wood but found no answer.

"The devil! There seems no one about. Give us the can, father, and we'll bind him up with your handkerchief."

Old Gerrit was frightened, and much vexed that the disaster should have occurred while he was near. He searched obediently for the water-can. Dirk lifted Piet as easily as if he had been saving his strength all day, and laid him on his left side so that the wounded leg lay uppermost. Gerrit brought the can, soaked two handkerchiefs with water and exposed the wound. Dirk gently washed the blood from the edges with the wet handkerchief, then taking off his neckcloth bound it tightly over the wound, and the bleeding soon stopped.

Dirk thought the patient could now stand. He put his hands under Piet's arms and lifted him to his feet. But the pale face grew paler and the legs refused to support the weight.

"No good, man, no good," murmured Piet, his body collapsing like an empty sack, while his eyes sought beseechingly for sympathy and help.

"What's to be done?" said Dirk. He gave another shout but again received no answer except the echo.

Piet lay pale, collapsed, shivering, on his back, taking quick shallow breaths, a terrified look in his eyes. At last a party of wood-cutters came in sight, carrying forks and axes. They were going home, walking with slow tired feet.

"Hallo!" shouted Dirk, "is Limmer there with his cart?"

"Hallo! Who's that lying there?"

"Piet. He's hacked his leg. Chopper flew out of his hand."

Bolk, stooping under a heavy load of tools, said he had just seen the cart.

"I'll call! There he comes! Hi! Limmer! Krelis Limmer!"

The empty waggon came bumping and jolting along the path. Limmer's figure emerged from the mist. Wood-cutters from all parts of the wood were now seen, making their way homewards in the fading light, and exchanging laconic good-nights.

Limmer, Heelis, and Bolk had all stayed to assist the sufferer. Dirk suggested that Piet should be placed on the box-seat of the vehicle where he could be supported by his brother, the rest of the company going inside. Limmer and Heelis agreed.

The blood had soaked through the bandages and the wound had to be bound up afresh. Piet, with drawn grey face, was crying with weakness and self-pity. The mist thickened; the rawness of the air increased as the men busied themselves with their wounded friend, forgetting their own fatigue. Through the little group standing there in the gathering darkness passed a sense of sadness, a deep consciousness of the misery of the toiler's lot. It was momentary but overpowering like a sob. Suddenly but poignantly they felt their human brotherhood, and deep though silent emotion of holy pity showed itself on the shadowed faces.

Dirk lifted Piet to the box as easily as he would have lifted a baby, supporting the injured leg on the pole. Krelis and the others climbed into the waggon, and crouched in the dirt and the litter of broken twigs which covered its floor.

Dirk sprang up beside his brother, picked up the reins and started the horses at a walk. Piet sat silent and trembling, leaning against Dirk and staring at the fog. Now and then he groaned softly.

Old Gerrit squeezed in between Bolk and Heelis; he grumbled a little and was full of vexed thought. Dark forebodings started up in his mind, in time with the jolts of the cart. Better to be in Piet's position than in his! He was in the clutches of the notary and of the doctor. He couldn't pay the doctor's bill as it was, and now he would have to run up another one for Piet. "Why had he such cursed bad luck? Dr. Troost had robbed him over his own and his wife's illnesses; now he would rob him over Piet's! There was no end to it."

His thoughts took an even gloomier turn, as the waggon rumbled along, while round him the weary labourers dozed in silence.

CHAPTER VII

I

OLD GERRIT sat half asleep in his arm-chair. He had been stealing again. Stealing was the only thing that made his life worth having. On Christmas Day he had stolen three planks; on New Year's Day a tobacco pouch, quite full; now he had found and appropriated a child's beautiful red cap. With eyes closed he was thinking it all over; the passionate pleasure of possession made his pulses throb, and drove away the black anxieties which generally crowded so threateningly on him.

The cuckoo clock struck nine with great rattling and scraping before each stroke; but for the old man deep sunk in reverie all the sounds about him were blended in a soft and soothing murmur. To-night he must see his treasure with his eyes. Not the devil himself should hinder this dear delight. The desire for it pricked Gerrit like a wound.

Vrouw Hassel sat staring at a much-thumbed newspaper. When she had read the paper through, it was her habit to begin it all over again, for she had not remembered a single word.

Guurt brought in the stew and dragged up the chairs. Old Gerrit did not stir. He could not eat. He was too excited. To-night he intended to look at his treasure!

One after another they finished their meal and rose from the table, but Gerrit paid no attention. The petroleum lamp had burned low. He felt sleepy. He would go to bed.

The whole family slept in cupboard beds round the walls of the living room except Guurt, who had a chair bedstead made up in the middle of the floor. Gerrit and his wife slept opposite the window, the sons in the wall next to the byre.

Gerrit stumped over to his bed and began to undress, telling Guurt she mustn't place the lamp so that it shone right into his cupboard bed if he opened its door to see the clock, or to get a breath of fresh air. Nor must she on any account leave the room quite dark. Guurt replied discontentedly, what did he want with a light at all? Gerrit scarcely listened. He knelt on the edge of his bed, tumbled into the dark cavern-like sleeping lair, closed the doors and buried himself in the bedclothes.

Guurt sat on the edge of her chair-bed, half undressed. Her arms were quite bare as she lifted them to take out her hairpins, which she collected in her mouth. She loosened the heavy coil of her fair hair, which clustered thick round her white neck and gleaming shoulders.

"*Kristis!* Shut the door!" cried Guurt, holding her hands before her bosom, as Dirk burst out on his way to the tavern.

Sounds of restless movement and loud breathing came from old Gerrit's bed, with a scratching of nails along the inside of the wooden panelling. He was searching for his matches, so as to be ready for his nocturnal excursion.

Vrouw Hassel sat on the edge of a chair, slowly undressing and staring vacantly. At a sharp question from her daughter she stood up, startled, her garments slipping to her feet. She heard; but to-night she could understand nothing. Unintermitted buzzing, singing, hammering, was going on in her head accompanied by a feeling of pressure; all of which made, however, little impression on her consciousness. The one thing she felt keenly was *fear*, and especially whenever her name was called.

She went to bed with the others because she saw everything round her getting quiet and dark. She slept little, however. For years she had slept badly, with terrifying dreams out of which she awoke with contorted body and a countenance of horror. To-night, having undressed, she went over to her sleeping-place and looked about for her night-cap. Gerrit grumbled and swore; she was letting the light in!

Vrouw Hassel trembled; she no longer remembered what she was seeking.

"What are you doing, mother? Is it your cap you want? Why, it's on your head all the time!" said Guurt, throwing a cover over the dove's cage.

Vrouw Hassel slowly crept into the cupboard bed and lay down by the side of her husband.

Guurt stood in her chemise, angrily examining, by the flicker of the little night-lamp, a couple of warts on her little finger. Her coarse hands—the hands of a worker—were very displeasing to her. She had put out the hanging lamp, and the feeble night-light made dark shadows about the room and threw a soft golden radiance on her hair. She was just getting into her bed when there was a rattling of the door latch and the dog growled from the yard.

"Quiet! quiet!" said Piet, entering. He kept somewhat earlier hours than Dirk since the fortnight's rest enforced on him by the wound in his leg. "Quiet! don't you know your master, rascal? Guurt, is there anything to eat?"

"Eating again!" sighed Guurt as she got up.

"I'm as cold as a stone," grumbled Piet; "are the old 'uns in bed?"

"Yes. Be quiet!" said Guurt. She took the lamp to the kitchen and groped in the bread-pan.

"Dry bread?" said Piet; "curse it, I can't eat that!"

"You be hanged! If you want anything else you can get it yourself. I'm going to bed."

Piet grumbled and called her a lazy hussy and wanted black-pudding; presently, however, he subsided in his bed. Guurt also jumped into her chair-bed and pulled the bedclothes up to her chin.

II

The cuckoo clock struck one and the sound reverberated through the room in the stillness of the night. Old Gerrit lay awake, his eyes wide open, in his cavern-like sleeping-place. He heard his wife snoring, with occasional uneasy little moans that began to get on his nerves. He lay still, his head and hands burning, his heart thumping, a prey to the half pleasurable trepidation he always felt when about to make one of his nocturnal visits to the cellar. He must go to-night! Gently now, Gerrit! Be very cautious and careful!

With great precaution he raised himself up. One of the cows rattled her chain in the manger ring and lowed a little. Gerrit lay down again much frightened, and tried to see if his wife had waked. The cow, cursed brute! had been lowing at night like this for a whole week. If his wife was awake, his game was all spoiled. The woman, however, snored on, every now and then holding her breath, then giving a stronger puff with her lips. It seemed as if she wanted to say something and was not able. Gerrit leaned over and put his face quite close to hers. She was fast asleep; it was all right.

He sat up again, drawing himself quite clear of the bed-clothes. Ugh! how dark it was! Good Lord! he almost kicked her! He sat for a few moments outside the bed-clothes. The lowing of the cow still frightened him, but he felt confident now that it would not wake his wife. Stooping, he made a wide step across the woman's body and got to the edge of the bed. After some fumbling, he opened the panel doors and was pleased to see that the night-lamp stood close to Guurt's bed. Now it could not awake the wife by shining right in her face. Retst!—Krak!—Krak! said the doors, as he stepped out through them to the floor. He stood motionless, his heart beating, his eyes staring wildly. Guurt slept on, but Vrouw Hassel raised herself at the doors' creaking, and peered after him. He felt it, felt it, though he did not look round. He stood perfectly still with his back towards her. She muttered a few unintelligible words in the voice of one talking in her sleep. Then silence. She had sunk back again on the pillow.

Now on! but gently, gently, restraining the wild desire to rush towards the cellar door. He lifted the lamp and turned it out, the tiny flame giving a dying sputter. It seemed safer somehow when the light was out and he could see no one. He went on; feeling his way. First, a doorway; then a chair; then close to the granary, a recess; after that—straight ahead. Gently! there, that's all right—that's all right!

He stood by the trap-door now. Earlier in the evening he had put a block of wood under it to hold it up. Otherwise it creaked when lifted—there! Lord! how dark it was—pitch dark. Wait! What was that? Didn't he hear something over there from the bed? No, it was nothing—the boys were snoring like pigs. You might knock the house down and they would hear nothing!

Gerrit was stooping to find the block of wood, when the cow lowed again with restless tossings of her head which shook and rattled her chain. This time Gerrit was not frightened. Let the cow low! Those folk would snore through anything! Now then, where was that block? Oh yes, right in the middle there! Be careful, Gerrit—very careful! Don't forget the lamp. Why hadn't he bought a lamp which he could leave down there with his treasure? No, that wouldn't do. He'd always be having to fill it; the others would smell it; no, it wouldn't do at all.

Noiselessly he lifted the trap-door, and descended the steps to the cellar, meeting a current of cold air which brought a fusty smell and struck chill to his bare feet. Now close the trap gently; now go on down, step by step. Don't be in a hurry; go quietly. Now relight the lamp. You have brought the box of lucifers from the shelf in the cupboard bed?

Gerrit could see now; he might turn the light a little higher. Steady! Steady! A wild desire to throw himself on his hoard almost overcame his coolness. His head throbbed as if it would burst.

Here he was at last with all his precious things about him; and no one knew! no one knew but he!

All round him were great pickling tubs, exhaling a strong sour odour. Overhead a string of mighty sausages hung from a hook, like links of a cable. He set the lamp on a reversed milk-pan. With swimming head and failing limbs he sat down on a wheel-barrow which stood, its wheel on the ground, its legs in the air, wedged in among casks. The lamp smoked, but the old madman, engrossed by his passion, did not notice it. He looked at the flame with wild, deepset eyes, wide open and staring; his long silvery hair hung down his neck, falling over his red vest, which glowed uncannily in the feeble light. He sat for some time motionless and panting, his breath issuing from his mouth as a golden vapour. He sat thus, realising with keen silent pleasure that there, a little farther on, in that cobwebby corner, behind the partition where no one but himself ever came, there was his hoard. Always till he actually saw it, he feared it might not be there; he might have been found out; his treasure might have been spirited away. The longing to *see*—now—this instant, surged up in him wildly, but he did not move. He was held back by the fear that he might not find the treasure as he had left it.

God's Christ! The suspense would madden him! He could bear it no longer. He must summon his courage. Holding the lamp above his head, he shuffled past the casks and other obstacles, which as the faint light fell on them seemed like living things wakening from their sleep in the eternal dark. On he pushed, past coils of rope, baskets, and piles of peat blocks, his head nearly touching the roof. Step by step he picked his way towards the far end of the cellar and stood at last by his spoil. He trembled; now at last he should see it—now! Was it there? was it untouched—as he had left it?

He put the lamp on the floor. The light shone full on his legs, weirdly illuminating his red drawers and dirty shuffling feet. Great formless shadows trembled on the walls, quivering circles of light pierced the dark spaces of the roof. Gerrit's shadow, distorted and grotesque, flitted about over tubs and baskets, walls and beams, seeming to shake gigantic fists at the silent things which surrounded him. Suddenly he stooped and began to search with his hands in a mass of peat-dust which he had strewn over his stolen treasure.

One thing after another came to light. Shoe buckles, parasols, spoons, a bracelet; all just as he had left it. In ecstasy he pulled out thing after thing, laughing and crying under his breath, scarce able to restrain himself from shouting aloud. Then he knelt, almost suffocated by the intensity of his pleasure. He could go mad for very joy, now he saw it all before his eyes!

He loosened the neckband of his red shirt, gasping for air, and bared his bronzed unwashed neck. He held the lamp to the things and moved it about to catch their glint and colour. Finally he retreated a yard or two and sat down on a little stack of peat, tears standing in his eyes.

To look! look! only to look, and feel, and remember it was all his! That he had snapped up that when old Vrouw Bekkema had left the room for a moment, and this from her niece—and no one knew! Here it lay, among the cobwebs, with just a little dust smothering it—and yet—no one knew! He stayed till the cold made him shiver, and wakening slowly from his ecstasy, he perceived for the first time the rats and mice, running, leaping, and gnawing around him.

Rousing himself he again covered his hoard with the peat-dust. Lord! how weary he was! exhausted! light-headed! He must get back to bed. Carefully now, Gerrit! carefully! He turned the lamp down till the flame sputtered blue in a dance of death. The cellar fell back into pitchy darkness. Gerrit disappeared as if swallowed by its black and cavernous mouth. He had reached the trap-door when it suddenly struck him that the mice had gnawed his treasures very badly and many of the things were spoiled. Well—there was no good in thinking of that now. He must get back to bed.

He set the lamp down, opened the door, picked up the lamp, silently crept into the room where his family were sleeping. He listened anxiously for sounds, his knees shook. He glanced at the cuckoo clock. Four! Had he really been down there for three hours?

He crept on past Guurtje's bed; Dirk and Piet were snoring heavily. He had to set the lamp in its place on the floor. He was cold as a lump of ice; it would be pleasant to be back in his warm bed and to lie thinking over his treasures.

Suddenly Gerrit gave a violent start. He saw that he had left the panel doors of the cupboard bed open. God's Christ! here indeed was a misfortune!

He shook with fear; suppose his wife had seen him? He walked straight to the bed and looked down at the woman's vacant, foolish face. She lay staring at him dumbly. She had been awake for some time, noticing nothing, however, not even that her husband had left her side, nor that the panel doors were open.

Suddenly a light had flickered in the room and flashed across her eyes. She saw a figure all in red: but she did not in the least realise that it was her husband. Dumb terror seized her: the red figure seemed gigantic—it came towards her. It stood by her side, staring at her. Horror and shuddering seized her. Presently she yelled aloud—

"The Devil! The Devil! He has come for me!"

Shriek after shriek echoed through the stillness of the night. She sat upright, her hands stretched out in front of her, her knees drawn up, her mouth open to scream. Gerrit did not know what to say, what to do. He tried to push her back, and to spring over her into the bed. With strength lent by fear, she struck at and pushed his legs away from the wooden edge of the bed. He fell on his knees to the floor, scraping his shins along the bed, his hands spasmodically grasping the wooden rim. The woman grew wilder as her terror grew. Her grey face shone ghastly against the black darkness of the cavernous sleeping-place. Her eyes glared. Her cap had fallen, thin locks of faded hair straggled across her horror-struck face, convulsed so as to be unrecognisable. She uttered inarticulate inhuman sounds like some witch frenzied by possession of the Evil One.

Now Gerrit tried to overpower and force her back on the pillow, thinking he could cover her mouth and smother her cries. Again she pushed him away, and he fell, striking his chin on the wooden side of the bed, and bursting into curses.

Guurt, however, woke, and sprang from her bed, alarmed though still bemused by sleep. She hurried to her father.

"The Devil! The Devil! Murder!" yelled the unhappy mother, now flinging herself down and turning her face on the pillow, now starting upright, her wild eyes glaring like those of an animal at bay; her hands ready to ward off the approach of Gerrit.

"Woman! Wife! hold your noise! You're gone mad! It's me! Stop that row!" shouted the old man, unable to understand why his wife should scream at him, or say he was the Devil, or why to-night she was ten times stronger than he was himself.

Guurt, fully awake now, still had no notion what was happening. She did not know her father had been up, nor what had terrified her mother. To her relief the noise waked her brothers. Furiously they banged open the panel doors of their bed, and leaped forth to the assistance of their father, who continued shouting at the top of his voice—

"Be silent, woman, or I'll cut your throat!"

Vrouw Hassel screamed the louder, hitting out wildly, and spueing foam into her husband's face.

All of a sudden she recognised him. The discovery, far from calming her, made her scream louder and more wildly than before—

"He has come to murder me! Help! Help! Murder!"

Dirk pushed his father violently aside, seized his mother by the arms and threw her back on the pillow, pulling the bed-clothes over her head, and pressing on her mouth to smother her cries.

"She's gone stark mad!" cried Piet.

"Come here!" shouted Dirk; "she's beginning again! Get on her legs. I'll manage her head. Hold on to her tight!"

Dirk's swollen eyelids and red eyebrows gave him an indescribably savage appearance in the feeble lamplight. He held his mother down, faint smothered cries and groans coming from under the bedclothes. He put forth all his strength, getting farther on to the bed, and placing his knee on the spot where he supposed the madwoman's throat would be. He was terrified, and did not know what else to do.

Gerrit sat on his wife's legs, crouching low in the dark confined space of the cupboard bed. More than once she shook him off, upsetting his balance and making his head strike the panel. He was thinking what he had better say when they asked him where he had been or what he was doing. He could not think of a plausible explanation, and was getting greatly frightened. But the children were not worrying about questions, their mother had gone mad—they thought of nothing more than that.

Vrouw Hassel's groans and struggles became weaker. Piet and Guurt suddenly realised her peril.

"Stop, Dirk, stop!" screamed the girl; "you're smothering her! She can't breathe!"

"Let her go," said Piet; "it won't help matters if you suffocate her. The devil!"

Dirk sprang back, dragging Gerrit off as well. Terror seized him that he had murdered his mother.

Piet pulled the clothes from her face. It was purple, and for some time she lay motionless. Then she drew a deep breath, opened her eyes and fixed them on Gerrit, who, relieved though still anxious, stood stroking his beard with an attempt at calm.

Vrouw Hassel with a sudden movement straightened herself; she spat in the old man's face, then flung herself on him, tearing his long white hair with claw-like fingers and screaming hoarsely, in apparent return of her memory—

"Murderer! you were going to kill me! I saw you."

Gerrit thought she had followed and seen him in the cellar. He was so alarmed that he fell on his knees in a state of collapse, scarcely feeling the blows the frenzied woman rained upon him with her clenched fists.

Guurt, also beside herself with fear, cried that she would go and call up the neighbours.

"Hold your tongue," said Dirk, "we won't have that! Oh, I'll manage her. Piet, take her by the feet, while I get father away from her."

The old man was hitting weakly back at his wife, his blows thudding dully against her chest. Dirk at last succeeded in freeing him.

"Get away, father," he said, throwing him unceremoniously aside, "she's too strong for you."

Then he took his mother's wrists, and forcing them against her bosom, got her to the pillow. Savage enjoyment of the struggle overpowered him, his breath came in loud pants, and Guurt, pale as a sheet, stood by him in an agony of apprehension.

Slowly the change came. The crisis was passed. Vrouw Hassel's ashy face, with its straggling wisps of hair, began to quiver. Perspiration broke out on her brow. She breathed hard and deep, licking the foam from her lips. She began to whimper; the old look of vacant fear returned to her eyes. She gazed round her uncomprehendingly. Already she had forgotten all that had taken place. The paroxysm was over. Frenzy was smoothed from her face.

"What is it?" she asked feebly. "Why are you holding me? What o'clock is it?"

"Don't talk," said Dirk brutally; "you are out of your mind."

She sobbed quietly, lying back with her hands crossed on her breast, not knowing why she wept: fearful only of hearing herself called in angry tones, of being upbraided for forgetfulness of this or that.

Old Gerrit sat in his arm-chair under the cuckoo clock, rejoicing that his wife had seen nothing, or had forgotten.

"Good Lord, father!" cried Piet suddenly, leaping from the bed now he saw the poor thing was quiet, her legs stretched out motionless and limp, "Good Lord, what were you doing out of bed? Did she throw you out?"

"H—m—No—o. It wasn't exactly that. I had to get up. When I was going back she was awake, and she began raving the moment she saw me."

Gerrit's head had swum at Piet's question, for he had thought the danger of questions was over. He had no answer ready. But without any preparation an answer had slipped out which sounded so natural he was quite amazed. Vrouw Hassel heard her husband's voice and noticed for the first time that he was not at her side.

For another half-hour the little group stood round the bed. They scolded the poor woman for having made a disturbance, but she only murmured a few uncomprehending words in reply.

"It's all right now," said Piet, yawning and stretching.

Gerrit alone was nervous, afraid of being strangled if he got into his bed.

"By God, I won't sit up any longer," said Dirk, "she's all right for the present; you can send for the doctor in the morning. I've got to get up early, so I must have some sleep. Call me if she begins again."

Apprehensively Gerrit crept to his place, expecting her to attack him. She remained quiet, however, only asking him in a dull tired voice if he had been away.

Guurt smoothed the lace edging of her nightdress, thinking she would like to beat her mother for having given her such a fright. Yet in spite of herself, pity rose in her heart when she looked at the grey face, the dull eyes staring vacantly out of the dark bed.

"What have I done?" said the poor mother wistfully to her daughter, who was the last to leave the bedside.

"Nothing—nothing—you weren't well. Go to sleep now," said Guurt.

And she slipped back to her own bed, creeping under the quilt, shivering with cold.

Old Gerrit lay trembling. He was frightened again; he felt sure his wife knew all about it—about the treasure. He felt desperately afraid; surely it would be taken from him! Then came remorse for his thieving, fear of God's punishment. He saw the green figures and flames flickering in the dark corners. Oh, why had Guurt shut the panel door? He was left in pitchy darkness!

Gradually his fears subsided, his eyes closed, in utter weariness he fell into an uneasy dreamful sleep from which he started up with a sense of suffocation. Beside him his wife slept heavily, breathing loud and puffing out her lips. He could not sleep again. The darkness and the silence lay like a weight on his eyes, his hands, his throat Slowly the old feeling of pleasure took possession of him, delight in the certainty that not a soul knew that he had a hoard of stolen goods; not one living soul!

CHAPTER VIII

I

AGAIN the snow fell in countless slow-sinking flakes over the wide Station Square. Dim and ghostly, horses and vehicles came from the central avenue. A woman in a red shawl issued from a low house and walked across the white expanse of the almost deserted Polder.

The old year had gone, its passing celebrated by a night of coarse and drunken uproar. Now Wiereland and Duinkijk lay snowed in on all sides; the cold increased daily untempered by the chilly glitter of the midday sun. The nurserymen were all grumbling and cursing because their early plants, already showing above ground, would be cut off. After long frost came short thaw, making the paths deep in mire and slush. Sombre days with leaden skies followed till there was more snow again, whitening the streets and houses, this time without perceptible frost.

Kees was stamping about his backyard trying to warm his feet. He had earned a few quarter-gulden at osier peeling. That was over now and he had a poaching expedition on hand for to-night. He had arranged to go in company with three of the more notable Wiereland poachers, as he had neither snares of his own nor a gun. Last time he had been caught by the keepers they had taken everything from him. For the first time Piet was to join the party. Kees had no particular objection, so long as Piet did not make a fool of himself.

Kees loafed about the yard till dark, cursing inwardly because he was out of work and there was no food in the house. The devil! It was too cold out there! His teeth chattering, he returned to the living room and threw himself on the floor in front of the small fire. Old Rams was there huddled up, chewing, spitting, and coughing. As soon as he was warm Kees stood up muttering discontentedly. The place stank like the plague. Intolerable that smell of valerian! It made him quite ill. He would go across to Grint's. He always liked to see Geert—she was a bonnie lass.

"Wife, if the fellows come tell them to wait. We shall be out for the night."

Ant's reply was hardly heard above the screams of the children.

At half-past seven she lit the lamp. Wimpie was singing softly in his corner. Old Rams sat with the flickering firelight playing on his face. The children, very tired and inclined to cry, were undressing. They dropped their dirty rags and scrambled into two cupboard beds, where they lay huddled together breathing each other's breath on a damp and stinking mattress of foul straw. Dientje and her little sister Aafje were not yet in bed. Dientje was the eldest, the little mother, a hollow-eyed pale child, nervous and overwrought, already weighed down by responsibility. She was going round seeing that the other children were all right.

"Say your prayers, brats," screamed the mother; "Dien, look after them and give them a good slap—little plagues. Don't let them talk. If they talk I'll come and give them something."

Aafje was kneeling, and Dien stood by her to hear her prayers, to help her through with them.

When the prayers were over, she put the child into bed with her sisters. She then took a bottle from the chimney-piece and with shaking hands gave herself a spoonful of valerian. Mother said she must take it for her nerves, because she had such horrid dreams and screaming fits. She was to give the little one who slept next her a dose too, Ant cried out; "and she must say her prayers, Dien. Look, she's lain down and not said her prayers. Can't you see I'm busy with the bread?"

"I'm so tired," sighed poor Dien.

Ant pulled a long baking tin from the oven and put it on the table with a clatter that made the children jump. Wimpie, who was singing to his picture of the Virgin, winced at the noise. He was never able to sleep until his mother came to bed at eleven. Now Grandmother Rams came in, peering about and holding her hands before her to avoid collisions. She was very stout with high hip bones and looked like a much bepetticoated fishwife. Her fat body was surmounted by a short fat neck and a small foxy head with sinister green eyes, never still for a moment, but peering restlessly from sockets deep sunk in her sallow cheeks. She could see only faint shadows of objects, but always tried to conceal how bad her sight was. In the daytime she insisted on going out alone, but was often brought back at night by good-natured people who had found her lost and bewildered. When she ran into anybody or anything she would fly into a passion and scold at the obstacle, taking none of the blame to herself. She never knew clearly who was in the room and who not. She would try to find out secretly from the children.

As she entered she paused by Wimpie's bed.

"Do you want something to drink, child?" she asked twice, not noticing the boy's impatient shake of his head.

"Don't you hear me?" she asked again crossly.

"No—no! I don't want anything!" said Wimpie.

Vrouw Rams bent her foxy head over the child the better to see him, and Wimpie began to cry querulously—

"What do you want? I haven't asked for anything," he said.

Ant, standing at the table, her hands covered with dough, looked at the boy and called out angrily—

"Do let him alone, mother! Don't you see you're driving him mad?"

Without answering, the fat woman shuffled away from Wim, past the beds where the other children were sleeping tightly packed. She looked into their cupboards as she passed but could distinguish nothing, and hobbled on defending herself with her hands. Nevertheless, she fell up against a chair in the corner.

"That was all your fault!" she cried at once, then gaining no reply realised that her opponent was an inanimate object. She stood by the hearth, recognising the outline of old Rams huddled in his chair. She hated her husband. They had hardly spoken to each other for thirteen years. She hated him because he had let Ant marry Kees, and because now he would neither do Kees a bad turn nor join in abusing him. Old Rams, caring only for himself, in constant fear of becoming ill and dying, old, worn-out, enfeebled, took no interest in the family quarrels and the troubles which had arisen out of his daughter's marriage. All he wanted was a quiet life. He returned his wife's detestation, if only on account of her bad temper, her perennial fountain of bitterness and gall; still hatred did not burn in him with its heat of earlier years. If he loathed the very sight of her he never said so to any one. For thirteen summers the pair had slept in the little cupboard bed at the back of the house; in those thirteen years they had scarcely exchanged a word. Rams did not care for gossip. He was satisfied with his chair and a little food. When there was no food and no fire, a quid of tobacco would satisfy him. So there he sat by the chimney, summer and winter, asking neither air nor sun, nor a sight of the outer world. Only when Ant had failed to beg any tobacco, or when his wife came near him, peering with her blind eyes, groping with her hands, then he would mutter under his breath, "Swine!—swine!"

Ant worked at the rickety table, kneading the dough in a dirty basin of yellow earthenware, and putting it in great handfuls into the long baking tin. Vrouw Rieker, who lived a little farther along the Zeekijk road, appeared in the doorway, bringing a rush of raw air in with her. She walked over to the chimney, sank on a stool and said with a great sigh—

"Oh Lord! I am terrified!"

"Why, neighbour, it's never you!" exclaimed Ant; for she had not been favoured previously by a visit from Vrouw Rieker, a market gardener's wife who considered herself very superior to the Hassel riff-raff. What had happened to her outside, however, had thrust her pride into her pocket.

"Let me sit down!" she panted, "let me recover a little! Give me a drink of water!—Oh, what a fright I have had!" Ant went on with her bread-making for a minute or two, then walked over to Wimpie, who was still lying awake, to let him lick the dough from her fingers. He always thought this a great treat. Rubbing one hand on her apron, letting Wimpie lick the other, she looked over her shoulder at Vrouw Rieker and said in a tone of some hostility—

"Lord save us, woman, what's the matter with you? You can get some water out of the bucket there."

Grandmother Rams had shuffled round the visitor and was staring hard at her back. She found out who she was by her voice.

"Well, what is it?" said Vrouw Rams; "your ghosts again?"

"By the Lord, I swear I saw two of them—there on the path!"

"There's an evil spirit in you, woman," said Vrouw Rams with a mocking grin; "the devil has got you fast, that's my opinion!"

Ant had to go out to take the dough to the baker in Wiereland. She had already waited a quarter of an hour for Vrouw Zeilmaker and Vrouw Zeune, who usually accompanied her on this expedition.

"Stay as long as you like, neighbour," she said, "but I must go about my business."

"No! no!—Oh, but I can go back with Vrouw Zeilmaker!" said Vrouw Rieker, getting up hurriedly, "I daren't go along that path alone! I saw two of them, I tell you! It nearly killed me with fright!"

"Two of them? *two?*" sneered the grandmother. "You must look after your soul, my friend, you're sold to the devil! Take care!"

A thump was heard at the door and the two expected women came in noisily.

"Ready, neighbour?" asked Vrouw Zeune, in a hoarse masculine voice.

"Yes, I'm ready. You see I am honoured by a visit from Vrouw Rieker. She has seen two ghosts on the path."

"Oh, ghosts!" laughed Vrouw Zeune, "I shouldn't have thought they'd come out in this weather. It's pouring cats and dogs, it's pitch dark, the wind's enough to blow your hair off. Depend upon it the ghosts will all stay at home!"

Pale and trembling, Vrouw Rieker sank back on her stool close to old Rams. The grandmother was still shuffling round the circle; she knew by the voices who was there. She did not hear Kees. Thank goodness, he had gone out. Vrouw Rams was mortally afraid of Kees and his furious temper.

"She's bedevilled, bewitched, I tell her," said the old woman, "she'll have to be exorcised. I can do it. Wimpie has been bedevilled too, by that blackguard of a father of his—the drunken brute—always running after the girls."

"Let Kees alone, mother," said Ant sharply, afraid of an outburst from Wimpie, and also not willing to have her husband's misdeeds discussed in the presence of the ultra respectable Vrouw Rieker.

"Ah, you poor innocent! you know nothing about it. Every one else knows about your husband. He tried to stab the burgomaster himself. And he's ruined all the girls in the place. And for the last three days he's been lying drunk in the Ferry Inn."

"It's a lie!" said Ant, "he's been home the whole week."

"Not true, isn't it? Ah, you poor innocent, don't you talk! He's deceiving you. The shameless brute! after every girl of flesh and blood whom he sees—and out poaching night after night—the thief! He's been the ruin of you. He ought to be cut in pieces, the monster—the heretic!"

She stood in the centre of the circle of women, gesticulating, delighted to have an audience for her abuse of her son-in-law; the more so that Kees himself was out of the way. She raised her arms above her foxy head, she shook her fists; she walked hither and thither excitedly and even ran up against Vrouw Zeune, who pushed her away by no means gently. Ant always agreed with her mother when they were alone, but the presence of all these women made a difference.

"Let Kees be, mother! What are you going on like this for? You'll talk us all crazy."

Wimpie was sobbing and crying, "It's all lies, grandmother, it's all lies! Father didn't do it—father didn't!"

Flushed with excitement, Vrouw Rams made her way to the child's bed with a sneering laugh.

"Ho! ho! this young master knows better than I do, does he? If I was your mother, I'd give you a good hiding, young impudence!"

"Come, come! what a fuss!" said Vrouw Zeune with her hearty deep-toned laugh. "How you do go on, woman! you'll wake the baby! And poor Vrouw Rieker sitting all this time shaking! Another drink of water, neighbour, eh?"

Ant was trying to soothe Wimpie. He was stretching up to his shelf looking for something to throw at his grandmother. Ant took his hands, kissed them and stroked them, speaking softly to him.

"That's right! that's right!" cried Vrouw Rams, "throw things at your grandmother, spitfire! Like father, like son, that's the way all the world over!"

"Good Lord, woman," said Vrouw Zeune, "it's very wrong to torment that child so! Why do you repeat these silly tales? The very devil and his dam wouldn't believe them. They're nothing but stuff and nonsense."

Wimpie sobbed on as if his little heart would break, making inarticulate efforts to speak. Vrouw Rieker stared vacantly, her cup of water in her hand, which shook so that the water splashed into her lap.

"What's gone wrong with you, neighbour?" said Vrouw Zeune, "you seem quite dazed. There, take a drink and then get home like a good soul. The wind's gone down a bit.

"I can't! I can't go along that path by myself! I hear their footsteps coming after me! *Klos! Klos!* like wooden shoes. If I take a light, I don't see anything, but the noise is in my ears the whole time! the footsteps! *Klos! Klos!* I get so frightened I can't breathe. I tell you I won't go back alone! I *won't!*"

"Mother!" moaned Wimpie, who had been thrown into strong nervous excitement by this recital. "Mother! Dientje and Jaansje say that every night a carriage without any horses drives by—right along the path—past the house. It's driven by a skeleton who keeps looking round—just looking—looking!"

The last words were scarce audible. The women had gathered round the child's bed with anxious eyes. The lamplight fell on the boy's death-like face as he turned beseechingly to his mother.

"It's wicked to say such things, child," said Vrouw Zeilmaker, her voice trembling, "you make me feel dreadful."

"It's all Dientje's nonsense, my pet," said Ant, smothering her own superstitious fears; "when I come back I'll——"

"No, mother, no! You mustn't go!" screamed Wimpie, raising himself on his elbow. "Mother! mother! Stay here. I'm so frightened! I've seen the death's head myself! I've seen it! It looks in at the window! like that! looking—looking!"

Wimpie's eyes were fixed on his mother in a wild stare of fear, cold sweat broke out round his mouth. Vrouw Zeilmaker moved backwards from his bed horrified. Vrouw Rieker shuddered and drank her cup of water, her teeth chattering on the edge. Vrouw Zeilmaker crossed herself.

"That was only a bad dream, my darling!" said the mother, stroking his cheeks, and the little head now dripping with perspiration, "a nightmare! When the good priest comes to-morrow you can confess, and when you've taken the Communion it will all fly away. Hasn't grandmother crossed your stockings at the foot of your bed every night?"

"It's a crying shame!" said the hearty, sensible Vrouw Zeune; "all that nonsense frightens the child! Crossing his stockings, indeed! You're just cracked the whole lot of you!"

Ant still stroked her boy's ashen cheeks, comforting him, and she whispered with Vrouw Zeilmaker, asking her to wait a few minutes.

"When he's quieter, then I'll come with you," she said.

Vrouw Zeune had sat down, and was now looking at old Rams, now at Vrouw Rieker, who was still scared.

"I say, neighbour!" she said suddenly, "where's your goat? It's not dead?"

An angry look was Ant's only reply. The animal had been sold to pay the rent; much to the indignation of Kees. Wimpie had loved the creature, and after its loss had cried inconsolably for a week. To-day he had appeared to forget it; and now this fool of a woman must go and remind him of it. Vrouw Zeune saw she had blundered and tried to change this subject.

She was not a person who could sit still and say nothing. She was accustomed to bustle and noise; an expert saleswoman who could generally contrive to dispose of anything her husband had left on his hands at the local market, or at that of Amsterdam.

"Has that brute of a rent collector been here lately?" asked Vrouw Zeune; "he's a nice blackguard, isn't he?"

"I die whenever I see him," said Vrouw Zeilmaker; "I owe him eleven weeks. He knows that my man and Kees and Willem are all out of a job. He knows we live on bread and water, yet he comes round frightening us. I do believe he'll put us in the street."

"If he comes at me," said her friend, "I'll punch his head for him, dirty beast!"

"He's not a beast," broke in Vrouw Rams, "he's a respectable man who doesn't drink and doesn't run after girls. I say a man without religion is worse than any beast; that's what I say. He's quite respectable and thrifty, and a man without religion is worse than a beast!"

The old woman's voice shook, and her mouth looked like the mouth of a snarling dog. She stared straight before her with her dim eyes.

"All right, Vrouw Rams, that's what you say. For me, I wouldn't trust him an inch farther than I could see him. You can't see, I know that, but I can, and—and—well, ask any woman in the place what he tries when they can't pay! You say he don't drink? Don't he, indeed? I'd like to have here in my pocket the half he spends in drink! And *respectable?* Didn't he try his nasty games on my Trien? Didn't he do his best to seduce Vrouw Grint's Geert?"

"All scandal and spite!" said Vrouw Rams shrilly. "He goes to church—there's not a more pious man in the place. And a man without religion's far worse than a beast, Vrouw Zeune. Do you hear?"

"Quite true," said Vrouw Zeilmaker soothingly, "true as a book."

"He's a Catholic, and that's enough for Vrouw Rams," said the other vigorously. "I say I'd sooner lend him my prayer book than my purse! That's what I say!"

Ant was still at Wimpie's side. Spite of the noise he was getting sleepy. Her thin fingers still stroked his head, which now lay quiet on the pillow, now stirred uneasily when his grandmother's harsh voice overpowered the others.

"Vrouw Zeune," said the old woman with an effort at great solemnity, "your soul is in danger. You're on the high road to damnation. You will not find mercy, for you don't repent, and you have no humility."

"Pooh! humility! If you weren't such an old woman, I'd give you a good clout. You ought to be ashamed of yourself! You talking of humility and coming out with your bits of catechism—and never one good word for a living soul! You're a nice 'un to preach!"

"I say you're one of the damned," said Vrouw Rams, staring with her purblind eyes, "you're full of deadly sins! You'll burn in unquenchable fire, and your conscience will gnaw you to eternity!"

She stretched out her arms menacingly, the ecstatic smile of the devotee on her face, the madness of the bigot in her voice.

Vrouw Zeilmaker trembled, even Vrouw Zeune the Protestant was at a loss for a reply, impressed and dominated as she was by the solemnity of the denunciation, delivered in the stillness of the little room, to the accompaniment of the howling wind.

However, she pulled herself together. "Is that all?" she said scornfully after a short silence. "Have you done? A fine piece of acting! a very pretty show! God Almighty! what a woman! Come, Ant, are you ready? I must be getting on now."

In the dark cupboard where Dien slept with three of her sisters rose a sudden commotion. Movements were heard and terrified cries. Dien was sitting upright and screaming with terror. She had thrown off the dirty rags which served as bedclothes, and was staring at the dark wall of her sleeping-place, her knees drawn up to her chin, her fingers tearing her short fair hair.

Ant went to her angrily, for she had patience with none of her children except Wimpie.

"Shut up, child! Be quiet! Are you at your silly nonsense again?"

Dientje did not see her. She looked straight in front of her, crying—

"He's got me! Help! Help! He's sticking a knife in me!"

"Hold your tongue, brat! There's nobody! lie down at once! There's nothing!"

The women all crowded round, following the child's eyes. Ant pushed them away, whispering to Vrouw Zeune to give her the medicine bottle from the chimney-piece. Dientje was still muttering and pointing, and two of her bedfellows were now awake, frightened and shivering.

Vrouw Rams suddenly shouted in her harsh angry voice—

"This is the sin of your tipsy, good-for-nothing seducer of women! It's the Lord's curse on him and his family!"

"Do you want to drive me mad, mother?" cried Ant, with the uncontrollable nervous irritation of exhaustion. "I could murder him this minute if he were here!"

"It's a lie, grandmother! It's a lie!" screamed Wimpie, broad awake since the beginning of Dientje's attack.

"But, neighbour, what's the matter with the girl?" cried Vrouw Zeune vehemently.

"Nerves. The doctor says nothing but nerves."

"I've never seen nerves so bad as that!"

Ant had returned to Wimpie and was devoting herself to him.

"Look here, neighbour," said Vrouw Zeune "that girl does too much, and that's what's the matter with her! It makes me wretched to see her! such a little creature! just look at her! To the Polder first thing in the morning; at nine scrubbing Vrouw Leming's floors, that mite! at half-past ten carrying papers for Theunis till three, with nothing in her stomach. Then working for you all the afternoon. In the evening hawking fish—I tell you it's enough to kill her! And all day long with her eye on the other children——"

"What's the good of all this?" said Ant angrily, "is it my fault? Can we live by her schooling?"

In a passion she went over to Dien, forced her mouth open with a spoon and made her swallow a dose of valerian. "It's nothing but nerves; the doctor says so. It doesn't happen often. Once a week perhaps. Now you see the sort of life I lead, neighbours, never a moment's peace. Nine children—one of them sucking, and nothing to eat. The child sucks me dry three times a night, so I hardly have time to close my eyes. It's worse than the life of a beast."

She threw herself on a chair by the table, her shoulders shaken by sobs. The neighbours stood round, with doleful faces. Vrouw Rieker had forgotten her own grievance, moved by Ant's undeniable misery. She resolved to see her oftener, and if she had anything to spare to send it for the woman with the nine children.

Ant got up from her chair ashamed of her tears; she dried her eyes with a quick rub of her apron and went over to look at Dientje, who had lain down but was still muttering and staring.

"The child's as thin as a lath," said Vrouw Zeune pityingly. "I tell you she does too much. Look at the rags the children have over them. They're shivering. How can they sleep like that?"

"But Kees has nothing to buy clothes for the children with!" cried Ant, exasperated. "They're wearing his old clothes, nothing else; and I patch and I darn till I give myself apoplexy."

Again Dientje started up, pointing at vacancy.

"Oh, mother! The policeman! There he is! Mother!"

She buried her head in her mother's bosom. Ant, at her wits' end, could think of nothing but to give her another dose of the valerian.

The other three children who shared Dien's bed were crying; but they smothered their sobs, knowing that if their wearied mother heard them, they would be given a beating.

At last Dientje slept and Ant flung herself on a chair by Wimpie's side.

"Neighbours! I'm done up. I can't walk a step."

"We'll take your bread," said Vrouw Zeilmaker, "you leave it to us. Goodness! what wind! what rain! you couldn't possibly go with these holes in your shoes."

"Thank you, neighbour. Here are three cents; I owe him twenty-eight. If he says he won't do any more for us, tell him Kees has got work, and perhaps——"

"What? you owe him money?" cried Vrouw Zeilmaker, "then I can't take your bread! I know he wouldn't bake it."

"God of mercy! then what am I to do?" moaned Ant, again bursting into tears and burying her face in her hands.

Wimpie tried to lift himself and struggle out of his bed.

"If mother cries Wim will die!" said the little voice with a strangely determined tone, the hollow eyes glowing like coals. Ant looked up, drying her eyes.

"Naughty boy, be quiet," she said sharply, cross even with Wimpie.

"Now, neighbour," said Vrouw Zeune's cheerful voice, "if Vrouw Zeilmaker won't take your bread, I will. Look at the great Vrouw Rieker, who could buy up the lot of us, and does nothing for you! Of your own religion the two of them; nice friends certainly! I'm a Protestant, but I'm not going to abandon you. He *shall* bake your bread! He trusts me all the winter and I just pay him when I can in the summer! Vrouw Rieker, don't you know you ought to spare something to your fellow-creatures? Just look at that child! Won't you risk a couple of cents for him? Well, good-night all of you! Good-night, Wimpie, my man!

The strong masculine voice vibrated in the little room. As she finished speaking she opened the door and walked out quickly. Vrouw Rieker and Vrouw Zeilmaker shuffled after her, confused and embarrassed.

Grandmother Rams, with her foxy head and staring purblind eyes, stumbled round the room, feeling her way, and mumbling sentences from the catechism. Old Rams sat huddled in his chair like a sack, spitting into the fire and trying to suppress his cough.

II

At ten o'clock Kees stumped into the house in his *sabots*. Ant was undressing, yawning loud and often the while. Wind and rain beat hard on the one window. With large eyes wide open, frightened and motionless, Wimpie listened to the storm.

"Aren't you going to bed, father?" he ventured.

"No, my son. Father has to go out. Shut up your eyes and go asleep: that's my good boy!"

"Shall you be out all night?" yawned the wife.

"Can't say. Not if we have luck. Have they brought my gun?"

"Yes. I've hung it on the wall."

"Go to bed then, and don't worry. We shall be all right."

Kees, already wearing his long boots, took down the breechloader; then polished the reflector of his lantern with his sleeve, rubbing the glass on his trousers. He shook the lantern close to his ear to hear if there was enough oil; took the gun quickly to pieces, and put everything into a grey bag. "Now go to sleep, boy," he said softly to Wimpie as he slung the bag over his shoulder.

"Isn't it a great storm, father?" whispered Wimpie.

"Yes. But that's all the better. The more wind and rain the better father can shoot! It's just right for January. Mustn't talk any more now, like a good boy."

The man's huge form seemed to fill the little room as he moved about in the dull lamplight. Wim's eyes followed his every movement. Ant put out the light and knelt before the Crucifix praying rapidly and low. Kees bade her no farewell, but he kissed Wimpie on the forehead. Then he opened the door and went out on tiptoe.

The wind roared and thundered; stinging hail like fine shot pelted the man in the face. He made his way rapidly in the direction of the sea. The expedition gave him no pleasure. It was a splendid night for it, but he detested it all the same. He hated the whole business. Setting snares was a little better, but now he had no snares left. Last week he had set ten, but each one had been found by the keeper.

Kees could not see an inch before him. The path led out into the black darkness. The wind seemed to blow from every quarter of the dune at once. He must go on a bit farther, however. The tryst with his companions was for half-past ten. The things in his bag thumped his back at every step; the wind pierced his worn garments. During a lull he gave a double whistle as a signal, but no reply came. Trees creaked and roared; flakes of wet snow blinded him. The moaning of the wind rising and falling was like a vast orchestra of strings, accompanying the great song of the sea, which was heard from far beyond the dunes.

Suddenly a low whistle came from a short distance in the

Wiereland direction. The men were there! Kees made his way to them, splashing along the muddy path. There were five. Jan Breugel, Klaas Koome, Delker, Piet Hassel, and another novice named Plomp. The pitchy darkness made Plomp nervous: he continually fancied he was running into something. Piet also was ill at ease; he shuffled about on the outside of the group, muttering to himself.

Kees did not speak. He took his position by Jan Breugel, who was to carry the dark lantern. Koome and Delker walked behind; Piet mocked at Plomp, who was heartily wishing he had not come. Not a word did he venture to Kees, whose grim taciturnity and herculean appearance were alarming. Kees and the other old hands led the way across the wildest, roughest part of the dune, the wind moaning in the inky darkness, the melancholy diapason of the sea sounding under the song of the hurricane.

Piet was far from happy. He did not like the storm; still less did he like the darkness. However, he was determined to hide his uneasiness from the mocking Klaas Koome.

"Well, Piet," said the latter, "it's whistling a bit, isn't it? We shall have some fine practice from Kees to-night. He never misses."

"Hold your stupid tongue there," growled Kees; "is this a time for talk?"

A new moaning and roaring above the general note of the tempest indicated a clump of trees close at hand, through whose branches the wind sighed and howled. A light shone from the curtained window of a house set back from the road behind a low hedge.

"Silence now, Klaas," whispered Breugel, "this is the keeper Piet Smeuling's place."

The poachers crept past the house on tiptoe.

"Are we never going to reach the place? Is it all right?" asked Plomp.

"You are quite safe with Kees," laughed Klaas.

"Silence there!" repeated Breugel.

"I say, Piet," continued the irrepressible Klaas, "you should have been out last week. Kees got twenty hares in twenty shots, and sixty rabbits in sixty shots. He was posted just outside Bekker Wood. No one to equal Kees at that stand! There's no one in Egmond or Haafedrecht or Zeekijk who can shoot against Kees."

The leaders halted suddenly. Plomp could not see his hand before his face; he muttered that he could find his way as easily about hell, and he believed they were all going there. The more experienced Kees and Breugel could see better. They had reached a place where a side track led to the very heart of the dune. Up this they pushed on noiselessly, till they came to a ditch with a fence of barbed wire on the farther side. Kees jumped over the ditch and negotiated the fence without difficulty. Breugel and Delker followed him. Kees whispered to the others that not one word must be spoken. Klaas Koome, however, who could not be silent, murmured to the novices that the pasture lay on the other side of the fence, and that the fun was about to begin. He then jumped the ditch, hung on to the fence, and tried to help Piet and Plomp as they scrambled after him.

Plomp was in mortal terror of being caught; he had joined the gang as a last resource, egged on by his friends, who told him that an out-of-work with no food in his house must get a living somehow. He had no sympathy with Koome or Delker, who went poaching for the love of it.

"Now then, Plomp! Piet's across long ago!" said Klaas impatiently.

Plomp floundered in the dark. He had fallen into the ditch and found the slippery snow-clad bank afforded little hold to drag himself out by. Klaas seized him and hauled him up.

"There you are, clumsy beggar! Now mind you don't leave the seat of your breeches on the barbed wire!"

A low whistle, blending with the moan of the wind, was repeated thrice.

"That's a call from Kees; he wants me over there to keep watch. Follow me."

Much frightened, Plomp stepped down from the bank. He could see nothing. Everywhere pitchy darkness. He seemed perpetually falling into a black abyss which at every step receded from him, then came up close again to his foot. Was he a child to be thus afraid of the dark? Plomp cursed himself for his cowardice; as he walked he kept violently jerking back his head, imagining he was going into a hedge. All was vague, threatening. He could see nothing, feel nothing; only he must go steadily on.

Suddenly his throat seemed to close with nervous terror. They had told him the keepers were near. Were they watching him through the darkness? Would they suddenly spring out and make him prisoner? He staggered on, and presently found the rest of the gang crouched on the ground whispering softly.

Kees, calm and unmovable, his every sense on the alert, his whole being concentrated on the business in hand, showing no trace of excitement much less nervousness, dominated the chattering and irresponsible Koome. So pleasurable was the expedition to Koome that he had difficulty in restraining his spirits. The man was actively disliked by Kees, first because he was always joking and playing the fool, secondly because he loved poaching, he a prosperous seedsman who never felt the pressure of want!

Kees, quite unmoved by the tempest, put his gun together, taking the pieces carefully from the bag.

"Koome," said Breugel in a whisper, "you hold the bag, Delker the sticks. Give a stick to Piet and one to Plomp. Don't use it, Plomp, unless some one goes for you. In that case hit him over the head."

"What do you say? What am I to do?" asked the trembling Plomp.

"Now, silence. We've got four keepers round us; if they get us by the throat it will be a case of Stone Jug; remember that. Now you, Piet and Plomp, keep the look-out. If there's danger, say, Haarlem; when it's over, say, Igmuiden. If the wind drops, lie down; you can hear footsteps better like that."

Breugel crouched over the lantern, Kees by his side with the gun. A match was struck; its light flickered on the faces of the men as they stood round trying to make a screen till the lantern was alight. After trying the shutter, Breugel announced that all was ready. A ray of light shot out from the dark lantern, illuminating the snow-covered field. Immediately the lantern was covered with a bag.

"Holy Virgin, they'll see us!" cried Plomp.

"Hold your jaw," said Kees in a fierce whisper.

He stood by Breugel, his gun ready at his shoulder.

"All ready? Klaas? Piet? Delker? Remember the watchword! All ready?"

"Ay! Ay!"

"This is nice weather and no mistake!" laughed Klaas, forgetting the prohibition of talking. A blow on the back from Kees brought him to his senses. Breugel was still manipulating the lantern shutter; Delker at a short distance lay with his ear to the ground.

After a minute or two Breugel uncovered the lantern, and a ray of light streamed far over the field in the direction of the sand-hills. He turned the lantern every way in turn for Kees. The latter stood bent slightly forward, his finger on the trigger, now lit up by the shaft of light, now lost in the darkness. Directly behind him stood Koome, beyond him Piet and Delker the watchers; Plomp was the last in station.

Kees stepped briskly forward; they all followed, now too much excited to speak, fighting their way through the storm. Now the lantern gleam revealed a pair of rabbits sitting up on the snow. The report of Kees' gun sounded dully through the howling of the wind. Kees reloaded quickly, fired a second time, .and walked quickly on. Koome hurried to seize the rabbits. Kees' first victim was creeping feebly over the snow, leaving a bloody trail. Koome pounced upon it, made his teeth meet in the back of the creature's neck, and threw it into the bag: the second he treated in the same way, showing his animal pleasure in the work by a curious growling.

Kees pushed on steadily, firing and reloading repeatedly, warmed now to the sport, oblivious of all else. The shivering Plomp hurried after his comrades, expecting each moment to flounder in a ditch. Already in anticipation he felt the clutch of the keepers' fingers at his throat. Piet plodded on, panting and uneasy. He had no idea where he was, he who had believed he knew every inch in the districts of Wiereland and Duinkijk.

After a while, Breugel turned and flashed the lantern along the slope of a sand-hill. The poachers were walking between it and a barbed fence which ran along the bank of a ditch. They halted instantaneously, their silhouettes just discernible, in a row along the fence. A quick, frightened voice had said—

"Haarlem."

Instantly the lantern was darkened; the sandy slope, the wire fence, the file of poachers were all swallowed up in inky blackness. From the neighbouring canal came the sound of a steamer's foghorn, a deep and swelling note like the trumpeting of some mighty mammoth in the prehistoric night. The sound ceased; the hurricane resumed its sway. Plomp, stumbling along after the others in a state of unintermitted panic, had suddenly felt himself seized by the legs. Hurriedly he gave the danger signal. Now he could neither see nor feel anything attacking him or twining round his ankles. They scattered, some leaping into a ditch. Kees was up to his knees in icy water, his whole body chilled. After some minutes, unable to bear it, he whistled. Breugel answered the signal. Delker ventured forth. Koome followed. Piet and Plomp alone dared not move. Plomp was quite certain something had caught him by the legs.

Kees, very cold and very angry, called his band to him.

"The devil, Delker! What did you cry out for? There's not a fly anywhere about!"

"I didn't open my mouth. It was Piet."

"I? I? I didn't utter a sound. It was Plomp."

"That fool!" growled Klaas. "You're a nice daddy to take out on a job of this kind! I believe you did it on purpose! We've had about enough of you."

Delker and Breugel joined in, cursing and abusing Plomp with great zest. Kees angrily silenced them with a few sharp words of command.

Still the storm roared and howled, rose and fell, and rose again like some mighty orchestra; and behind the flutes and violins and organs which could all be heard in the myriad-voiced song of the tempest, thundered the mighty, the reverberant bass of the Sea.

Unconsciously the poachers were impressed by the great and mysterious voices around them; they drew closer together and made their way along the slopes of the sand-hills. Breugel walked beside Kees, who had put a fresh cartridge into his breechloader. Plomp had been placed between Delker and Piet, and was vowing to himself that if a dozen gamekeepers nabbed him he would not utter a word. His terror had sensibly diminished. Kees had not spoken to him and seemed less formidable. He had been threatened with a peppering from Kees' gun if he misbehaved himself, but Kees had neither pointed the weapon at him nor joined in the scolding. Plomp felt relieved and walked on with lighter step.

The storm was lessening in fury as the little company made their way by winding tracks among the sand-hills. No game had been seen for some time. Breugel cursed under his breath and waved his lantern more rapidly, sending light over the dunes in all directions. Then Kees stopped. A shot rang out, another and another. Koome picked up, killed and bagged the rabbits—as before. Ten paces in front of Kees a rabbit was seen, sitting bolt upright, ears erect, eyes dazzled by the sudden glare, rubbing a fore-paw over its nose like a cat washing its face.

The gun sounded. Koome was darting forward with a jest, trailing his bag over the snow, but Kees gripped him and held him motionless.

"Stay where you are! There are two more!"

"Where?"

Again came the report of the gun, its echo rolling round the sand-hills like a peal of thunder. Another rabbit leaped in the air and fell dead on the snow directly under the beam of light.

"The devil!" cried Koome, "what eyes the fellow has. Cursed if I didn't think it a molehill!"

"Hold your tongue!" said Kees, watching intently, not the slightest movement escaping him.

"Christ!" chuckled Klaas. "I've seen 'em. Two jack hares!"

"Shut your mouth!" said Kees hoarsely. He was slowly taking aim, while the wind whistled in the muzzle of his gun, as though the fiend himself were curled up inside the barrel blowing on a demoniacal foghorn.

The report came, and Klaas, sure of Kees, sprang forward without waiting to know if the shot had told. Piet gazed after him, forgetting he was supposed to be on the look-out. Delker kept watch. Plomp dodged about timorously near the leaders, shoved aside unceremoniously if he got in the way. He was as much afraid of being shot by Kees as of being nabbed by the keepers, and he longed to blow out the lantern which so insolently proclaimed the whereabouts of the party.

Nothing, however, happened.

After this the poachers tramped for an hour without getting a shot. They had reached the other side of the dune, close to Van Ouwenaar's woods.

"What's o'clock?" asked Breugel, flashing the lantern so that Klaas could see his watch.

"Five," said Koome, stooping to the light.

"I shall stop now," said Kees. "I'm going home."

"So am I," said Breugel. "I'm perished with cold and wet."

"But we've got next to nothing!" objected Klaas.

"Can't help it. There's no blood in my fingers—I can't pull the trigger. Besides, there's nothing to shoot. How many have we got?"

"Twenty rabbits—and three hares. The devil! last time we had the double."

"Can't be helped. I'm going to stop."

Breugel darkened the lantern and the poachers clustered together in the obscurity.

"Well, Van Ouwenaar!" joked Klaas, "here we are, Old Boy! on your ground catching your hares. Why don't you keep a look-out? Have another drink, Breugel?"

"I will!" said Delker, seizing the bottle.

Kees leaped the fence followed by the others. Plomp was helped over by Piet, but the latter was so much hurried that Plomp tore his trousers on the barbed wire, making a great rent.

"The devil! this will cost me a new pair!"

"Hurry! hurry!" said Piet. "I've lost sight of the others." He did not know where he was and had no wish to be left behind.

Breugel was talking to Klaas.

"The damned rabbits cut up my whole garden. Last year they ruined my crop altogether, so that I couldn't pay my rent. Curse them!"

"If I'm half dead," said Koome, "I can always enjoy a bit of rabbit-shooting."

"You! You! Yes, it's fun to you. We poor devils have to suffer. The swells get their sport out of the rabbits, but we get trouble and disaster. It's a damned wrong state of things."

"Oh, hold your noise," snapped Kees; "who's going to sell?"

"What? Can't we talk even now? rifle and lantern in the bag, and ourselves out of the side paths?"

Plomp was telling himself he would never learn the business. And it was very dangerous. If he had to make a living that way, better go hang at once.

"Who's selling?" repeated Kees.

Piet and Plomp refused to share in the division of the spoil. Piet also was swearing to himself. Call that sport? He had never been so cold and miserable in his life; shivering and burning by turns. He would rather dig five spits deep every day of the year than go in for this game. Soaked to the skin! The first time, and the last for him! Lord! he knew now why Kees abhorred it! He was dead beat! Dying for his bed!

The wind had dropped, but occasional gusts still pursued them. Near Kees' cottage they drew up.

"Well, good-night all of you. I'm going to sleep a couple of hours and then set a few snares. You'll do the selling, Klaas. Bring me the money to-morrow. Ninepence each for the rabbits, mind!"

"Right you are, Captain. I know a chap who'll take the rabbits. He lives close to the bridge in Weighhouse Street at Igmuiden. He sells a thousand rabbits a day."

"Good-night all," said Kees, turning along the quiet path to his home. The others took their way along the muddy road to Wiereland.

III

Kees opened the cottage door and stepped quietly in. The stuffy smell of a crowded unventilated sleeping room assailed his nostrils as he came in from the pure outer air. He shivered, sitting in his wet garments and removing with difficulty his long mud boots. He heard his wife singing to the baby—

"Sleep, baby—baby, sleep!
Outside there runs a sheep.
Baa-lamb with four white feet,
Come and drink your milk so sweet."

Oh Lord! that infant crying again when he wanted to catch a wink of sleep! Surely Ant made it cry on purpose!

Kees stumbled over a stool and the noise waked the child thoroughly out of its incipient slumber. She began to scream uproariously. Wimpie turned his head uneasily, but did not wake.

In a passion Kees rushed to the bedside, and said in a half-articulate hoarse whisper—

"Is she at it again? Keep her quiet, woman!"

"Keep her quiet? She's teething!"

"I don't care. Damn her teeth! I want to go to bed!"

"Please lie down and be quiet!" pleaded Wimpie, awakened at last.

Kees grew still angrier. He would strike the woman if she said another word.

"Make the little devil be silent, will you!" he shouted, beside himself, unable to check the nervous irritability caused by fatigue and chill. The child screamed louder.

"Stop that noise, imp!" said Kees between his teeth, pushing the baby roughly against its mother.

"That's the way! Kill your child—it's what you wish, I'm sure," said the indignant mother.

Kees realised that he must restrain himself. He felt capable of battering mother and child to a jelly.

He vaulted over them into the cupboard bed and lay down in his wet under-rags, pulling the filthy quilt over him and shivering as he lay.

Ant herself tossed the infant down on the bed, and got up to light the lamp. Deserted, the poor child roared louder than ever.

"Shut up, you devil's fry!" thundered Kees, snatching up the child and shaking it, causing it to burst into a perfect paroxysm of yells.

"God's Christ! I shall beat its brains out if it doesn't stop!" roared Kees, beside himself. Ant hurried back, took the infant and tried to soothe it. Kees flung himself down, panting with nervous exhaustion and dying for sleep.

Ant walked up and down the room, the infant in her arms, swaying herself backwards and forwards till the cries died down. The woman was in her nightdress, chilled to the bone. She sank on a chair and held the babe to her empty breast. It sucked greedily but in vain. Ant took a lump of bread from the table, bit off a piece and chewed it till soft, then fed the infant with it.

"*Sleep, baby—babv, sleep!*
Outside there runs a sheep."

Ant sat for a long time rocking the baby and singing to it gently, hardly able to keep her eyes open. At last it slept and she laid it beside her husband, who was snoring loudly, like a giant in his cups.

The child had slobbered over her nightgown, and she hung it up to dry; then crept into bed, uncovered, and stiff with cold. She had whispered to her mother, begging her to get up early as she had not yet been allowed to close her eyes and she wanted to sleep till nine.

About half-past seven the children all woke up, hungry, quarrelsome, noisy. Dientje helped the little ones to dress, and Wimpie, long awake, looked on at the noisy romping crew.

Vrouw Rams stumped in from the back; from Grandfather Rams' bed came sounds of violent coughing and spitting. The little room was filled with clamour.

The children were turned into the yard, where they splashed their faces and hands with water from the bucket and brushed each other's hair with a brush almost denuded of bristles. Dien kept one eye on them and one on her grandmother, who was trying to lay a fire and continually running into things and abusing them. The little girl seemed everywhere at once; now hearing the little ones their prayers, now setting a match to the shavings and sticks which Vrouw Rams had laid in the grate. Six-year-old Griet, the little assistant mother, helped with an air of great importance.

At nine came a loud rat-tat at the door. Dien lifted the latch, and in came the field-constable of Duinkijk, accompanied by a Wiereland policeman. Vrouw Rams, coffee-pot in hand, shuffled forwards, peering to see who the visitors could be.

"We come," said the constable very loud, "in the name of the burgomaster——"

Wimpie, staring from his bed, could not conceive what it meant. He had never seen such people before. The little girls retreated to a corner, looking at each other with frightened eyes. The policeman's shining silver buttons, his gloved hand on the hilt of his sword, seemed a menace. He stood silent beside the Duinkijk constable, who repeated in a rasping tone of authority—

"We come in the name of the law. There has been robbery last night and Hassel is suspected. Is he here? Was he out last night?"

Vrouw Rams, puzzled at first, no sooner realised that Kees was under suspicion than she was all alive. She set the coffee-pot on the floor with a thump.

"Lord have mercy on us! Is that you, Constable Nooter? About Hassel? Has he been stealing again? Holy Virgin! has he? has he? To be sure, he was out last night, to be sure he was!

Crossing herself, she spoke in tones of dramatic horror; but she could not keep the note of triumph out of her voice. Now Ant must confess her man a good-for-nothing rascal!

"Don't be alarmed, Vrouw Rams. We can't help it. We come by the burgomaster's command to search the house."

The white-gloved policeman nodded confirmation. The children were now crowding round, gazing at the officials with excited and frightened eyes. Wimpie, understanding that his father was threatened, sought his rosary and recited an Ave with quivering lips, then called anxiously for his mother.

"What's the matter? What's the matter?" yawned Ant, waking from a heavy sleep.

"The police," said Vrouw Rams, not without exultation; "your ne'er-do-weel has been stealing again. Get up. The police are here."

Ant, much alarmed, shook her husband by the shoulder. Covering her naked bosom with the bedclothes, she put her head out of the cupboard bed, her unkempt hair falling over her white cheeks.

Nooter, the constable, came over, and with some embarrassment stated his errand.

"We must search the house, Vrouw Hassel. A lot of poultry was stolen last night; fifty head. Five poultry runs were entered. Your husband is known to have been out with a party of six. He is suspected. We must make a search."

"Good Lord! But it's a lie! He didn't bring a feather home with him. Kees! Kees! the police! Wake up! Kees!" she shouted, shaking her husband till he woke from his deep sleep of exhaustion, confused and angry.

"What is it? What? The police here? I? been stealing? I?" he said, his deep voice resounding from the depths of his sleeping lair.

Thoroughly awake, he sat up and shouted at the invaders.

What was the row about? What did they come bothering him for? The devil! Hallo! it was that sneak Nooter! the cur—always at his heels. Nooter and the policeman whispered together; the latter was for allowing short parley with this riff-raff of low persons. Nooter was emboldened.

"Were you at home last night, Hassel?" he said in a hectoring voice.

"Mother! Mother!" moaned little Wimpie.

Ant did not hear him. Vrouw Rams shuffled to the boy's side and scolded him.

The suspect was inclined to refuse reply. However, he answered "No."

"It's well you admit that. Where were you?"

Kees was enraged. Rubbing his eyes with assumed indifference he sprang out of bed, his half-dried garments clinging stiffly to his limbs, and smelling of damp.

Nooter fell back nervously, and the policeman took a firmer grasp of his sword hilt.

"Well, what do you want?" roared Kees, his huge bulk towering over the men. "Yes, I was out; but you'll have to be very clever to make me say where."

"The burgomaster——"

"Burgomaster be damned!" shouted Kees, seizing a stool and brandishing it as if to fell the officers. "Now, are you going to get out? Damned cowards! Do you suppose I'd dirty my hands with chickens? Am I a thief?"

"Poachers are all thieves," said the policeman with the courage of fear; while Nooter, very pale and with shaking voice, implored Hassel to keep calm.

Kees flung down the stool, thrust his hands into his pockets and clenched his fists in the effort to restrain himself.

He stared at the policeman, pressing his thin lips together in a cold sneer. He felt giddy with rage, his head burned and throbbed. Still, he wished to keep calm, that he might befool these men, who were so completely on the wrong track.

Nooter again plucked up his courage.

"We must search the whole house," he announced solemnly.

"As you please. Go ahead!" said Kees with a yawn.

The policeman felt puzzled and irritated by this permission.

"We begin with the bed," said the policeman.

"Very good. Now then, wife, get out for the gentlemen."

"Yes, Vrouw Hassel, you must get out," said Nooter. He guessed that underneath his sneers Kees was a volcano of fury.

"Out of bed? Now?" said Ant; "if you'll kindly go away for a minute——"

"No! no! We can't do that! You can't play with us. We are here in the name of the law. Get up, if you please, or we must use force."

"Get up, wife!" said Kees, who was beginning to be amused. "This is your fine Catholic friend, Mr. Nooter. He wants to have a look at you."

"You're a liar, Hassel. But she must get up; that's the long and the short of it!"

"Mother," cried Ant, "take the baby, and give me my nightdress from the back there."

"No! no! Get up, woman, and no more talk about it. No one goes to bed without a nightdress," said the policeman, thinking he saw glances passing between the husband and wife.

"Holy Virgin! Look for yourself! It's hung up to dry! Mother! mother! Give it to me!"

"These gentlemen are in a hurry," sneered Kees, biting his lips.

The policeman seized the bedclothes.

"Now then, Vrouw Hassel, do you wish me to pull you out?"

"But I—I've nothing on!" said the poor woman, sick with shame and fright. "I—I'm quite naked——"

"Well then, naked, out you come. Another word and I'll use force," growled the policeman, insulted that the woman should try to make a fool of him.

Ant saw she must obey. Holding a rag before her she jumped out of bed, cowering and weeping.

"Wimpie! Wimpie! Pray for your mother!" she sobbed, fleeing to the back-place, and snatching something to cover herself with from the pile of rags on the floor.

The policeman looked scared and foolish. The woman had spoken truth then!

Kees laughed mirthlessly. His face was grey. He too had thought Ant had spoken merely to keep the policeman at bay.

The policeman and the constable again whispered together. Then they ransacked the cupboard bed, moving the unsavoury rags, and lifting the planks of the framework. The constable felt greatly embarrassed.

"Is there anything more here, Hassel?" he asked.

"What do you say?" roared Kees, his face so distorted with anger that Nooter retreated behind the policeman, and did not repeat his question.

After examining the bed, and looking into every hole and crevice, the officers proceeded to search the house and yard, meeting with no success. Wimpie gazed despairingly at his father, who stood looking out of the window. Ant, dressed now in a short petticoat and dirty red blouse, tried to busy herself with the children.

The policemen's faces lengthened. They had found nothing; yet had not the man been caught almost in the act?

"There seems to have been some mistake," said Nooter quite humbly.

Kees was too angry to speak. He continued to attend the fellows in their search, scarce able to keep his fist out of Nooter's sanctimonious face. For some time Kees had felt Wimpie's frightened gaze, and now he tried to smile for him. Ah! he must hold himself in, or he would kill the child!

Presently the policeman said—

"Well, Hassel, you have scored this time. But——"

The blood rushed to Kees' head at what seemed to him insult. He glared at the two men with an air of such concentrated fury that they both made hastily for the door.

"Oh, father, do come! Come quick! Wimpie is so frightened!" said the plaintive voice from the dark corner.

The men passed out, and Kees stood like a wild beast ready to spring, ready to fell the messengers of the law to earth, to batter their heads against the wall. Giddy, blind with rage, he watched them go; restrained from attacking them by Wimpie's faintly-heard, suppliant voice.

The ragged little girls, who had hidden in corners during the visit of the police, seemed now to spring out of the ground, till the poor room was full of them. They were still frightened and subdued. Each gnawed silently at the crust held in her dirty little fist.

BOOK II

SPRING

CHAPTER I

I

IN the fields and gardens of Wiereland and Duinkijk all was cheerful bustle and movement. Blue or light brown smock-frocks flapped in the spring breeze round the sturdy frames of the workers, or showed, fresh coloured and bright, against the lingering winter grey of the fields. Everywhere March had flashed shafts of golden light. The earth, dried by the wind, shone in the cool bright sunshine; above it was a blue heaven across which masses of fantastic clouds—centaurs, swans, ships, pursued each other majestically.

Under the cheerful movement of the clouds, the workers were spending this first spring day in the fields, snatching as it were the sunlit hours from the grip of winter. Yet winter was reluctant to depart, and every now and then would spread shadows over the land from sea to Polder—grey shadows like giant birds unfolding black wings in the path of the sun's glory.

Like a fever the joy of work possessed the gardeners and bulb-growers, all laboured at highest pressure, all were inspired by the wish to drive away every vestige of the black evil of the winter; to behold the dull brown of tree and field decked with the tender green of spring, to see colour and light again setting Wiereland and Duinkijk aflame, and making lane and pathway, bulb-row and garden, a glory and a feast. In the streets was clatter of feet, and hurry of coming and going. The shops of the seedsmen were thronged, prospects of sowing-time and harvest were eagerly discussed. The workers crowded in the bulb fields like ants. Sometimes a master-gardener, dressed like a gentleman in white shirt and coloured tie, strode by, anxiously examining the first tender shoots to see if they had suffered damage from the frost. Straw, laid to protect the crocuses and hyacinths, was being removed in red wheelbarrows, which made cheerful splashes of bright colour. Hedges and fields, their branches creaking in the blustering March wind, were, of course, still bare and grey.

Ever busier were the workers, the rhythmic clatter of their shoes—very unlike the dispirited klos! klos! heard through the winter months—echoed cheerfully on all sides. Under-gardeners flitted about with seed-bags and red or green watering-cans; others broke up the clods with hoe or rake; all laboured with the passion of the true husbandman, the delight in evoking life and growth from the Mother Earth.

Gerrit, line in hand, was marking out seed-beds. Piet drew shallow furrows, and a small boy followed with the seed. Dirk also was sowing early peas, his powerful form very distinct against the background of brown earth. Old Gerrit had plenty to do; he saw no occasion to hurry, however. His was, so to speak, voluntary work, as his sons quite realised. He marked out the rows with his line, but all the while worrying thoughts chased each other through his brain and would not be banished. A long time had passed since he had stolen anything, that in itself was depressing; his thoughts ran also on his business troubles. This year he had sold his cows. He had taken them himself to market by the night boat. Never again! That lugging the beasts about, that haggling and chaffering and abating of his price! Finally, he had sold at a loss of sixty gulden. The beasts had been poor things, still they had given him milk and manure free. Now they were gone, and the money he had borrowed to purchase them was still to pay. Everything was going wrong. Twice the notary had lent him money, and not one cent had he paid off of these debts. Then there was the mortgage, and he was two quarters behind in his rent. Once he had been obliged to come on his surety, and afterwards the fellow refused to have anything more to do with him. Would the new banker, the young chap, give an advance? It might be worth while to try.

Sunshine and cloud chased each other over the March fields. Wheelbarrows creaked along the paths, manure carts rumbled up and left their contents on the ground in scattered heaps. Old Gerrit looked on. For thirty years he had rented this plot of land among the bulb fields of the Beek, and had grown a little of everything. Next year he must give it up, for Doctor Troost's brother-in-law had sold the very land under his feet. He might remain at a rent increased by two hundred gulden, but no market gardener would consider that worth while. The land would certainly fall into the hands of some nurseryman. The nurserymen were swallowing up the whole place. They could afford big rents. This lot of land had a splendid water supply, the best in the district; how was he to get on without it? with only that poor, peaty bit behind the house? How well situated this bit was, sheltered on three sides by tall trees, with the bulb fields there in the middle. It was maddening to think he must lose it. Just a little manure, and his crops were assured! Suppose, though, he were to lose his other plot too—the piece of ground out there on the dune? But he'd go crazy if he worried like this. Things must take their course. After all he had his secret and inalienable pleasure.

Next day Gerrit stayed indoors; he had caught cold. Dirk finished the seed-beds, smoothed the paths, raked the top soil, broke up the clods left by the winter. Dirk was an expert, he had soon reduced the land to an orderly series of rectangular plots, the soil of which was finely tilled and ready for sowing. Neat paths separated the plots. The soil, turned over by rake and shovel, took on new tints, beautifully ruddy. Eagerly but silently did Dirk do his work; he was proud to see the land neatly laid out and properly cultivated.

Piet was putting down young strawberry plants between the rows of peas. With his stubby fingers he made small holes, then put in the plant, with careful disposing of the fibrous roots and firm pressure of the soft earth. Each day he planted a fresh corner, though he hated the monotonous task. But after a few days, weeding must begin; indeed so much would require doing, it was hard to know where to begin.

One day at the end of March, old Gerrit was out again sowing long lines of lettuce. The morning was sunny, but cold. Silver clouds chased each other across a sky of palest blue. The March wind blew keen, but it was fresh and exhilarating. Dirk worked vigorously sowing, then raking to preserve the seed from the birds. Piet followed with a roller, making each seed-bed smooth as asphalt. Sometimes they exchanged their occupations, Dirk taking the roller, Piet the seed-bag and the rake. At a short distance worked their next neighbours, the sons of Gerrit's brother. The cousins met in the morning with careless greetings; as the day wore on ill-feeling showed itself, though the young people had never formally adopted the parents' quarrel.

Piet had just addressed a rough insult to his cousin Willem Hassel, who, unprepared with a reply, stood glaring at his kinsman, whistling to hide his embarrassment. Uncle Hassel was out also inspecting the work of his sons, jealously watchful that his nephews should not use any of his gardening implements.

Hallo! there was a strange manure barrow on his ground close to the boundary!

"Take that thing away!" he shouted; "this is my ground, mine!"

Dirk swore under his breath.

"Your ground is it?" snarled Piet, "you'd better scrape the mud off your boots each time you step out of it."

Dirk, who disliked quarrelling, pulled the barrow a foot or two on to his own ground. The cousins worked on without speaking to each other. Now and then the silence was broken by snatches of song from the bulb fields.

Day by day, the sheen of the green leaves on the hyacinth fields grew more beautiful, seeming to smile up at the silvery spring sky. Purple and yellow crocuses made bright bands of colour. Rivalry seemed to have set in among the infinitely varied shades of green. The vivid green of the hyacinth, the grey-green of the tulip, the blue-green of the narcissus, were contrasted the one with the other. When the workers left the fields at evening and made their way along the narrow garden path, they passed great stretches coloured with the soft hues of seedling vegetables, and here and there a patch of delicate white snowdrops.

Sombre and still, the beech woods of the Van Ouwenaar estate dominated the whole neighbourhood of Duinkijk.

II

As April rolled on, life and colour in even greater luxuriance spread over the land. Sheets of soft green marked the tulips and narcissi; but the hyacinth fields were aglow with colour and the scent hung on the air as far as to Zeekijk. The workers, busy in the morning sunshine, drank in the perfume with the great draught of warm spring air. The beeches bordering the lanes were already in leaf, brilliant though delicate in colour; the emerald of the grass grew more vivid as the sun rose in the heavens.

April, like a goddess of old story, had waved her golden wing, and thrown a glory on the fields so lately desolate and grey. The workers shared in the joy which animated all nature. Each had perceived the passage of the goddess and had participated in her golden gifts; each felt in himself the rising April fever of life and growth.

The blue blouses thronged daily in greater numbers in the fields. The straw and the reeds which had protected the young plants from the frosts were now being taken away and collected in great stacks in distant corners. Dirk and Piet were at work on the strawberry beds, old Gerrit watching them. Everywhere stakes were being placed along the rows of peas, the young green of which was just showing above the ground. In one day the wide fields were striped with serried lines of sticks in double rows, inclined towards each other like the piled weapons of an army. The workers in their bright blue smocks looked as if they had been dipped in a vat of ultramarine. The blunt points of their wooden shoes bored into the sandy ground as they knelt by their bundles of brushwood, and fixed the stakes.

After the midday meal Gerrit and his sons were busy putting up spinach for the market. Dirk did the cutting: his knife dripped with dark green juice, the air was pervaded with the pungent smell of the new-cut leaves. Old Gerrit gathered them up and packed them in baskets marked G. H. in blue letters. Piet carried the basket to the cart, and an hour later started with his load to the quay. There he mingled in a busy crowd of growers and dealers; his baskets took their place among the hampers of green stuff which, under the shade of chestnut trees, were spread from the water-side almost to the doors of the houses. Market carts of all sizes waited in the background, their horses and donkeys standing patiently. Private buying and selling went on in anticipation of the auction which took place just before the arrival of the market boat. Red and green prowed skiffs darted across the harbour; wherries, lighters, barges, tugs, lay along the quay. An engine was shunting trucks on the railway embankment. Near the station a huge windmill towered in lonely dignity and waved its giant arms with stately regularity over the Polder, over the crowd of market folk, and the bands of children playing at their heels. The harbour taverns were filled to their doors, and a constant stream of labourers and gardeners, salesmen and loafers passed in and out.

So the April days went on and the glory of the landscape grew in colour and in light. Now the fields were ablaze with flowers; now trees and hedges were clothed with the soft garment of green leafage. Now the workers laboured more stolidly, for the first gay fever of the spring with its joy of renewed employment was over; and the human beast of burden had settled down to the routine of unremitting toil. Anxious eyes studied the growth of the crops, the conditions of the weather and the soil, the prospects of the season.

Asparagus and radishes, beans and turnips, peas and rhubarb were showing in all the gardens. Young green strawberry leaves were overwhelming the red gold withered foliage of last year, which seemed still to be singing the sad song of autumn long after the echoes of its notes had died away elsewhere.

Old Gerrit tramped about, closely examining his beds. Dirk worked at the peas; Piet was weeding the carrots with a boy to help him, a poor little chap almost lost in a man's blouse and ragged trousers hanging round him in folds, while his feet rolled about in a great pair of dilapidated boots riddled with holes. The boy knelt at his work, leaning on one hand, weeding with the other and throwing the weeds energetically behind him to the path. His sleeves brushed the ground, almost concealing his hands.

"Hi, Master," said the child shyly to Piet, "you promised me a plug."

"Come along then, you young rascal," said Piet, handing him the copper tobacco box, from which the child helped himself greedily. He kneaded the tobacco with his dirty fingers, then stuffed it into his mouth and chewed with great satisfaction.

"Very bad for you, imp. Your face is the colour of a dirty shirt."

"I've smoked since I was seven," grinned the boy, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand; "like my father! My brother—he's six—chews like a good 'un. And Klaas Dirkse's boy—he's five—smokes like a chimney. I swear it!"

"Get on with your work! You're good for nothing—as much use as a bit of halfpenny calico."

"*I'm* all right," said the boy. "I live in Pebble Street at number find-out-for-yourself!"

Old Gerrit dawdled about enjoying the sunshine and sniffing the grateful scents of the warm earth and the young green shoots. He had nothing to do. He had indeed been summoned by the caretaker at the Bekkema villa to set the garden lawns and borders in order. But it was a light job already finished, and he could enjoy himself looking at his own things, basking in the sun and having a draw at his pipe. His mind was running on a recently made acquaintance—a photographer who had established himself in a little timber house opposite the villa. Gerrit had looked in on him several mornings and been given a cup of coffee. The photographer was friendly and had taken several photographs of him in different positions. He liked that; especially as he had heard this photographer was rich.

Gerrit pulled away at his pipe, which bubbled as he sucked it. It was very pleasant smoking a pipe of good baccy there in the sun. The things in his garden looked well; and that photographer chap was agreeable. A feeling of leisure and content warmed the old man's whole being. Around him were the bulbs all in full bloom; stiff hyacinths in their myriads, flooding the air with scent, the sunshine making them an orgy of light and colour. Wide stretches of white blossoms contrasted pleasantly with the others, which represented every note in the gamut of blue and pink. The yellow trumpet narcissi rose from their grey-green bed, nodding their heads in the quivering light, and seemed to be singing a hymn of praise to the sun.

The spring day wore on; as the sun declined fields and workers were alike bathed in a golden glow. The soft azure of the sky was cloudless. The red-gold rays came filtered through the young green of the trees which bordered the fields. The little outer branches were touched with gold, as if the trees were surrounded by an aerial dance of angels. It was a fireless glow, a golden bloom on the leaves like the bloom on a grape, Holy stillness brooded over the landscape, which was all transfused in the transparent, wine-gold evening lights. The sun sank to the horizon, richness of purple and red spread over the western heaven, and threw hues of deepening bronze upon trees and houses.

Then the brilliance of the hyacinths faded, the golden hymn of the daffodils died away in the evening silence, while still a glow as of burnished copper burned on the houses, and the glass of the window panes flashed like the mouths of a furnace.

In the soft haze the distant trees seemed listening to the silence. Not a breath stirred in the perfumed air.

At last darkness settled on the fields; then soft whispering winds stole secretly from the woods and from the sea, and passed over the leaves and brought waves of scent from the flowers. The blue and the crimson hyacinths were no longer visible, but in broad tracts the white blossoms still gleamed with a glamour as of snow.

III

Four pair of *sabots* stood in a row outside the Hassels' door. The sons were dozing. Guurt had placed a wash-bucket on the stone bench before the house and was washing plates and dishes. Old Gerrit walked impatiently up and down before a pile of brushwood. He wanted to get to work at the liquid manuring, the malodorous cart for which was already in the field. It annoyed him that his sons could sleep.

"Guurt, wake the boys now!"

"*Now*, father?"

"Good Lord, girl! they'd sleep all day!"

The dog, a half-starved miserable brute, used for drawing a small cart, was now chained to a kennel in front of the house. He scratched restlessly at his bed of filthy straw, sometimes attacked his own flea-tormented body, sometimes ventured out the length of his chain to take a surreptitious lick at the plates which Guurt had piled on the ground beside the bench. Gerrit gave the beast a vicious kick which sent him back howling to his kennel.

"Heeoo!—there, wake up!" called Guurt, putting her head through the door.

Dirk and Piet jumped up rubbing the sleep from their eyes.

"My Christ! it's half-past one!" grumbled Piet, rubbing his back lazily against the posts set in the wall of the byre. Dirk was already on his way to the fields, scanning the sky anxiously as he passed through the yard. He jumped on to the manure cart and baled some of the unsavoury liquid into a barrow which stood at hand. When the barrow was full he wheeled it along the paths between the strawberry beds and the rows of peas and beans. Filling an old watering-can from the barrow, he poured its contents along the rows of young green plants.

"Just look at these peas, father!" he called angrily to Gerrit, who was coming towards him.

"Lord! It must have frozen sharp last night. Those damned rooks have been at them too. There's a whole row gone! This is a nice look-out!"

"Oh, we're—well enough—off," panted Dirk, refilling his can; "look at Huuzer and Spiderhead, and that lazy beggar Jaap! they've had the birds down, you may be sure."

"Dirk, why don't you use the ladle for filling your can?"

"My way is the way of the world. In time of need one may have to peel potatoes with a hatchet."

"You can't do it right like that."

"Can't I? *Can't* died years ago; *will* is alive and kicking."

Dirk was unusually talkative. He was in good spirits, even excited. He had struck up a friendship with a pretty girl—just such another as Geert Grint—and had a tryst with her this evening. The heavy human beast-of-burden was all aglow as he thought of the girl. His spirits found vent in loquacity and ponderous jokes.

"Oh, very well," said Gerrit, "but there's no necessity to get yourself in such a mess."

Piet had appeared and was on his knees pulling radishes from the rows between the young strawberries, and making them into market bunches, which he threw behind him on the path when finished. It was work he hated—creeping along on his knees, the points of his *sabots* boring into the sand. His head bent forward till his nose nearly touched the strawberry leaves, and he worked his way along till he had reached a bed of carrots beside which stood Gerrit muttering to himself.

Piet was longing for his cup of coffee—without which the afternoon would seem interminable. His knees were stiff and cramped by the long crawling; his fingers were sore from grubbing about in the soil among the radishes.

Gerrit was strolling round with his hands clasped behind his back, his clean bright blue smock flapping in the wind. His glance fell uneasily on his own garden and on its neighbour. Ah! he spied something! A beautiful little basket was lying there on neighbour Jan's ground, and no one had been near it for ever so long! It was clean, white, exquisitely woven. He must have it. Why not this very minute? He could get to it along the ditch. No, that wouldn't do. Look out now, Gerrit! be careful! You might run right into Jan! Besides, to go along the ditch he must skirt old Spiderhead's land; and Spiderhead was there weeding; and his son was beside him digging. Dirk himself might be watching his father; and those two fellows who cut the daffodils were never far off. He must be very cautious.

Just then Dirk went by, wheeling his manure barrow very fast and with much clatter.

"Hallo, father! Suppose you draw a furrow or two for me, over there by the beans. I've just finished this."

"Damn!" muttered the old man. "Why must he bother me now? I'll walk on a bit as if I hadn't heard."

"Hi, father! Don't you hear? I want a furrow or two, over there by the beans."

Gerrit mustn't feign deafness longer. Very irritating to be interrupted just when he was planning his campaign against the basket, and thinking how happy he would be when he had got it! He turned round and moved towards his son, much afraid the basket would be gone before he could get back.

"How many furrows? Where?"

"Here. No, no! not there. Begin here. You look a bit stupid to-day!" said Dirk merrily.

He felt more and more merry as the hours passed. The heaviest work was child's play to him. He did not mind the stench of the manure. He was not a man who could sing a single note; yet as he thought of the pretty maid whom he was to see to-night, a little song of joy kept singing itself in his heart, and every now and then it even strove in his throat for utterance.

This morning Guurt had given him his early cup of coffee at half-past four. He had been in excellent spirits, full of warm pleasant thoughts all day. The meal times had come round before he expected them.

Yesterday they had received their first payment for spinach, and he and Piet had spent a fine time at the tavern. He had kept a trifle to buy something for his girl. Christ! if the old man only knew! and on the boat he had lost a gulden at cards. That, he would have to make good before next Kermis.

Dirk worked all day with furious energy, and in the highest spirits, now at one part of the garden, now at another. After finishing the manuring, he shouldered his scythe and went to a large bed to cut spinach. It was tall and upstanding; he could get a good cut at it with the scythe. The blade flashed round his feet as he mowed down a great breadth of the juicy leaves. Afterwards he weeded the carrot beds, planted lettuce, attended to various matters among the strawberries, the cabbage, the peas. His energy was rather irritating to Piet; though the latter was working hard too, being slave-driven by his father. All the morning, old Gerrit had been telling him he was a slow-coach.

Piet had tossed several hundred bunches of radishes close to the pump where Guurt had set him a tub of water. He cleaned the radishes with a stiff brush, and rinsed them thoroughly. His sister helped him, and soon there was a goodly heap of the little shining bunches with their green leaves and scarlet or creamy bulbs all glistening in the sun.

Gerrit finished his furrows and threw his hoe on the path. He was in a fever of impatience; hardly, however, dared to look if the coveted basket still lay in the same place as before. He crept cautiously along the rows of beans and past the strawberry bed which bordered the ditch. Just a look round to see that no one's about—then—

"The devil! It's gone! not a sign of it!"

He stood staring straight before him, boiling with rage. That fool Dirk! Why had he made him draw the furrows at that precise moment? The lovely basket was gone. Foolish to have thought it would wait there for him! At that moment he would have liked to poison all his children. And if his old lunatic of a wife got in his way, he'd give her something to remember him by! Well! to-morrow he must look round at the villa, and at the photographer's, to see if he couldn't pick up something. To have had his eye on that basket for two full hours, and then to lose it! Certainly to-morrow he must get something, if he had to pay a man to take his place in the garden!

Gerrit, very cross, went indoors, pulling viciously at his long silvery beard, which looked so picturesque against his blue smock, and gave him so venerable an aspect.

The sons worked on till quite late as if they did not know the meaning of weariness. Dirk hummed to himself gaily; in half an hour he would be meeting his girl.

All round in the bulb fields and the gardens, men were still busy, digging, planting, weeding. Sometimes they stood up, straightening their backs and gazing round the wide expanse of cultivated land: then returned to their labour, kneeling, stooping, creeping, working with horny, earth-stained hands, till the sun had gone down in his crimson glow, and the air grew chill, and night spread her wings over the land.

CHAPTER II

I

NEAR the boundary of Wiereland and Duinkijk an avenue of copper beech leads to the Van Ouwenaar property. On every side are market gardens, plantations, quiet cloister-like farmsteads, thickets of brushwood, in May-time all bathed in golden sunshine. The branches of the beech trees interlace across the road, like Gothic vaulting above a cathedral nave. Under the trees is cool shadow, flecked with myriad small splashes of light. The undergrowth is of hawthorn, just now a mass of sweet snowy blossom. The fruit trees in the gardens are in full bloom. Farmers' carts and waggons cross the avenue from side lanes, or pass slowly along till they emerge from the shadow of the trees into the sunny opening at the far end. Everywhere thrushes, larks, and other minstrels are singing of love, and of the spring.

The flower-cups of the tulips, open full to the May sun, make the beholder almost dizzy with the intensity of their colour. Near Zeekijk, the flowers border the road, but it is in Wiereland itself, away from the dune, that the bulbs grow thickest; that the yellow, purple and flame-colour of the tulips pass without break into the white and blue and pink of the scented hyacinths. The grassy banks of the little streams and ditches are pied with buttercups, cuckoo-flowers, daisies and star of Bethlehem; but the gentle appeal of these is drowned in the *shout* of colour that comes from the bulb fields. One might fancy that a slice of the surface of a southern land, gorgeous with tropical vegetation, had been hurled by an earthquake, into the green meadows, the soft refreshing tints of May-time Holland. Far and wide the bulb fields lie glowing and quivering in the sun, magnificent in their unstained, unbroken masses of brilliant colour.

Just behind the harbour on the edge of the Polder, anglers congregated on the banks of the little streams, gazing intently on the surface of the water, which rippled and sparkled in the sunshine, or grew mysterious and dark under the passage of heavy rainclouds. The glow of the evening sky was repeated in its placid mirror, reeds whispered along the banks, frogs croaked, a scent was exhaled from the shallow pools and backwaters, and from the damp vegetation at their edge.

On the far horizon, churches were sharply outlined; barges and wherries gliding down the canal between green, reedy banks, seemed dreamlike and ethereal. With majestic beat of wide wings, the storks sailed homewards across the Polder; and the larks rose high over the darkening fields, and sang their evening hymn to the departing sun.

There had been anxiety among the gardeners, for sharp frosts had come night after night, and played havoc with the fruit blossom. The days also had been chill and damp. Growth was checked in the gardens. For long there had not been so miserable an early May.

But the weather changed quite suddenly. The sun resumed his genial sway; glory of green and gold clothed the little township. The workers sang aloud as they toiled in fields and gardens. The nightingales, the blackbirds, the thrushes, filled the air with music. The lanes and paths bathed in the warm rays, decked themselves with leaf and flower, and offered a feast of fragrance to the wayfarer. Bees hovered over the pink and snowy flowers of the fruit trees. Everywhere rose the perfume of lilac and chestnut and mayblossom. Wild flowers came up along the watercourses, silvery grasses and reeds, dead nettle, and bushes of golden broom. Daisies, the modest ground ivy, and buttercups like burnished gold, carpeted the meadows. Here and there a scarlet poppy held up a brilliant head on a slender stalk to greet the sun.

Even the little streets of Wiereland—a labyrinth of narrow ways—were full of colour and scent. There was incessant changing play of sunlight and shadow, the air vibrated with the hum of insects, with the myriad-voiced song of the joyous birds. Thus May ran its course.

II

Very slowly Kees was making his way along the sea road, raising little clouds of dust with each movement of his wooden shoes. He had tramped about all day meeting with nothing but disappointment and annoyance. Now he was tired out.

In the evening stillness cows were grazing quietly close to the road. The old minister sat in his garden, his face wreathed in the curling smoke of his peaceful cigar. Kees had no feeling for the tranquillity around him. He was on fire with angry and vengeful thoughts. In his search for work he met nothing but rebuffs. In the fruit-gathering or haymaking season they might find him something to do—but now——

To be constantly refused work, then to be despised because he did nothing—it would drive him mad! From a little rise on the road he saw a man hoeing at a short distance. It must be Reeker, the nurseryman. Should he try him as a forlorn hope?

"Good evening, Reeker."

"Good evening. Is it Kees? Yes—good evening, Kees. Fine weather, eh?"

"Fine weather, certainly. Real summer. What are you doing?"

"Just taking a look round. The mice have done a lot of damage."

"Do you want an extra hand, Reeker?"

"Sorry, but I can manage very well just now with my boys. When we are getting the stuff in, then, perhaps—there's really not so very much doing just now. Why don't you work a bit of ground of your own?"

Kees gazed vacantly across the fields. This man was like all the rest. Didn't he know perfectly that he, Kees, had no chance of getting any ground?

"There's none to be had, Reeker. Anyhow, I couldn't get it without sureties. I've been half a dozen—no, a dozen—times to the notary and to every one else, but it's no good. No one will stand surety for me. Can you help me out?"

Once Kees had been on very friendly terms with Reeker. They had been on many poaching expeditions together. Surely the fellow would come to his assistance. But Reeker again said he was sorry. He was vexed that he had got into the talk at all. It was stupid to gossip with a pauper. Had he really gone poaching in the old days? Well, bygones were bygones. He stand surety? Certainly not. He wasn't going to be let in; and it would do him no good to have dealings with such a wastrel. Every man must look after himself and see to keeping his own head above water.

"No, Kees," his voice was embarrassed and hesitating; "you know I'd be delighted to do anything for you—in one way or another. I'd be very glad indeed. But stand surety? I can't do that. My wife wouldn't put up with it. I've got children of my own. It's all I can do to pay my way. I'd like to oblige you. I would really. I remember how you gave me food in the old times—and half the bag on our expeditions. I don't forget, Kees. Anything I *can* do—but——"

Kees still stared over the fields and he said nothing. Inwardly he was raging. The miserly curs! They had nothing for their neighbours except when they were prosperous and didn't need it! Help a beggar like him? a pauper without a red cent? No, thank you! Each for himself and the devil take the hindmost. Not one of the lot would lift so much as his little finger.

Kees turned away and the rhythmical beat of his wooden shoes sounded clear in the evening stillness. He walked along, anxious and bitter, thinking of Wimpie. The quarrelling about religion had been worse than ever lately. The annoyance had begun with Lent. On Good Friday his son had refused to eat anything but a single crust. On Ash Wednesday he had mumbled over his crucifix "Dust we are, to dust we shall return." Ah, he might well say that, poor little mannikin! What an Easter, what a Whitsuntide it had been for him! This morning Kees had brought the child out into the air, setting his bed on a couple of boxes in front of the house. How the little chap had enjoyed it! And ah! how pale he had looked! God's Christ! Wimpie seemed to have wasted away to nothing—a little skeleton! Those cursed fasts! one before each festival! This morning Wimpie had laughed and sung, screwing up his eyes to meet the dazzle of the sun. It was months since they had seen the sun. If only he could get a little bit of land, thought Kees, how he would slave! till he dropped! At present he must slave for some one else,—if he could get work at all. There were many much like himself, but they all managed to get work. They slunk off to church, they toadied the minister or the priest, the doctor or the notary. He couldn't do it. When he tried to flatter, the words stuck in his throat and choked him.

And now the very poaching season was over. There was no food at home. What was he to do? Should he try for work at a distance? It would kill Wimpie to leave him; but what else could he do?

He came in sight of his house, standing out against the background of the dune. A small lamp sent its ray of yellow light through the uncurtained window.

He was afraid to enter again, *again* with empty hands. Savage impatience, however, overmastered his nervous shrinking. God's truth! How could he help it? If his wife blamed him, he would snatch up a stool and crack her skull with it. In grim silence, his lips compressed, Kees stepped over his threshold and threw himself on his bed, without a word, without a look, even for Wimpie.

One evening a week later the man was again on the sea road; in good spirits, however, and with springing step. He had spoken to his brother Dirk and asked for help. In the family consultation which followed this request old Gerrit was unwilling; to put Kees back on the land, he said, would be to bring them all bad luck. The young people, however, spoke for their brother. Things could not go on as they were; Kees was starving; and there was a great deal of work to be done, another hand of some sort must be found. Kees would be glad enough to come for seven gulden a week.

After making the agreement he was walking cheerfully home. He would be able to tell Wimpie that at last—at last he had got work. Now he could look his son in the face; now his wife need no longer rave and sneer at him. He breathed deeply, filling his lungs with the sweet evening air. He tried his muscles; was he in condition, would he be able to stand the long day's work, stooping and crouching, kneeling, weeding, raking, digging?

Next week, the work began. When Kees presented himself, his father gave him no greeting, did not even look at him. Gerrit knew his son could work with the best; but he was full of bitterness against him, and moreover he was mortally afraid that Kees would find out his secret. But there was no opposing Dirk, who had always been friendly with his brother, and who said brutally, that now the old man did nothing, he must be given assistance. Guurt found a torn pair of trousers, once Dirk's, and a good smock which she handed over to her brother. Then he went to the garden.

Kees worked with a mind at ease. He hoed the long rows of beans, Dirk following him close and weeding by hand. Kees' huge form, crowned with a worn straw hat, towered above the bean-stalks, which in their dead greyness contrasted sharply with the surrounding wealth of colour and of life. Field upon field of strawberries stretched on every side; great sheets of bright green foliage spotted with snowy blossom.

Uncle Hassel and his sturdy sons were working on their own ground a few yards away, now and then looking up and regarding their relations with sour hostility. Gerrit was careful to turn his back on his brother, whom he regarded with jealousy and spite. The man's garden was in enviable condition, the lettuces and strawberries more forward than Gerrit's; even the carrots! Still there was consolation in the rhubarb. Gerrit's rhubarb, luckily just under the brother's nose, was truly magnificent; the brother's was late, poor, and sickly. Every now and then Gerrit would peep to see if his brother was observing his rhubarb; and Uncle Hassel in the same way tried to catch Gerrit admiring the carrots and strawberries. Once their eyes met, and both looked away at once, and stared straight before them with a air of supreme indifference.

In addition to his sons, Uncle Hassel had three labourers at work. He himself, a tall, raw-boned fellow in a yellow shirt, was very busy hoeing. His eldest son Willem looked after the labourers, who were lifting bulbs, vigorously scraping the dry sandy soil with their fingers, so as to get up each bulb with its mass of fibrous roots uninjured. One of the men sang a drinking song. The next one, Piet Hesse, was taking great draughts of coffee from his tin can.

"Get on with your work, Hesse," said Willem imperiously, "your long drinks cost money!"

"Well, to be sure!" replied the man angrily, "is a thirsty man not to drink?"

Willem ignored Hesse's irritation, and walked up and down, his hoe over his shoulder. The labourers watched furtively, their manner expressive of dislike tempered by servility. Hesse complained aloud.

"He's a nice 'un! we mustn't drink now! Did you ever hear the like?"

"And I'm not to sing! But it seems it's worse in Zeeland. There you get the spade on your head or the hoe in your guts before you can count ten."

"Oh! oh! oh! the devil!" cried Hesse, whose finger had come against a stone and had a good piece of nail torn off. He was too much afraid of Willem to stop working, though he was squirming with pain, and every now and then, when he thought himself unobserved, breaking off to suck the injured finger.

"What a fuss!" said his comrade. "Last year I chopped half my thumb off. Look!"

"Oh, I daresay! But *phew!* it's hot, and I'm dying of thirst, my throat's on fire. Look here, I'm going to have a drink and be damned to the young whipper-snapper! Perhaps he won't see if you'll just go on with your work."

He sprang up and made for his can, which was at the end of the bed. He put it to his lips and took a long draught of the tepid fluid while the sweat rolled in big drops from his bronzed face and neck. Willem saw him but said nothing, being frightened by the man's defiance,

Kees finished the beans and moved over to weed the carrots. He was hot and out of breath; the unaccustomed toil was making him ache all over. He still had the work fever, however; his fingers moved with furious energy as he tore up the weeds. He had heard the hectoring tone in which his cousin had forbidden one of his labourers—a man whose face was dripping with sweat—to drink from his own can. It had made him furious. A nice crew those relations were now they had gone up in the world! Not so very long ago they had been paupers. By a little luck, a little cheating, a little blood-sucking usury, they had improved their position, and now they gave themselves airs. Kees would have liked to lay his hoe across his cousin's back—the young blackguard! Willem swaggered up and down close by Kees. He seemed anxious to show his relatives as well as the hirelings that he was privileged, and might saunter while they stuck close to their work; for a full quarter of an hour he did nothing. Jaap, his younger brother, a jolly lad enough, who was working as hard as possible, was annoyed by his brother's air of authority.

"I say, can't you turn to and do something? You think you look very pretty loafing round like a boss—but—Hi, father! Willem's not doing a hand's turn!"

Kees was delighted. He had not spoken to Jaap for years, but now he would have liked to wring his hand.

"Let him alone!" grunted Uncle Hassel, who seemed to admire his swaggering son.

The fields were full of withered tulip leaves, showing yellow and brown under the strong sun of June. Many of the blue-bloused workers were busy removing the bulbs, others carried them in sacks and baskets to be loaded in hand-carts waiting on the pathway. The vegetable gardens were in a blaze of sunshine. Here the men who knelt for the weeding all wore broad-brimmed straw hats. In the distant meadows, over which the air quivered and danced with heat, mowers plied their scythes, with rhythmical movement of their bent bodies, their shirts showing blood-red against the golden green of fields and hedges.

Two days later old Gerrit announced—

"Hi, boys! I've bought a strip of grass in the Polder just behind the fort. I've sent in the cutters, so in two days you can do some haymaking."

"Then you must get another hand for the garden, father."

"Another hand? What's Kees for, then? And I've sold two breadths of strawberries to Peters van de Baanwaik, and three to de Gauw—all for Germany."

"Leave some for Amsterdam, father. You know I like taking them there."

"Of course you do. You can booze away without my eye on you," said Gerrit.

At noon the workers rested for a quarter of an hour, lying luxuriously at full length in the shade of the hedge-rows. The sun's blaze was already tempered; the light which bathed the fields was paler and cooler than in the morning. The *zaem-zaem* of the bees sounded on every side, while huge flies buzzed round the heads of the men as they lay in the shadow, some of them swinging their arms frantically in vain effort to get rid of their tormentors.

Kees pulled a big lump of bread from his pocket, and ate it in large mouthfuls. Now he was known to be in work, his wife had again succeeded in getting supplies on credit. Kees enjoyed his lunch, revelling in the warm sunshine and picturing the things he could carry home to Wimpie. He was content, his nerves were quieted by the knowledge that he had opportunity to exert himself; that he was able to work all day and to take something home at night. He was glad, too, to exchange an occasional word with his father, though the latter still regarded him with unfriendly eyes.

Gerrit joined his sons at the resting-place, gave a few directions for the next day's work, then turned and entered his house. Vrouw Hassel, her face yellowish grey, sat on the edge of her chair staring through the tight shut window. She was so much worse that Guurt said she would look after her no longer, unless Dr. Troost were consulted; so now Gerrit must needs go to fetch him. Gerrit hated the doctor. Dr. Troost wouldn't have him in his sick-club, and his fees cost the very hair off the head. But Gerrit was not able to apply to any other physician, for Dr. Troost was the notary's brother-in-law, and the notary had lent Gerrit money, and next winter would probably have to lend him more.

Early on the morrow, Gerrit was at Dr. Troost's surgery. The waiting-room was crowded with club patients; poorly dressed women with sickly children, a few men and boys. The doctor's dispensary assistant, a little man with thin grey hair and big spectacles, stood behind his counter, leisurely pounding something in a mortar. The pestle made a dull scraping as it rolled the powder round and round in the brightly burnished copper mortar. The little man had a very sharp nose turned up at the tip so as to make his wide nostrils very apparent. His mouth was cross and tightly compressed, his cheeks somewhat swollen. He looked as if he were very carefully holding a mouthful of toothache remedy. Every now and then he spoke to one of the patients.

"Well, mistress, what do you want?"

"Well, sir, I'd like to see the doctor, please. It's her side, you see, her side. She's got such a pain in her side, and——"

"Come, my good woman, spit it out. I can't wait all day," said the dispenser, pushing up his spectacles and pounding vigorously. The mother was frightened: she stammered, and pushed forward the little girl who was clinging to her hand, telling her sharply herself to explain to the gentleman where her pain was. Old Gerrit was vexed to find so many there before him. He stood behind two women with very broad backs; and stared at the rows of white ointment-pots, each with its name in black letters. A man was spelling out the names in a low voice—

"U–ung—a–c–i–Acidi—Bor–Bori–Borici!"

Gerrit heard the man mumbling but could not make out what he said. As he stared at the pots, and at the bottles ranged on the polished mahogany shelves, his own nervousness grew. Suddenly he began to burn all over; then he broke out in perspiration. What a beautiful little bottle one of them was! How much he would like to have it! But how could he get it? The thing was impossible. But—God's Christ! wasn't it a beauty!"

At last the woman, pushed by the others right up to the counter, succeeded in making clear what it was ailed the child. The assistant doctor stopped his pounding and stared at the little girl, whose curly head just reached above the counter and whose eyes were fixed in awe on the row of small bright copper mortars close to the scales. The little room smelt of drugs and of unwashed human beings. A boy mounted on a pair of steps was dusting the shelves and bottles. From the cellar below came the smell of iodine and of valerian. The patients waited in nervous silence, looking about and listening with respect to the curt clipped sentences of the assistant.

He gave the woman something for her child. He hadn't a notion what was wrong with her; but then neither had her mother, so it didn't matter very greatly what was in the bottle. He wished Dr. Troost would not leave him to prescribe for such a number of the club patients. Ordinary diseases were all very well, but many of the cases were quite out of the common. He couldn't make head or tail of them, yet had to hand out medicines.

Another woman, less nervous than her predecessor, had taken her place at the counter.

"Well, mother, what's gone wrong with you?"

"Oh, sir, it's awful what I have to endure. I'm always dizzy. My head goes round and round. There are stars in front of my eyes. I'm nearly mad with them."

She poured out her words in a torrent, moving her hands up and down, to and fro, close to the assistant's turned-up nose, trying to represent the dance of stars she complained of.

"I see, I see!" said the assistant, looking very wise, and scratching his thinly covered head: "put out your tongue." The woman protruded a large and flabby tongue. The assistant gazed at it with great solemnity for several seconds, irritably pushing up his spectacles.

The woman was now thoroughly frightened. Her face grew red, sounds uttered themselves in her throat, her fingers drummed on the counter.

"I see, I see!" repeated the doctor's assistant, "you're a bit full-blooded, you know, mother. Do you feel bad if you climb upstairs?"

He could think of no other question; this was one he had often heard put by the doctor. The woman took a deep breath and poured forth another torrent of words.

"Ah, now you have hit it! If I go upstairs, or for the matter of that if I go downstairs—a week or two ago I was standing by the forge—my husband is Stoop the smith, you know——"

"Yes, yes! I see, I see! I'll give you a powder. Take one of these four times a day; do you understand? Come for it at midday. And you"—he turned to another woman, leaving fat Vrouw Stoop, though she had more to say.

"Sir, I can't wait, and I can't come back. Why, it's an hour's walk!" She pushed the other patient away; but the dispenser was displeased.

"Can't you hear what I say? At noon; not a minute earlier!"

"But my children? Two of them are at home very ill and I can't leave them again."

"Come at midday, I tell you!" shouted the assistant, getting angry. The stout woman retreated to the door. "And you, mother?"

"This boy coughs himself to pieces. He shivers, and wanders dreadfully in his talk——"

"Put out your tongue, youngster," said the little man.

The red-haired mother lifted the child so as to raise his head above the counter. His mouth opened to its fullest extent, and an ear-piercing long-drawn-out wail proclaimed his terror and distrust.

"Don't be frightened, my pet! Nice gentleman won't hurt you."

"I *am* frightened! I am frightened!" screamed the child, trying to wriggle out of his mother's arms, while she grew scarlet with distress and annoyance.

"Stop that noise, child. We can't have that noise here. Now, mistress, if you can't keep him quiet you must just take him away. Next patient!"

A man pushed his way to the front; a tall, dark-haired fellow, who looked right over the little assistant's head.

"I've come for my wife—down at the other side of Duinkijk."

"Well, what's the matter with her?"

"Have patience, sir, and let me think. What was it she said? I can't keep it all in my mind. Oh yes! now I remember! She's had a pain for five nights, and she's so weak she can hardly stand."

"Then she——"

"Wait a minute. Look here, the wife said I was to be sure and see the doctor himself."

"You can't see the doctor. He's not here. And your wife must come herself."

"But you don't understand. She can't walk. She's as weak as a kitten! No, no; I must see the doctor!"

"Well, the doctor will let you know when he can come."

"That's all right. But please give me a bottle to take home.

Otherwise it's like I hadn't been. She's so weak she can't even crawl. She's as weak as a twig."

One by one they took their place at the counter. Each was told to show his tongue and then was dismissed with the promise of a bottle of medicine.

Just before old Gerrit was a lame woman.

"Sir, I won't wait any longer!" she exclaimed.

"Eh? What's the matter with you?"

"Why, I've been here thirteen days running, with my little girl. She's got worse instead of better. Now she can't stand. She's in bed, panting, and her neck's swollen as big as this."

"I see. Put out your tongue."

The assistant had not been listening; he was wondering why the doctor's servant was late with his cup of tea.

"I never heard the like in all my born days!" exclaimed the woman, swinging round on her lame leg and facing old Gerrit. "Want's to look at *my* tongue, when the child's lying sick at home!"

"What? what? I referred, of course, to your daughter. Have you looked at her tongue? Is it dirty?"

"Yes, sir, it's a bit furred—fur as thick as your finger. But I want the doctor to see her himself, if you please."

The assistant resumed his hectoring tone.

"Quite impossible, my good woman. The doctor can't go visiting every trifle. Bring your girl here."

"Here? She's too ill, sir. Why, it's an hour's walk—the far end of Duinkijk."

"All I can say is, she must try."

At this moment a tall, fair girl, daughter of one of the township's leading men, came into the surgery, looking back as she entered, and talking over her shoulder to a friend who was waiting outside.

"Good-day, Daan," said the girl familiarly to the assistant.

"Good-day, miss," replied the little man, becoming very polite, even servile. "Do you want to see the doctor, miss? He's at lunch, but I'll tell him you're here."

"No, thanks, Daan. I've only come for grandmother's powders. Are they ready?"

"Oh yes, miss. Of course they're ready. Here they are. Will you be able to carry them?"

"Yes. Good-day, Daan," and away went the girl to rejoin her friend.

The lame woman had stood humbly aside when the young lady came in. She watched her with timid admiration. Old Gerrit, too, followed her with his eyes as she walked down the street. Who could she be? perhaps the daughter of Zuivel the rich member of the *Raad.*

The lame woman, angry but afraid of the assistant, returned to her attack.

"Sir, I must have the doctor."

"Do you mean you won't bring the child?"

"It's impossible. That's God's truth. She's burning with fever: she looks half dead."

"Let me see. I gave her syrup of iodide of iron. Did she have it?"

"Yes, sir. But it did her no good at all."

"Well, well! I'll tell the doctor. He'll let you know if he can come. But it's eighty cents a visit, you know. It's really a gulden for Zeekijkers, but as you've been in the club so long, we'll make it eighty cents."

"Eighty cents!" said the woman, paling; "eighty cents? How can I pay that? My man's bent double with the rheumatics, and we've all been in the club for years, and doctor's never once had to come to us, and I pay fifty cents every week."

The bell tinkled sharply, in ran an urchin, pushed up to the counter, and asked for a ha'p'orth of peppermints.

"*What?*" shouted the dispenser. "Get out of this! This ain't a sweet-shop!"

The boy's face fell; and he made for the door in great confusion.

"I say it's cruel, sir," continued the woman. "I pay to the club, and every one ought to have their rights. It says in the Rules, 'for Wiereland and its neighbourhood.' What do we pay our fifty cents for when we're all well—father, mother, three sons, and two little children besides?"

Her lips quivered, her voice shook, she looked uneasily from the assistant to Gerrit, and from Gerrit to the assistant. The latter was losing his temper.

"Come, come, that's enough! What have you to do with the Rules? Are you going to lay down the law to me? All those who are outside Wiereland have to pay. Now you can go."

"But, sir——"

"I've said all I'm going to say!" shouted the man. "If you can't pay, bring your child here. That's all about it. Now, Hassel, what do you want?"

The lame woman trembled, her face grew white. She tried to say something but no words came. Slowly she hobbled out of the surgery, tears rolling down her cheeks. She could not think what to do; overwhelming anxiety made her dumb.

"What a woman!" growled the assistant to Gerrit. "She'd talk the hind leg off a dog! She want's to get the doctor out for nothing, so that her man can have his drink. What can I do for you, Hassel?"

Gerrit was embarrassed. He had no relish for the interview with Dr. Troost.

"The fact is, Weimer—well, my wife isn't at all well. She gets worse every day. She seems absolutely bewitched. I must speak to the doctor about her."

"Well, step into the waiting-room and I'll tell him you're here."

Gerrit entered the waiting-room and took up a position by the window which gave on the garden. He fingered his cap uneasily and watched two of the doctor's maids who were laughing together under the trees. Presently a bell rang, and immediately the assistant put his head in at the door and beckoned Gerrit to follow him along the marble flags of the passage to the doctor's room.

"Hassel," announced the assistant.

The doctor sat in his consulting room; the garden windows stood wide open; perfumed air welled into the room. Gerrit was almost afraid to go in, so great was his awe of the doctor's wealth and learning. He held his breath, turning his cap round and round in his dirty hands, and cleared his throat noisily.

"Well, Hassel, how do you do?" said the doctor affably, rising and approaching Gerrit. "Sit down, man, sit down. Your wife not so well, eh?"

Gerrit felt himself pushed into a chair by the fat jovial doctor, who stood over him, wearing a white waistcoat, and seeming to exhale prosperity at every pore. He had short dark whiskers, round cheeks, and a double chin. His eyes, small and deeply sunk, were extremely bright and active; nothing seemed to escape them.

"*Allons donc!* Now then, old chap, tell me the trouble."

His jolly tone made Gerrit very uncomfortable. If he answered with the like, Dr. Troost looked offended; if he remained reserved, he was laughed at for stiffness. The magnificence of the room added to his embarrassment, and he sat, very uneasy in his mind, running his fingers through his silvery hair.

"Yes. You see, doctor, she seems clean daft. I can't make her out at all."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"I've been thinking it might be better to put her in the asylum. Guurt says——"

"Yes!" said the doctor eagerly, "tell me about Guurt!"

"She's sick of it. She says she won't bide at home any longer. The wife—well, she can't remember anything. Nothing sticks in her head."

"Come, come! It's nonsense to talk of the asylum. The woman wants help, that's all. Perhaps you don't look after her enough."

"Well, doctor—if you'll come——"

"Certainly, my man, certainly. I'll be with you at three. Tell me now, how are things going with you?"

"As to the wife?"

"No, no, no! Your affairs. That bit of land, eh? Plenty of strawberries, I suppose. There's money in them."

Gerrit was never at ease when Dr. Troost talked about his land and his gardening. He knew a score of gardeners who had ruined themselves by following Troost's amateurish advice. Besides, the doctor's sharp eyes frightened him. Suppose they found out about his pilfering and his hoard? A clever man like that might be able to see into anything.

"Things don't go over well, doctor. I never get a bit of luck."

"What you want is more land. I've got a nice little corner, just the thing for your son Dirk. I've run up a cottage on it—two rooms above, two below; a loft, a barn, everything. You could have it cheap. By the way, though, how about my little bill? time it was settled, eh? You'll let me have the money in a day or two; or, say, when the strawberries are in, eh?"

Gerrit had known this would come. What was he to answer? He sat heavily in his chair, staring now at his blue stockings, now at Dr. Troost, who stood looking down at his visitor and stroking his double chin.

"Well, you see, doctor—well—it's been a shocking bad year——"

"There's no good in that sort of tale, Hassel. I always hear it when I want a bill paid. No, my friend. We'll make out a little mortgage on the bit of land at the back of your house. My brother-in-law will draw it up. It'll only cost five-and-twenty gulden to have it made out, and then you'll have some cash, and I shan't have to wait for the strawberries."

Old Gerrit's face turned green.

"But you're ruining me, doctor! Your fees are so high! A gulden for each visit! It comes to a hundred and seventy gulden, and now—five-and-twenty more for drawing up a new mortgage!"

"Do you suppose I am going to give advice for nothing?

And think of the medicines you've had from me! May I ask if you sell your vegetables for nothing? I wouldn't talk like that if I were you. It's owing to me that you're still at the Beek. You'd have had to go long ago if I'd said the word. You forget I'm on the parish land-commission, and can take the ground from under your feet if I choose. Do you understand? *All* your ground! And now you want to get out of paying my bill! There isn't a man who treats the people as well as I do; and I get no more thanks than this! Now, listen: that mortgage must be put through to-morrow, or you'll be sold up. I've spoken to my brother-in-law about it."

"But—but, doctor—I'm in such a hole—I'm so hard up, I——"

"Oh, I know very well you have no ready money! *Allons donc!* Don't sit there looking as if you couldn't count ten—I'll see your wife this afternoon. And now, good morning."

Gerrit rose stiffly from his chair. Troost put on his hat and walked briskly down the passage in front of him.

His carriage was at the door. He nodded carelessly to a few patients who were in the surgery waiting for their medicines, and made way for him with many demonstrations of respect.

The groom held the door of the carriage. The doctor stepped in, lifting his feet delicately like a hen; off he drove in the carriage, leaning in luxurious ease against the cushions.

He distributed greetings on all sides, a picture of smiling *bonhomie.* With his grey hat and white waistcoat and general air of summer enjoyment, Dr. Troost was assuredly one of the notables of Wiereland.

III

That afternoon the doctor sat in Gerrit's house opposite Vrouw Hassel, who stared at him vacantly, wondering what he wanted, and why he was asking questions. The doctor's back was to the window, and he stroked his chin. The patient sucked her fingers and slobbered. Her cap was crooked, her eyes were dull and expressionless, except for occasional short flashes of terror. Her bodice was only half buttoned, revealing a dirty white undervest.

Dr. Troost watched her for some time, gently shaking his head. Guurt stood beside him with arms akimbo. Dirk and Piet had come in, wearing their working clothes. Gerrit sat trembling with nervousness. On the table was a cut-glass decanter containing brandy, and surrounded by wineglasses sparkling in the sun.

"Well, mother," said the doctor, "tell us all about it."

"What? What do you say?" said Vrouw Hassel, much frightened.

"*Sacré nom! quelle misère!*" muttered the doctor: "tell me, Vrouw Hassel, do you feel a sort of pressure just here?"

"Yes—yes!"

"Here on your temples; and at the back of your head, and at the root of your nose, eh?"

"Yes. Yes. What is he saying?" asked the poor thing, looking helplessly at Guurt.

The doctor also looked at Guurt, with a meaning smile not unobserved by Gerrit.

"Yes, she's very much worse," said Troost, under his breath; "it's shocking; quite shocking. Colleague Zwanke was right. There's nothing to be done."

The others could not catch what he said.

"Bad business. Dementia. She's done for. That's a fine girl, that Guurt! Wonder would she come as my housekeeper? What a figure! Look at those staring louts! The old woman's done for—no doubt about it."

Then he spoke aloud.

"Hm. Hm. Yes. Well, Hassel my friend, she is certainly much worse, very much worse. It's sad. You must bear up, however; that's very necessary. You, Guurt, must take everything into your own hands. Especially don't let her go near the paraffin——"

"It's a nice look-out for us!" said Guurt.

"Well, well—she mustn't do anything which might be dangerous." As he spoke he gave Guurt's rounded arm a friendly pinch and leered up into her face.

Vrouw Hassel stared uncomprehendingly. Why were they all gathered round her? What were they saying? She was not deaf, yet she could not understand. Now and then with a look of fear or pain she would shrink back as if from a blow.

Not one of her children understood or cared for her suffering. They saw her becoming more of a wreck every day, like some dilapidated piece of furniture better broken up and cast aside. Her expressionless stare got on their nerves. They felt her a wet blanket and a spoil-sport.

Troost, a sensualist devoid of any feeling of sympathy or pity, was considering how he could get left alone with Guurt. If the men went out and only the patient and her daughter remained? His meditation, mistaken by Gerrit for hard thinking over the sick woman's case, was interrupted by a loud knock at the door and the entry of a well-dressed man who asked—

"Is doctor here? I know he is, for I saw his carriage waiting outside. I want to speak to him."

This was Dr. Troost's brother-in-law, Stramme, the banker and money-lender; his entry was exceedingly annoying to the doctor. Guurt gave the new-comer an extremely courteous and smiling reception. She knew he admired her, and thought he had invented a pretext merely to come in and see her. Nothing pleased her better than admiration. She liked a squeeze of her hand, a pinch, an arm round her waist. She had spent a full hour in adorning herself for Dr. Troost. Her brothers laughed, but what did that matter? The laugh would be on her side when she had hooked a rich husband. She could have sung for joy now she saw two of Wiereland's wealthiest citizens under her father's roof.

"Please sit down, Mr. Stramme; doctor's not going just yet."

"Thank you, Guurt," said the banker; then turned to Troost, ignoring the Hassels altogether. "I'm glad I've met you; there is something I must discuss with you."

"Yes, yes! I'm coming; I'll come at once. Now, mother, keep up your spirits. You'll be better very soon. *Sacré nom! quelle misère!*" he whispered to Stramme with an expression of great concern.

He rose, his chair creaking as he relieved it of his substantial form. Stramme stood close to Dirk, looking about with an insolent air of contempt and swaying backwards and forwards on his heels and toes. His cuffs were very conspicuous; he wore a light grey summer suit and looked about through gold eyeglasses hung round his neck by a fine black cord. Old Gerrit awkwardly offered him a glass of brandy, handing it on one of the old-fashioned trays used by the peasants. The banker declined in a lordly tone, and seemed disposed to laugh. The doctor was still talking to the smiling Guurt. Again ignoring the Hassels, Stramme asked his brother-in-law if he was ready to go. It made him jealous to see Troost flirting with the girl. He had suddenly caught sight of Vrouw Hassel's bleared eyes and imbecile face, and he shuddered visibly. Guurt was much excited, her face brightly flushed. The two men's elegant attire, their cuffs, hats, light grey suits, white waistcoats, impressed her enormously. Good Lord! what a triumph if she could catch a man like that.

At last Troost turned away from Guurt. He wrote a prescription; then spoke to Gerrit, telling him that the mortgage deed had been drawn up by his brother-in-law, Breemsma the notary; and that he must go and sign it without delay, and take with him the fee of twenty-five gulden, as Breemsma required to be paid at the time. Gerrit, a picture of dumb misery, was appalled, but dared offer no opposition.

Troost and the banker, escorted to the door by the rosy Guurt, now drove away. The girl returned to the room, Troost's whispered compliments ringing in her ears, and making her almost giddy. She felt pleased with the whole world and even looked kindly at her staring yet unseeing mother. For some time there was silence. Hassel glared at his wife, who sat in her chair a living corpse. Dirk was enraged by the insolence of the magnificent Stramme, who had not vouchsafed so much as a good-day. Kees, who had remained in the garden, now came to the house to see what kept the others so long. Guurt poured out coffee for each of the men.

"You have a cup, mother?"

"What do you say? What?"

"A cup of coffee to comfort you?"

"Yes, yes!" and she stretched her hands eagerly for the brimming cup, put it to her lips with shaking hand, and swallowed great gulps of the hot sweet drink, licking her blue lips with her parched tongue.

Kees looked at her in silence. He had never seen her like this, for it was the first time for several years that he had entered his father's house.

"This is going to cost money!" exclaimed old Gerrit suddenly, with a growl in his voice; "a gulden a visit; he says he's coming again to-morrow, and I suppose the day after, and the day after that. You'll see! and Guurt's to go and get two bottles of medicine to-day to lead off with!"

"Good Lord!" shouted Kees, "can't you see the scoundrel is making a fool of you? Oh, it pays him well enough! Of course the medicines are to be had only at his dispensary! of course he'll come again to-morrow, and write another prescription. The damned rogue! I'd kick him out of the house if it was me."

Gerrit, huddled in his chair, made no answer. The turtle dove filled up the silence with its coo.

"Kees is right!" muttered Dirk.

"But doctor wouldn't order medicine if it wasn't wanted, would he?" said the milder Piet.

"Head of a sheep!" said Kees, "don't you hear the same said of him everywhere? Unnecessary medicines—unnecessary visits—both going on long after the folk are well."

"He and his medicines stick like burrs," said Dirk.

Gerrit stared out of the window, but he felt greatly irritated. Kees was right; but that made his interference all the worse: for there was no more possibility of getting free of Troost than of Breemsma. Both got every one into their clutches—Gerrit among the number.

"Why don't you have Doctor Zwanke?" continued Kees; "he's young, he's only been here two years, and hasn't got a dispensary. He doesn't come when he's not wanted and he's a good fellow, friendly and not stuck up. Or there's Dr. Moas, the opposition chap. Even he'd be better than Troost."

"That's it," agreed Dirk, admiring the eloquence of his usually silent brother. But old Gerrit started up, his face pale with passion.

"What business is it of yours? What are you poking your nose in for? Get rid of Troost? How can I? How can I? He has me by the leg! And his precious brother the notary—hasn't he made out all my mortgages? Suppose I went to Zwanke—wouldn't the two of them be down on me that very day? The notary's got the burgomaster in his pocket; poke one, and you poke the other. They've got me fast, I tell you; fast—fast. If I stir—I shall be put into the street!"

Gerrit's voice rose to a scream; he walked up and down the room gesticulating violently. Vrouw Hassel thought he was going to beat her and shrank each time he passed. The sons drank their coffee in silence. They knew Troost was all-powerful, that he was intimate with all the landowners, that a word from him could make a working-tenant's position intolerable; or could, on the other hand, open many avenues of profit and advancement.

Troost and his family party were the tyrants of Wiereland and its vicinity; the most hated was Breemsma the notary. He had more direct power over land, rents, debts, leases, mortgages, and so forth. He could bewilder the labourers and small tenants with figures, could make their heads swim; with a single word could throw them into abject terror. He could keep them waiting for the drawing up of an agreement, till a whole plan was spoiled, and the object in view was no longer attainable. He could be hail-fellow-well-met with them if he chose, but he could also squeeze them dry if it suited him. A few realised that the notary, the doctor and the banker had battened on *them*, had grown rich out of their toil; Troost, now so magnificent, had come to the neighbourhood a poor man forty years ago; Breemsma had bled the whole gardening fraternity, till he had grown fat and sleek on their juices. They murmured under their breath; even when they realised the facts they dared not speak out. On the contrary, they toadied both notary and doctor, they bowed and scraped, and slandered their neighbours to curry favour. Only when drunk did some of the poorest and roughest give vent to their feelings of hatred.

If a small gardener or nurseryman did betray himself, and railed against the great men, the fact was sure to be brought to these worthies' knowledge, and the poor devil would find them become his enemies. Wherever he turned he knocked his head against a stone wall; his business was hampered, in all his intercourse with his neighbours he felt the hostility of that powerful family party. Sooner or later he must come crawling to their feet, humbly begging pardon for his iniquity, and promising amendment. In the District Council—that medieval clique of small tyrants and stupid reactionaries which ignored or got rid of any clear-sighted and independent member—the burgomaster was supreme. He was a narrow-minded, insignificant man with a handle to his name which procured him general homage. He misgoverned and oppressed the township with all the forms of the law. A few citizens muttered and jeered at the man's pretensions and small-mindedness. His clever secretary taught him his business both in theory and in practice; but in public his title proved he could do no wrong.

Kees knew all this; but what could a pauper, a wastrel without a cent of his own, say or do? Deep in his breast raged bitter resentment and revolt against the whole gang of petty despots. It maddened him to remember his Wimpie lying at home stricken to death, while suffering never came to those rich ones.

Then he remembered that Guurt had never offered to go and see Wimpie or any of his children; that Ant had forbidden the little ones to go near the nest of heretics, and that his whole family detested Ant for her bitterness and spite. Still it hurt him deeply that none of his own flesh and blood ever asked after Wimpie.

As he followed his brothers to the garden his heart was seething with rage. He felt, however, that in work he would find soothing and calm; he knew vaguely that the great Earth Mother had comfort for him though it was denied by his kind. The brothers worked on, crouching to lift the bulbs, till they could see no longer; till the golden glow of the June evening had faded, and universal dark covered the land.

CHAPTER III

I

TWO days later Dirk and Piet were hoeing along the row of beans while Kees weeded; his great hands moving quickly and skilfully in and out among the finely cut foliage of the young carrots. Old Gerrit, his face horror-struck, came out from the house.

"Boys! boys!" he cried despairingly, "the caterpillar has got into the strawberries—into the whole crop out there on the dune, next to the potatoes."

His voice shook, and Dirk and he gazed at each other in consternation.

"The whole crop?" said Dirk, "you mean it's destroyed?"

"Which bit do you say?" asked Piet.

"The bit in the dune. There's not a leaf left—the fruit is all dried up and shrivelled.

"My Christ!" cried Dirk, properly horrified. "I must go and see for myself!"

"See? There is nothing to see. You can see the cabbages. But they've got slug in them. Everything's going wrong at once."

"We may have rain; that's the best cure for caterpillar," said Piet, with anxiety in his tone also, as it had been in Gerrit's and Dirk's. The caterpillar meant loss of crop. Gerrit, looking blankly before him, was calculating the loss. Into his anxious thought of disaster and failure, came pricks of conscience. Certainly he had brought evil upon himself. He was a thief; a common pilferer and thief.

He plucked at his beard nervously. Piet and Dirk, leaning on their hoes, watched him and this made him still more nervous. They must know his secret, or they'd never look at him like that! God's Christ! Why should they stare? They were not saying anything at the moment; that must be because of Kees. Presently they would come out with it. They must have been talking to the doctor about it; and Guurt and the wretched wife knew too, and very soon it would be all over the place. Fear, deadly fear clutched his throat. He could scarcely breathe!

The brothers returned to their work, and Gerrit walked backwards and forwards between the flower-beds and the rows of vegetables. He saw his wife standing by the well, a pair of stockings in her hand. The sight of her was exasperating to the angry man. That woman had brought him poverty! And Kees had brought bad luck—as he had expected. His wife was costing the very hair of his head; she spied on him and had seen his treasure—the dirty hag! he'd like to split her head open, for she it was who had spied on him and then told his secret!

His head swam. Ten acres ruined! Even without that, he couldn't pay his way. He must sign more papers, caused by his debt to the doctor for treating his wife, and treating Piet's leg, and sending medicines. It was all the result of having given work to Kees. Kees had brought all these misfortunes!

The sons watched their father as he strode angrily up and down. Never had they seen him so much upset by a piece of bad luck.

"I say, father, whatever's the matter with you? You look like a corpse. Don't take it like that," cried Dirk, "it's not so bad as all that!"

"But the money—the money! That Troost has forced another mortgage on my land, for his doctoring of mother and Piet. Oh, it's all very well for you, boy! You can go to Amsterdam and get drunk; but I've got to stand still and be shot at by the whole pack of them!"

Gerrit's smooth childlike face was distorted by fear and rage. Suddenly turning away, he walked quickly to the yard, and drank a copious draught from the well to moisten his parched throat. Guurt, with her skirts looped up through her apron band, was busy cleaning the paved path across the yard, swilling buckets of water and energetically brushing with a stiff broom which hissed and scraped over the wet bricks, while her body swayed forward and backward, and every muscle seemed tense with energy. Her father approached her with pale face and uneven gait.

"What's the matter?" she cried in the Wiereland sing-song, but Gerrit hurried past her to the house and kicked off his wooden shoes outside the door.

There was a frightful buzzing and singing in his head as if he were on the verge of apoplexy. This matter was certainly going to be the death of him! Fear seized him, gripped his throat, paralysed his limbs. Through his terror surged up the longing to visit and gloat over his hoard. But entirely new fears now possessed him. What would become of his hoard when he died? Or suppose he were to have a stroke some day while he was down in the cellar looking at it? Or if Dirk or Piet were to discover it? Could he save anything out of a crop of strawberries eaten by caterpillars? When he appeared before the dear Lord, would he have his white beard?

These and similar queries made a giddy dance through his brain. Fears, like an army of ghosts, encompassed him. If he tried to seize them and push them back, they flowed through his fingers and stood round him as before in stony silence, while he gazed in helplessness and agony. To shut his eyes brought no relief. They were there just the same, blacker and clearer the harder he tried to shut out the vision.

But what frightened him most of all was the horrible feeling of oppression at the pit of his stomach, which brought a cold sweat to his face. His head seemed bathed in some cold fluid; but presently it grew hotter and hotter till his very neck and the skin of his scalp were on fire. Then all grew suddenly cold; only to burn again, and worse than before.

Had God sent this to him as a punishment? How he wished he could read! Then he could see in the Bible if there had ever been a man like himself. But no! no! if he could read he might find in the Bible that there was some punishment yet more horrible awaiting him! There was his brother now. Everything seemed to do well for him, though the two pieces of ground marched together. God surely meant it as a lesson! And yet, oh yes—on Grim's strawberry bed the caterpillar was just as bad as on his own. Did that mean that Grim also was a thief? And what about Reeker—who had had a whole bed of bulbs eaten by mice? And de Grouw's potatoes which had been caught by the frost? Plainly he, Gerrit, was not the only person who suffered! He mustn't worry. He must keep calm. Now he was all right again. But that feeling at the pit of his stomach—that's what made him feel bad! almost as if he were dying! Was there really a hell or not? God's Christ! it was impossible to feel certain one way or the other. At night he was quite sure there was one; by daylight it appeared an old wives' fable.

Oh! there they come again! the whole troop of black things pressing round and hemming him in. How dark it seemed, though still the hour of broad daylight. Was he going to die, was he going to hell? He hadn't sold one of the things he had stolen! He would never look at them again. He'd give them all away, give them all back, all—all! If only he needn't die. Christ! how his head burned! What a dark cloud was before his eyes. Was he being suffocated? He sank into his chair, gasping for breath, clutching at his throat. But at last the burning heat died away, and he grew calmer. The black figures, the dark cloud had gone from his eyes. Only he had a sense of impending disaster, and he trembled from head to foot.

He could sit still no longer, he must get out and move about. He shuffled to the empty cow-house; sat down on a stone block, leaning his head against the manger and letting his arms hang limp at his side.

II

The morning song of the workers rose from the fields and gardens of Wiereland, filling the luminous June air with melody. The ground, which here shone golden, there glowed with the rich tints of unnumbered gems, was covered with a film of dew as if some fairy hand had scattered diamonds and pearls upon every leaf and flower and blade of grass. Behind the hedge-rows could be seen the blue smocks of the workers as they crouched over the rich and light diffusing green of the strawberry beds. Fresh sweet scents exhaled from the sunlit fields. At midday the shadows became black, the sun's rays burning and oppressive. The workers, absorbed in their heavy toil, sang no more.

Dirk and Piet worked in the purple shade of some trees beside Gerrit's potato ground. Here his land was bounded by the immense garden of the rich and taciturn nurseryman, Waarmer, which stretched to the dune at one side, to the hawthorn hedge and the avenue of beech trees at the other.

Waarmer was a gentleman: very big, very choleric, very reserved, often malicious. His house was in the centre of his property, sheltered by great elms and oaks and beeches. The private garden was shut off by a wire fence through which the workers outside could see its shady paths and wealth of flower and leaf. In the meadows, which formed part of the enclosure, fowls wandered about clucking in the tall grass, and young poplars, in their quivering dress of silver-glinting leaves, rustled in the balmy air, making a gentle melody like the song of a summer shower. Deep among the trees was an outhouse, built of soft-hued red brick and seen through the golden rain of laburnum which grew in front of it, the long trails of blossom catching the light of the June sun. A flock of white geese with beaks of brilliant orange waddled about under trees, followed by a crowd of downy goslings which pecked incessantly at the tall grass, their small featherless bodies almost hidden in it. The gander, with outstretched neck and watchful sidelong glances, moved hither and thither in pursuit of his restless brood, his snowy plumage startlingly conspicuous whenever he stepped into the sunshine. The house was whitewashed and shadowed by the trees, of which the nearest ring was of sweet-smelling chestnuts, now in full bloom. A perpetual soft rustle of wind was among the branches, and their shadow, pierced by bars and shafts of sunlight, danced perpetually on the white walls. At a little distance was a moss-grown surrounding wall, very ancient and dilapidated, in parts even threatening to fall. A turkey cock stood on the wall proudly displaying the sheen of his bronze and steel-coloured plumage. Now and then muffled barking of a dog came from some shady lair near the house. Out on the nursery land tall windmills in a circle danced their merry hornpipe. Dirk and Piet were working close to a group of lilacs, the pale and fragrant blossoms of which were conspicuous against a rich background of copper beech.

The beech avenue belonged to Jonkheer van Ouwenaar; it seemed drowned in the overflowing scent of the adjoining garden, in the breath of jasmine and lilac and pines, in the intoxicating fragrance of thickets still damp with the dew of a June night. Bees swam through the glowing air as if giddy and drunk with perfume. On every side silver-throated birds carolled joyously from the depths of the green.

Kees had worked later than usual, bringing back cartloads of baskets from the quay. The sale had been good to-day, and Dirk gave his brother a gulden in excess of his stipulated wage. It was very welcome for his human warren of thirteen persons, where the children fought with each other for crumbs.

For the first time for many weeks Kees started homewards with money in his pocket. He hurried along rejoicing in the luxuriant green which before he had passed unheeded. Something in his rough passionate nature had softened towards all external things. He rejoiced in the fragrance and the colour. He thought that after all life was worth living.

The still June day was dying in a glory of colour. The young pines stood up dark against the glow of red; but the outermost needles of each branch were touched with fire, so that the trees resembled candelabra in a mighty cathedral ablaze to their summit. Blue veronica and purple ground ivy, daisies and buttercups sparkled and glowed in the wayside grass, kissed boldly by the wine-gold sunset light.

A gentle shiver stirred the willows and white-leaved aspens. It seemed a whisper, warning that the spring must die. From out the glowing trees a nightingale suddenly burst into joyous song telling that the summer was at hand.

The little nightingale in his sober dress of grey and russet sang from the low branch of a willow. His eyes shone in the golden light; he drank in the enchanting song which poured from his own full throat, a song that seemed to rise into the holy stillness of evening as a column of sweet and sparkling melody. A few soft sad notes in a minor key began the plaintive anthem, which stopped now and then, only to burst forth again after a short interval, breaking the evening hush with silvery cadence. The little beak was wide open, the small throat swelled almost to bursting. With ever-deepening ecstasy it poured forth its sparkling flood of passionate music.

Suddenly the song ended and the bird flew to a lower bough of the willow. From afar sounded a reply from another nightingale. The air became full of song, nightingale and blackbird, thrush and lark, vying with each other in singing the dirge of the dying spring. The light faded, but still the bird songs, crystal clear, hymned the departing sun, the little songsters paying their humble evening tribute of worship to their god.

BOOK III

SUMMER

CHAPTER I

THE fields, the gardens, the little streets of Wiereland were redolent of the aroma and the sweetness of fresh strawberries. The ground, soaked with recent rain, gave forth a stimulating scent. The intense blue of the sky was flecked with silver clouds. In all the fields and gardens work was in full swing.

Mowers had come from Gelderland wearing their small black hats and sombre costume. Each morning they presented themselves for work in the Polder, threading their way with measured strides through the crowd on the quay, their long scythes borne on their shoulders, the blades glittering in the sun. Day after day the sun shone in a sky of intense blue. He poured his broad rays over the fields, causing in the midday hours a fervent and intolerable heat.

In Wiereland, in Duinkijk, in all the surrounding district, the stress and hurry of work grew daily more fevered. In the golden evenings the roads were thronged with men wheeling hand-carts laden with baskets of market produce. They came from the remotest corners of the district, all converging upon Wiereland harbour, whence at a late hour the goods were despatched by boat. The carts and waggons, laden high, rattled and jolted through the quiet streets where, after the day's work, the citizens took their ease in their little front gardens. Till quite late the stream flowed on, each hand-cart pushed by one panting labourer and pulled by two others, their perspiring faces shining red in the rays of the sinking sun. After a long day in the fields the men now strained every muscle to get their stuff in good time to the quayside. Anxiously they looked this way and that lest they should be run into, and find their whole mountainous load rolled to the ground.

From the Polder came the scent of hay, and sometimes a heavily-laden hay-cart came swaying through the busy streets, its load over-topping the roofs of the little houses on either side. Hay-time came and went, but the stress of work did not diminish in the market gardens.

Kees three nights a week cut and packed lettuces for a neighbour in order to earn an extra trifle. He and three other over-timers filled the baskets; then piling four or five on top of each other they staggered with them to the hand-cart at the end of the field. Their joints cracked; their muscles seemed about to break under the burden. Kees was followed by a narrow-chested, coughing, and feebly-swearing man, who stumbled along with his heavy pile of baskets held at full arm's stretch in front of him. Each time as he lifted the burden his tongue lolled out like that of a panting dog.

"The devil! They're heavier than ever to-night!" he murmured.

"What! those few baskets?" grinned his comrade, a sturdy fellow who panted himself as he lifted his load. "You're a duffer. Give it up and let some one else have the pay, eh?"

The narrow-chested man held his peace. He was beyond speech, and could only puff and pant, feeling as if something in his side were bursting. To slave all day in the heat, and then to take this crushing work in the evening—he could see now it was impossible. This should be the last night of it.

The men kept on at their work till the sun had set, the red afterglow had faded, and the dark earth beneath their feet was scarcely visible. The carts laden with green were still rattling by on their way to the harbour.

An hour or two later Kees was tramping home through the back streets and lanes of the township. Before he had gone far, he heard a child's voice just behind him crying tearfully—

"Father! Father!"

Kees stopped and looked round. It was Dientje, his nine-year-old daughter, with a big fish basket on her arm. She approached timidly and stood looking up at him.

"Are you coming from the quay?"

"Yes, father. I've sold sixty-five cents' worth."

"But—— the devil! You ought to have been home long before this."

"I know. But mother said I must go into all the taverns, and in one of them there was a lot of tipsy men, and they took five of my fish, and they wouldn't pay, and the landlord said——"

Her voice was broken by sobs as she told her story. She had cried so bitterly, so despairingly, that the landlord had paid her (promising himself that he would get the money back from her some other day).

The child burst into tears and broke off short in her story. She was utterly exhausted and overwrought.

Kees noticed the weakness of her voice and felt pity for the little creature. He slackened his pace so that she might keep up with him and not lose her breath. But he did not trust her. The whole nine of them were their mother's children, bigoted, false, and cunning.

"Give the basket to me. Is there anything in it?"

"Yes, fifteen gurnet. But I must give mother the money, father."

She spoke very anxiously, thinking her father meant to take the fish from her.

"Hold your silly tongue!" said Kees angrily, "I don't want your money! Did your mother say you were to look for your father in the taverns, eh?"

"No! No, never!" stammered Dientje, greatly frightened. Kees was sure she was lying.

"How has Wimpie been to-day?" he asked, dropping the matter.

Unconsciously he had relapsed into his usual pace, and the child trotted after him gasping, her hand pressed to her side. She was very nervous, afraid of the dark, but also afraid of her father. Her heart thumped violently, and she forgot to answer the question.

"Well?" said Kees sternly. His pity for the little girl had evaporated.

"What? I—— What?"

"What? What?" said Kees, mimicking her. "How has Wimpie been to-day? That's what I said!"

"I don't know. I haven't been home all day."

Kees was silent. The basket creaked now and then as Dientje staggered against it. The smell of fish made him half-sick. The child felt more and more frightened as she hurried along trying to keep up with him, afraid to tell him he was walking too fast. The beating of her heart nearly choked her. She had a confession to make. She had eaten one of the sixty gurnet her mother had given her to sell. Oh! she had been so hungry! But it would make mother mad with rage. Once before Dientje had done the same thing and mother had beaten her till she could hardly stand.

"You eat my fish, while we are hungry? That's fine conduct!" Ant had screamed, slapping and cuffing the child till her eyes were suffused with blood. And now Dientje had done it again. She had started in the morning with two chunks of bread which were to last her all day. About midday she had begged a mouthful or two of food, and had drunk water from the pump, using her *sabot* as a cup. Late in the evening, standing on the quay, amid the shouting and the bustle, she had suddenly felt so faint and hungry that she could resist the temptation of the fish no longer. Before she knew what she was doing she had taken a fat little gurnet from the basket, had looked round anxiously, made one bite, then overmastered by furious hunger, had swallowed the rest in a few mouthfuls. The smell of green stuff and fruit, the fumes of gin wafted from out the tavern doors had excited and made her reckless: yet no sooner was the deed done than she was overwhelmed by terror and remorse. She had to answer for every cent. Her mother counted it all up every night. She dare not, she dare not go in! She was half-crazy with fear. Her heart was beating and hammering in her very throat. She had lost all sense of fatigue. She had forgotten everything but her dread of her mother, of her mother and her grandmother too. For grandmother was certain to join in scolding her.

She had just screwed up her courage to tell Kees about it, and beg for the couple of cents which would make her money right, when she found herself at the door. Not a word was she able to utter for the sheer terror which overwhelmed her.

CHAPTER II

STRAWBERRY picking had begun. Before the sun's disc had risen above the horizon, while the dewy fields still lay under a shimmering haze, the gardeners were out. Each was surrounded by a ring of young people—some of them quite little children—and was busy apportioning the day's work to his own sons and daughters as well as to the hired pickers.

The tulips and hyacinths were over; but beds of irises and anemones still made spots of colour among the green of carrots, lettuces, and peas.

All day the fields were crowded with busy workers, plucking the scarlet sun-kissed fruit, passing baskets, carrying the filled ones away to the shade. Uncle Hassel had set all his family to work, even the little girl of seven. He urged them on to furious haste, anxious to have his fruit ready for market before any one else, that he might get the highest price. He was greatly pleased to think that the quick and skilful fingers of his children would do the work without costing him a single cent.

All Duinkijk and Wiereland was possessed by the same fever of hurry. To stop for a moment, to take a deep breath, was to waste time. Middlemen and consumers pressed for delivery, masters goaded their workers, the workers stimulated each other. Kneeling at their labour, the pickers, with practised eye, sought the glowing gold-specked fruit, their busy fingers probing the leafy recesses.

"Baskets!" cries a picker; and a little girl in a short, red, very ragged petticoat throws baskets along the rows behind the heels of the pickers with a pretty sweep of her childish arm. As each basket is filled the picker puts it behind him. Soon there are long lines and piles of strawberry laden baskets which make the whole air laden with a rich sweet scent.

Old Gerrit had no crop from his caterpillar devastated beds. His new plot, however, only one year planted, was full of fruit, so he did not grumble too much. He took his share in the work, keeping the same hours as his sons. He liked the heat and thoroughly enjoyed the thought that there was money coming in. The rush of work was all-absorbing; even his mania for stealing cooled. He only noticed the stiffness of his limbs when he lay quiet in bed, his wife by his side snoring and puffing out her lips. True, the itch for thieving occasionally asserted itself; but there were too many people about; too many observant eyes for him to venture upon action. He had to content himself with the excitement of hard work, and with secreting a few cents in places known only to Guurt.

"Damn it, girl! you're picking them too ripe!" said Dirk one morning very angrily to his sister; "don't you know they've got to ripen on their journey? They're going to Germany. Didn't you hear father say so?"

"They aren't too ripe," said Guurt.

"I say they are. Just look. I say look!"

And with dirty fingers the scowling Dirk turned over the fruit from the girl's basket.

"One or two perhaps," she said indifferently; "most of them are nearly green."

"Let her alone, Dirk. Let her alone," growled old Gerrit. He was mortally afraid Guurt would throw up the work and take herself off. Each year she had grown more reluctant to join in the picking. This year it was only for the sake of some extra money for Kermis that she had consented at all.

"The boys mustn't irritate her," he thought.

Dirk was nettled, for only a few minutes before his father had bidden the sons not to pick any fruit that was ripe. The young man went on with his work, kneeling on one knee;

changing to the other when the constrained position and the pressure of the burning sand became intolerable.

"God's truth!" grumbled Piet, "there's a devil of a sun to-day! My neck's on fire! My back's broke."

"Stuff and nonsense!" shouted Gerrit, working away feverishly though he ached all over, and every sinew seemed a furnace; "isn't it the same for all of us? Are you the only one with a back and a knee?"

"If I'd a drop of drink I might bear it," said Piet; "for that matter I could swallow a gallon!"

"You shan't have it! You shan't have it!" roared Gerrit. "I won't have the vile stuff on land of mine!"

"Keep your hair on, old man! If I want a drink I shall take it without leave from you!" said Piet.

"What do you think of it, Kees?" asked Dirk.

"Oh, Kees!" growled Piet, "I suppose he ain't got a back, or a head, or knees, or anything!"

Kees went on with his work, not looking round. He filled his basket quicker than any of them, dragging it after him as he worked his way along the bed.

On the paths bordering the fields stood brown, green, and red hand-carts piled with strawberry baskets and hampers of vegetables. At noon the pickers came up from all sides bringing their contributions. The air was sweet with the mingled perfume from the fruit, the new-mown grass, the fresh vegetables. In the pitiless sunshine which streamed from the unclouded sky, the straw hats and coloured blouses of the workers dotted the fields with points of brightness.

At this strawberry season all Wiereland was in a ferment. The fruit was all sold in anticipation to a couple of big local contractors, who in their turn resold it at an immense profit to salesmen in Germany and England. Thousands and thousands of *kilos* of fruit had to be delivered—all bustled to the station in hand-carts and there weighed and despatched. Each day the price fell as the fruit became more abundant. Hence there was wild competition among the gardeners, each straining every nerve to get his fruit delivered before that of his rivals.

Dirk had a very large cart with projecting framework, which was loaded every evening and trundled off to the station. On top were a few baskets of vegetables to be deposited *en route* at the harbour. Nightly a continuous stream of hand-carts rattled and bumped along the station road, tributary streamlets on either side swelling its volume. Men with dust-stained faces, exhausted and excited at once, pushed and hauled and yelled and cursed in the general confusion of jolting and colliding carts. Draught dogs, poor tortured things mad with heat and thirst, barked hoarsely, panting and dripping foam from wide jaws, at every opportunity lying down in their harness, between the carts.

At the station mountains of baskets stood ready for despatch. A contractor's clerk presided at the weighing machine. Passing trains, hurrying passengers, the crush and jumble of carts and waggons, the confusion constantly aggravated by fresh arrivals, made the station yard pandemonium. As each grower brought his load to the scales, his name was written in a book and presently the weight of his consignment. The moment his business was concluded, another would detach himself from the crowd and get his cart noisily over the brick-paved causeway, the place he had left being instantly closed up behind him. The baskets were transferred in a trice to the weighing machines. The clerk, his face streaming and seamed by worry, his lips quivering nervously as the noise and confusion increased his sense of strain, weighed the consignment, pushing the sliding weight back to the base of the lever, while he cast a hasty glance at the quality of the fruit.

"Name?" he asked shortly, mopping his face with a red handkerchief.

"De Kaiser."

"Piet or Willem?"

"Willem."

"Willem de Kaiser," he dictated to himself, as he filled in the perforated receipt form which he tore from his book and handed to the consigner.

"Load it here. Next!"

About twenty yards away another throng surrounded a rival buyer, a German, who in the shade of a little tent was receiving and weighing and drafting off the fruit to a second row of railway trucks.

The German's wife and daughter—the former very stout, the latter tall and long-necked, with a face like a goat's—sat at a small table in the tent making out the receipts while the man weighed and examined the fruit. He wore a white motor cap and his face shone. He grumbled and disputed with each grower about the weight and quality of his strawberries, while the men, tired and uncomprehending of his German accent, stood in anxious silence waiting for their vouchers, and wondering what was the matter.

The chief crowd, however, was round the Dutchman's weighing machine. Dirk's turn came at last. He pushed and tugged at his heavy cart till he had got it in position, his head bursting, his every muscle swelling with the exertion. Sweat dropped from his face into the baskets as he heaped them carefully on the platform of the weighing machine.

"From?" asked the clerk, ready to write, his pencil point pressed against his tongue.

"Hassel."

"Which Hassel?"

"Gerrit."

"Flowerpot," muttered the clerk, writing down "Gerrit Hassel."

Dirk went on piling baskets.

"Hi!" shouted the clerk, jumping up, "what's that?—the basket there, and the next one? That's filth! Won't take that!"

Dirk stared.

"What's the matter? Won't take what?"

He knew quite well that he had brought a dozen baskets of bad fruit. Old Gerrit had insisted on some of his spoiled strawberries being put in with the good ones, hoping that in the hurry and confusion the trick would be unnoticed. Three other growers had succeeded in this game—why not he?

"Look sharp, Hassel!" shouted angry voices from the waiting crowd still outside the weighing enclosure.

"Go to the devil!" called Dirk in reply, glaring at the speakers.

"Now then! now then!" cried the clerk, "take those baskets off. I won't have 'em."

"It's the old man's fault," muttered Dirk to himself; "he's let me in nicely, old devil!" Aloud he said, "Are you gone mad, man? There's nothing wrong with them—a little bit crushed, perhaps——"

The clerk leaped to his feet in a fury.

"If you don't take them down, I'll throw them, and quickly, too! Come on, now! That leaves forty baskets—six hundred *kilos*, eh?"

The voucher was made out while Dirk sulkily replaced the twelve rejected baskets on his cart. The cursed old man! He deserved the whole lot flung in his sanctimonious face. Dirk had told him the game wouldn't do. Damn him! The young man forced his way out through the crowd. Now he had to go for some empty baskets. He made his way to a truck standing on a siding. A yelling, struggling horde of gardeners surrounded it, fighting for the baskets. In vain the big fruit contractor and basket owner endeavoured to deal them out with some kind of order. The strong pushed the weaker out of their way, and helped themselves. Dirk captured and made off with a substantial bundle. Before long the waggon was empty. Many were disappointed, and swore audibly. Why couldn't the buyers and the clerks have a better supply?

"Can't help it," roared the man presiding at the truck; "can't create 'em! There'll be two more trucks at four a.m. You must get up early, that's all."

A blind organ-grinder had taken up a position against the station railings just outside the noisy, struggling throng. He stood bareheaded in the sun, staring with unseeing eyes as he mechanically turned the handle of his instrument, which was suspended in front of him by a shoulder-strap, its weight resting on the ground by a single leg. The soft sad wailing and whining could be heard through the clattering of the carts, the shouting and swearing. One thin, shaking hand, showing all its veins, rested on the top of the organ; the other turned the handle. At the blind man's foot lay a little boy in filthy verminous rags, greedily eating the half-rotten strawberries which had fallen from the carts. The sun's rays streamed pitilessly on the organ-grinder, whose eyes seemed to be *listening* for what they could not see as he ground out tune after tune, the mournful notes unheeded in the furious hubbub of the crowd.

So the day wore on and evening was dissolving into night, but still new carts rattled up, still the loading of the fruit trucks continued, the last level red-gold rays of the sinking sun illuminating the figures like the lights in a cathedral nave. In the fading light the Polder's green expanse seemed limitless. From the distant gardens and meadows came the sweet scent of grass and flowers and fruit.

At last it was quite dark, and the unloading and weighing and packing must cease. The noise and bustle about the station ended; the carts rattled homewards over the brick pavement of the streets. Deep stillness brooded over the Polder. From a distant lane came the tender and melancholy singing of a child.

The vault of night was sown with golden stars, and filmy angel wings swept noiselessly across the blue abyss.

CHAPTER III

I

STILL the sun blazed over the golden fields, still the fever of work was at its height. Strawberry picking went on, and the workers' homes were neglected and forgotten. More and more pickers were required; money was flowing in, and the master-gardeners lived in an excited dream. Babies wandered alone in the lanes and the farmyards. The women and all the children old enough to be pressed into the work knelt and toiled in the sun from the morning till the night.

The first fresh green of grass and leaves had given place to a deeper and a duller tint; the hedges bordering the lanes and the seaward road were already thick with dust.

At the time of the quivering July heat Kees was up and out each morning at three. Wimpie asked daily to be moved out of doors. Ant had begged an old perambulator from a neighbour, and in it Wimpie was wheeled out by his father while the other children still slept, and was placed beside the yellow wall of the cottage immediately under the window. Flies buzzed round him all day in the sun. Virginia creeper had trailed over the wall, and made a background against which the boy's death-pale face stood out startlingly distinct. The whole day through he was there, looking straight before him down the road, or at the leafy splendours of the chestnuts in Jonkheer van Ouwenaar's park, or at the pine woods, or at the pollard willows near at hand. He smiled, humming softly to himself, a gentle devout look in his wide blue eyes. Sometimes a spasm of pain would shoot through his leg, and he would clutch himself to restrain a scream. If his father was by he would look up at him and smile—the gentle heart-searching smile of the child who has learned what pain is and has become prematurely wise.

Morning by morning Kees grew sadder and more silent as he placed a jug of milk by Wimpie's side, kissed him, and went away to his work. He felt that the world would soon be over for the boy. Each day Wimpie was thinner and weaker; and in the father's heart surged up passions of desperate revolt and hatred, carefully concealed.

Ant also went away—an hour or two later, however. She worked at the pea-picking on some fields at an hour's distance, near the sea. Before starting she gave Wimpie some breakfast, said her prayers hastily, routed the little girls out of bed with much scolding and abuse. All day the younger children, ragged and unwashed, wandered aimlessly about the lanes. Two of them, five and three years of age, had fiery red hair and queer little freckled faces. Grietje, the little mother, was six; and she and Vrouw Rams the grandmother looked after the babies.

From nine till noon Dientje was out hawking her fish: in the afternoons she was employed as picker at one of the gardens. On market days she was back on the quay at seven to sell a few more of her evil-smelling fish.

The baby, in a broken manure barrow which did duty as perambulator, was placed outside near Wimpie. It cried hour after hour, unheard and unheeded by the half-blind grandmother.

Old Rams sat all day in the corner by the window, just under the dried fish, which hung from a hook on the wall and on hot days gave forth a horrible odour of decomposition. The old man neither spoke nor moved; every now and then he would cough long and violently, then sink back in his chair utterly exhausted. Rain or sun, heat or cold, it was all one to old Rams as he sat chewing his plug and rolling it round his mouth with the tip of his tongue. When the sun was obscured by heavy thunder clouds and the fir copses grew black under the leaden sky, then Wimpie would cry softly to himself: and Vrouw Rams would come shuffling out, to wheel his rickety little carriage into the house and keep him prisoner till the shower was over.

About half-past eight the mother came home, and the children crowded round her like young animals scenting a meal. Ant, however (some months now in the family way), would sink on a chair close to Wimpie, half dead with fatigue and heat, panting, her mouth parched, too weary to utter a word. She had eyes only for her boy, at whom she now and then gently nodded and smiled. The grandmother shuffled about, pushing the children away from her daughter, and occasionally giving one of them a piece of bread, but not till she had carefully examined the little hands and face to make sure it had not had its share already. Silently she pushed a bowl of thin gruel before her old husband. Last of all—having caught Jans and bidden her hear the little ones their prayers—she brought Ant a plateful of warmed-up vegetables, saved from the midday meal.

About nine, Dientje returned with her unsold fish, the money she had taken tightly clutched in her hot little hand. She brought with her an insufferable stench of bad fish, which clung permanently to her clothes and to herself. No one minded it, however, except Kees, who was often nearly sick with it.

Tired out, Dientje sat by the window till Ant was ready to count the money. Her head leaning against the wall, the child would fall into an uneasy doze. When it was almost time for Kees to come in, grandmother would light the lamp and mother would start up and begin hastily to count the fish and the money, Dientje standing by, her face sleepy but nervous. She was afraid of her mother, and though she had counted the money a hundred times and knew it was right, still, as she saw it spread out on the table, she always trembled and shook, dreading lest it should somehow be found short.

By this time the little ones were all sound asleep, packed tightly together in their cupboard beds. The weary Dientje knelt by the hearth, looked up at the Crucifix, and murmured her prayers mechanically, as if half asleep. She dipped her fingers in the holy water, and crossed herself; then found a corner in one of the beds already occupied by three naked children, and lay down to sleep.

Old Rams and his wife went to their accustomed bed. At half-past ten Kees came in, his face drawn and grey with weariness. Not a word was spoken, but Wimpie in his little crib in the dark corner raised himself slowly on his elbow and looked anxiously at his father and his mother. Some rye bread had been left for Kees on the table; listlessly he sat down, listlessly he drew the bread to him, listlessly he ate. Ant watched him, but not a word passed between the husband and the wife. Dientje also was awake, for her father's entrance seemed to have banished sleep from her eyes. She felt queer in her head, but she dared not complain; she was only too thankful to be lying down at last. Silently Kees got up: he yawned, pulled off his coat and smock, beneath which he wore a fisherman's jersey. He went over to Wimpie and stroked his head softly and caressingly; then went to his cupboard bed where the baby slept between him and his wife, and lay down still wearing his trousers, for he was too weary and too stiff to drag them off.

Ant now got up slowly and heavily from her chair. She was crying silently and rubbing away the tears as they ran down over her thin cheeks. Her condition made her nervous and depressed; she was apprehensive of some great impending calamity, she knew not what. She kissed Wimpie again and again, then lifted the baby, which had sunk down in the bed with its face against Kees' dirty trousers. She knelt before the Crucifix, prayed, and crossed herself with holy water. Then she too lay down, utterly broken and worn out, aching with fatigue in every limb.

She ought to have washed certain garments for Wimpie and for her husband and for herself; but it was impossible! she would have fainted over it. Some other time, oh yes! but not now! Now she must sleep.

If only the baby would be quiet, and not keep its wretched mother awake by wailing the whole night through!

II

The picking of strawberries and peas was over; now came the taking up of the bulbs. Everywhere in the fields the workers knelt, digging them out of the sandy soil with their fingers. The air filled with fine dust quivered with heat over the thirsty earth, while the sun's rays streamed pitilessly from the blue heaven. Sacks wholly or partially filled dotted the bulb grounds, looking like grotesque figures of men, some headless and meaningless trunks, some bolt upright, some lolling in aimless imbecility. The workers—whether kneeling to grub up the bulbs, and shake the earth from them through a sieve, or standing to load the hand-carts with the heavy sacks—were all streamingly hot. On all sides the sharp hissing sound from the sieves was to be heard, the sand falling from them in showers while the dust floated away in clouds.

At the edge of the bulb fields, close to the sea road, men were shovelling the dead hyacinth and crocus leaves into heaps, which made patches of soft colour, tender green and gold, on the brown of the newly-dug earth. A smell of rotting leaves like the faint mustiness of a potato cellar rose from the heaps under the furnace heat of the sun. Bright-winged and dreamy, the butterflies flitted in every direction across the fields.

About half-past three, the end of the third shift, the workers rested under the hedges, rubbing their tortured limbs and eating their light afternoon meal. One of them lay panting for breath, throwing himself now on his back, now on his face, in the vain hope of ease. In the end he wriggled out of the shadow and lay with eyes closed like one dead in the full glare of the sun.

Flies buzzed round, attracted by the scent of the perspiring bodies. Three jars of water were passed round, and the tepid fluid was eagerly gulped down by the parched throats. But the man lying with his face to the sun, his arms stretched above his head, was too much exhausted even to drink. He was speechless, and the flies buzzed and crawled about his face.

He lay panting like a beast of burden done to death, dumb, senseless, and stricken by the cruel sun.

From the side-lanes sweet scents were wafted across the fields by passing hay-waggons. From the spinney came the call of the cuckoo, monotonous but strangely romantic, calling up visions of cool green groves where white nymphs sported daringly with wanton satyrs, splashing each other in silvery fountains, dancing with merry laughter, fleeing from their pursuers deeper and deeper into the seductive shelter of the leafy screen, their heads giddy, their senses aflame.

After the rest, work was resumed more feverishly than before. The scorched earth sent fiercer blasts of heat into the faces of the kneeling workers, but the sacks were filled still more rapidly, and were carried in a constant stream to the carts standing in the paths. No one had time to stop even for a deeper breath.

Thus work went on through the transfiguring sunset glow, till the darkness of night had settled down upon the fields.

CHAPTER IV

I

IT was half-past four in the morning of Friday, the Wiereland market-day. Already carts were arriving on the quay with the early consignments of garden produce. The ground was strewn with rotting cabbage-stalks, leaves, strawberries, and vegetable refuse of all kinds. The line of houses facing the quay, where lived the parson, the doctor, and a few of the greater shopkeepers, was pleasantly shaded by an avenue of chestnuts. Against the quay-wall boats were ranged, each connected with the shore by a plank gangway. Down this slid a never-ending stream of baskets, received by a man on the quay, who piled them up in stacks. The heavy smell of the decaying refuse was at the tavern doors combined with the fumes of gin. Across the background ran the green railway embankment, on which engines were shunting trucks with much creaking and snorting.

Under the chestnuts was a row of canvas-covered fish-stalls, poisoning the hot air with the stench of half-putrid fish. In front of them the rush and rattle of hand-carts grew every minute faster and more furious. At this season the boats left twice a day for the town.

Daily in the early morning six freight-boats steamed away laden to the bulwarks with strawberries and vegetables. At midday they came back empty and loaded up a cargo of strawberries only, returning again in the evening to lie up at the quay for the night. Thus every day the produce of Wiereland was poured into the great town's insatiable maw.

All day the furious uproar and bustle continued unabated. The country carts dashed up and down through the crowd to an accompaniment of shouts, "Ho! Hi! Hi!" which turned into oaths and abuse if room were not made quickly enough. Draught dogs barked and howled; the fish-dealers called their wares; yelling children rushed about in bands, jeering and getting into everybody's way.

Suddenly the auctioneer's bell sounded above the clamour. At once gardeners and costermongers clustered round him. He rang and rang, while his assistant, putting his hands to his mouth, shouted till he was black in the face with the effort to make his voice heard, announcing that a sale was about to begin. The auctioneer and his man stood on a pile of packing-cases; round them pressed the buyers, examining with professional interest the baskets of lettuce, peas, beans, rhubarb, and other produce. The bell was silenced, and the crowd pressed closer to the auctioneer, each man regarding his neighbour with suspicion and dislike.

"Now then, this lot! What shall we say? Eighty cents a dozen? Eighty, seventy cents a dozen? Sixty, fifty——"

"Mine!" yelled one of the crowd. The auctioneer rang again, and at this moment a large contingent of men with strawberry carts come from a distant corner of the township hurried past the auctioneer with much shouting and swearing and rattling of wheels over the brick pavement of the quay. Soon the decks of the freight boats were laden with piles of vegetable and fruit baskets, which reached half-way up the funnels, threatening almost to sink the vessels.

In the midst of the din, the shouting and rattling and creaking, the thuds of basket thrown on basket, a Jew, with face as dark and swarthy as though out of a Morocco ghetto, suddenly appeared, standing on a stool in front of a showman's high table upon which were certain dirty, crooked-beaked forceps suggestive of torture instruments from a medieval prison.

Three times already this man had endeavoured to fix his stand between the boats and the phalanx of hand-carts. The space was crowded with porters carrying heavy baskets, and each time his table had been promptly and unceremoniously overturned. Now he had found a spot which was a kind of backwater in the swirling throng, and here he securely planted himself and his belongings. He put a small trumpet to his lips and blew a long wailing blast like that sounded in the Synagogue on the Day of Atonement. The draught dogs all raised their heads and answered the sound by long-drawn howls. Now and then the Jew interrupted his performance by a few sharp bumps on a gong. But everybody in the crowd seemed furiously busy, and for some time no one paid any attention to the strange personage.

At last a few men and lads, at leisure for the moment, came and stared at him, and he was favoured with a little mockery by the passers-by.

"And Abraham begat Isaac—and Isaac begat Jacob—and Jacob begat—— Hee, hee! nosey! monkey-face! There's a hole in your trumpet, old boy!"

The Jew took no notice. He put down his instrument, rolled papers into the shape of torches, lighted them one by one, and waved each in turn flaming above his head. Thick smoke surrounded him, pierced every few minutes by a blast from the trumpet.

Gradually a crowd collected, the outermost ranks of which were scattered at intervals by a passing cart, only to close up again as quickly as possible, the men muttering angry imprecations upon the authors of the inconvenience. The Jew was in no hurry to get to his business. He waited till the staring crowd was quite dense, then put down the trumpet and ostentatiously rearranged the row of forceps. He stood with his back to the evening sun, the slant rays lighting up his shoulders, while his face was in deep shadow. Coal-black beard, whiskers, and moustache almost concealed his narrow waxen-yellow countenance, which seemed all hair and eyes. Now he saluted the crowd, bowing and sweeping off his hat with an exaggerated assumption of dignity and politeness. He coughed, and began a speech—

"If the honourable public will deign a moment's attention, I will make myself known to them."

He pronounced each word with emphasis, moving lips and cheeks vigorously, and displaying a fine set of exquisite white teeth gleaming from behind his black moustache. He curled his upper lip and wrinkled his brow above his swarthy eyebrows, till he seemed a grinning fiend. Yet there was a note of wretchedness and fatigue in his tone, as if his own words sickened him. With lack-lustre eyes he gazed over the heads of the people standing before him; he gesticulated, but his very gestures showed weariness, and his words were spoken in a spiritless sing-song. No one in the toil-worn crowd, however, had the slightest perception of his depression. They eyed him with a mixture of admiration and suspicion, ready to stone him should he prove any sort of impostor. Already boys were throwing cabbage-stalks at him, and the children screamed out, "Thief! thief! Rotten Jew!"

He picked up the cabbage-stalks which had fallen on his rostrum, threw them behind his stool, then looked round with a sad ironical smile. Presently he took off his broad-brimmed hat, again bowed theatrically, and resumed his measured sing-song—

"Ladies and gentlemen—I have the distinguished honour—to introduce myself. I am an expert who can cure all maladies of the teeth. My name is Jaack Rozel. I have lived for three-and-forty years in Rotterdam, and have practised there for forty. I am the son of—the ex-Professor at Montabilie—Professor Jaack Rozel, senior, of whom I have the honour to be the sole descendant. I represent his memory, and I salute—this honourable public—in his name."

He paused, his voice dying in his throat as if he were exhausted by contending against the surrounding hubbub; quickly, however, resumed in a dull, nervous tone—

"Ladies and gentlemen, my profession is that of a dentist. I cure all pains and all diseases of the teeth, the mouth, the throat, the palate. I cure rheumatism and all fever; all illnesses and disturbances—just like the most distinguished professors of the healing art."

Dropping his voice suddenly, he went on in a low, vibrating tone, which carried to the farthest limit of the listening crowd in spite of the surrounding din—

"Call me a liar, call me a swindler, call me a gaol-bird if I do not prove my words! Why!" he went on, raising his voice, "all the professors, all the doctors, all the dentists, all the surgeons, all the physicians, know Jaack Rozel—Jaack Rozel—the only son of Professor Jaack Rozel, senior, his true father—buried at Montabilie with music and military honours. All know Jaack Rozel, junior; who will now have the honour of exhibiting his remedies and his cures to this highly distinguished public. I, Jaack Rozel of Rotterdam, will cure you of every sort of pain in the back, of every sort of pain in the eyes, of the cramps and the colic, of swelled glands, of suppurations, of pains in the muscles, pains in the tendons, of corns, of tumours, of abscesses. And observe! ladies and gentlemen! I cure all with this priceless tincture of Valura, compounded and sold in these little phials."

Here he drew from his bag a number of small bottles neatly wrapped in tissue paper. He bowed low, taking off his hat with a flourish, and went on still more emphatically—

"My honoured and distinguished Sirs and Madams, with this tincture of Valura I have made cures amazing and miraculous! With this tincture, I, Jaack Rozel, who stand before you, have cured the King of Italy, the Queen of Spain, the late Crown Prince of Greenland, the Princess of Montabilie, the hereditary Lord of Havana, the Resident of Tokio, the deans and bishops of Romana. With this precious tincture, honoured ladies and gentlemen, I have performed cures which no doctor, no dentist, no surgeon, no professor, no spiritualist, no mesmerist, no fakir, no Bedouin, no Arab, no Hebrew, no Christian, no Moor, no Swede, no Spaniard, no French, German, or English man can perform in emulation of me. A few drops, my friends, of this precious balm, held in the mouth, against the palate, then spat out—(the mouth washed in cold water)—and in a short moment your pain, your fever, your bleeding will vanish away. Now! at once! Ladies and gentlemen, I shall in your august presence allow any person who so desires to put my words to the proof. I am Jaack Rozel of Rotterdam. For forty years I have drawn teeth, without pain and without payment, free, gratis, and for nothing! All you pay is for this little bottle! That means, ladies and gentlemen, that I have come here not to gain money, but to confer a boon upon my fellow-men. If you were to offer me five, twenty, a hundred gulden, I should not take them. I am here to serve you, and for that reason alone. This tincture of Valura, specially prepared from the honeyed juices of plants, discovered at the hour of midnight by my father, the Professor at Montabilie, by his own hands, the hands of Jaack Rozel, senior—this tincture compounded of the secret juices of plants—you can obtain not for the price of five-and-twenty gulden, not for fifteen, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, not for one gulden! This tincture, with which I cure all bleedings, fevers, pains, diseases of throat, teeth, stomach, bowels—this balm, I say, costs only the small price of *five-and-twenty cents.* Ladies and gentlemen, five-and-twenty cents! And if, after seeing the marvels I can perform, whether on the body or the limbs, the muscles or the tendons, no matter of whom, if you wanted to pay me five-and-twenty gulden down here on my table, I would not receive it, because I wish, ladies and gentlemen, I wish to benefit the poor!"

He paused for breath, his face shining and grey with fatigue and heat. The women were all open-mouthed at his eloquence and at the wonders he had recounted. The men eyed him with suspicion, but were keen to put his claims to the test. Here and there some one groaning with the toothache felt a glow of hope rise in his breast. Awed credulity, receptivity, and suggestion spread like an aura through the crowd. The Jew knew this, and his features settled into a restrained, ironical, but triumphant smile. He looked down upon a sea of upturned faces, all hanging on his words and watching his slightest gesture with feverish attention. He resumed—

"Well, now, honoured Sirs and Madams, is there any one among you suffering from pain, bleeding, fever, rheumatism, affection of the mouth or throat? If so, let him come to me, and I will cure him at once, without pain, by means of this wonderful Valura, this secret tincture. Do not hesitate: have no false shame, no fear, for I will draw your teeth and perform all cures without pain."

Two lanky lads and a gardener's man detached themselves from the crowd and advanced sheepishly to the rostrum. One of the boys had a cheese under each arm and from his pockets protruded the tips of cucumbers. Not speaking to the patients, the Jew summoned the crowd to draw nearer.

"No one, friends," he said, "shall be asked to buy this till he has seen it tried. Ah yes, you, my lad! put the cheeses down, if you please. Now! Oh, I shan't hurt you, not in the very least! No, no! not all three of you at once! Only you, my lad. Put down the cheese. Don't be nervous. That's right, my young friend, that's right! Stand just here, please. Yes! Now tell us what the trouble is, where you feel it. Tell me—without fear."

"There—look—at the back of my teeth," said the boy, embarrassed and pale with fright. He had set the cheeses on the ground, and kept turning round, afraid some one would run off with them.

"This is the one, my lad, isn't it? This tooth here? Eh, young man?" said the Jew, tapping a bad tooth in the boy's upper jaw with a steel instrument.

"Yes, I'm mad with the pain," said the youth.

"Ah! Ah! Is it so really? Well, be quiet just one moment; lift up your head. Just a little——"

The two other patients looked anxiously at the Jew and his victim. A thrill of expectation ran through the crowd.

"Pass me that instrument, please," said the Jew to a man close to his table.

"This hook?" stammered the man, much agitated.

The Jew did not answer. With several fingers in the boy's mouth he reached over impatiently with his free hand and picked up a spatula from the table. Holding the patient's tongue down with the spatula, he turned away from him, leaving his mouth wide open and his chin pressed into his neck. Then he again addressed the audience, extolling in much the same language as before the virtues of his tincture.

"Be quick! be quick!" murmured the boy; "the pain is awful!"

But the Jew went on calmly—

"He is in severe pain. Now observe—I give him a few drops of this secret tincture. Yes, my young friend, rinse it backwards and forwards in your mouth. Let it spread over your tongue. That's right! Now observe, my friends, the secret power of my tincture, with which I have cured kings and princes——" and so forth at some length. At last he said—

"Now, my young friend, spit forth all that you have been holding in your mouth. Do not be ashamed. Spit before your equals. Take now a mouthful of this ice-cold heraldic water. Yes, this is heraldic water from Egypt. Rinse your mouth. Now spit it also forth, and with it you will spit all the impurities of your body. Ah! Away, away, and away have flown all your pains! Speak, my friend, *speak!* How are you? Where is your pain now? Has it not vanished? And in one instant? Speak! Speak!"

The lad, a strange taste still in his mouth, looked about him in a bewildered way as if seeking his toothache. Suddenly he snatched up his cheeses and felt in his pockets for his cucumbers.

"Ah, my young friend, speak! Speak, I pray you, to your friends; tell them that I, Jaack Rozel of Rotterdam, have cured you of all your pain. Speak! Have you any pain now?"

"It's cursed odd! I don't feel it now. Not one bit."

In his amazement he put his finger to his tooth to see if it were still there.

The Jew, with a triumphant gleam in his black eyes, bowed very low to the audience, and continued his harangue—

"You see, friends, the wonder I have performed. This young man came to me, suffering and in agony, his hand pressed to his face drawn with pain. I gave him a few drops of my secret tincture. I rinsed his mouth with my ice-cold heraldic water. He spat. And in an instant his pain was gone. He who was groaning and writhing with his torture is now at ease. Speak once more, my young friend; say nothing but the truth, the truth, nothing but the truth!"

He fixed his eye on the lad, who nodded and said, "Yes, yes," very quickly, holding on very tight to his cheeses.

"He's a clever chap!" said a spectator, much awed.

"If it ain't a swindle," said another.

"Swindle? Swindle? Didn't you see with your eyes?" said a third, glaring at the sceptic.

The majority were by this time enthusiasts for the Jew, and the sceptic was unceremoniously hustled away.

"And you, my friend, what ails you?"

This was addressed to a new patient, a rough-looking fellow, who stumped up, turning his hat round and round with his hands, his shiny hair plastered down flat on his forehead. He spat out his plug of tobacco at the Jew's foot and wiped his stained lips with the back of his hand. The crowd roared with laughter at his boorishness. Without a word he took up his position, his head thrown back, his mouth as wide as that of a hippopotamus. The Jew looked in, putting one hand on the man's forehead and pushing his head back still farther.

"What is your name? Where do you live?"

"None o' that matters; I've come to be cured," said the fellow, with his rough laugh. "My whole mouth's rotten; the whole family gone wrong, eh? I can't chew my meat at dinner."

The crowd laughed, knowing that he never got any meat. He joined in the laugh himself.

"Now, my man," said the Jew, "if you can't keep still I shall have to give you up."

"Lord love you, I'm as still as a post. Hurry up, though, damn it!"

The Jew peered into his mouth, poking among his teeth with an instrument.

"Yes, friend," he pronounced solemnly, "the state of your mouth is such that one tooth will have to be drawn. Throw your head back, well back, if you please. So I shall pull the tooth without any pain. Jaack Rozel always draws teeth without shock, without pain, without suffering of any sort."

The eyes of the crowd followed in death-like stillness the movements of the man's hands. Those in the back rows stood on tiptoe. The Jew took a pair of forceps, red with rust, from his bag. Holding the patient's mouth open with one hand, he fixed the forceps firmly on the tooth with the other. Then he put his hand behind the man's head and with one turn of his wrist extracted the tooth. Before the patient had time to speak, the Jew bade him, in a tone full of suggestion, to rinse his mouth with the secret tincture and the heraldic water, whereupon away would go the pain in one instant.

"Now then, friend, you also tell us, did you feel pain when your tooth was drawn? Speak up—the precise truth, if you please!"

The man stared, utterly bewildered. No, he had not felt so much as a twinge. When he thought the operation was going to begin, lo! there was the operator flourishing the tooth before him in the jaws of the forceps!

"God save us! It's a miracle!" he muttered in the intervals of spitting the blood from his mouth. "The devil! You've got him and no mistake! Christ, what a great man! It's a miracle!"

"Spit into this bowl. Take a mouthful of Valura—free, gratis, for nothing—mixed with ice-cold heraldic water. Do not speak, do not move; let it cool your teeth, your nerves, your muscles, tendons, bones, and all your suffering will be gone!"

The Jew continued his harangue with the same inflated language. The crowd, at first hostile, was becoming completely under his influence. The clown stood with distended cheeks, churning the liquid round and round in his mouth with absurd grimace. The whole assembly watched him open-mouthed.

"It's a miracle!" repeated the patient after he had spat.

"Have you no pain at all Piet?" asked a spectator.

"Not in the least."

"Didn't he hurt you at all?"

"Devil take me if I felt anything. Lord save us! It's the way to heaven! My stars!"

The Jew, whose eyes had been fixed on the patient as if they would bore into him, now took off his hat with an air of triumph and started off on a fresh burst of eloquence.

"You have seen I am no liar, no rogue, no Chamberlain, no Rhodes. I am Jaack Rozel, son of the Professor of Montabilie. In the mountains of South America he cured the Ojibbeways, the Iroquois, the Sioux, free, gratis, and for nothing, as I cure you to-day. I am Jaack Rozel, come to cure you and your friends and your servants. I am the friend of all the professors and doctors in the world. I travel about the world with the tincture of Valura, and all the professors come running after me. Three months ago you saw me in this very place cure two cripples and break their crutches across my knee. I gave them tincture of Valura, and they walked away from my table upright, tall, elegant—like cameleopards. Have you not seen me cure your neighbour, your friend, who tells us he felt no pain? I cure the lame, the blind, the deaf, the rheumatic, with these my marvellous drops, my tincture of Valura. Now I will assist this other friend here. After that I shall have to go away from you, for ever. But without respect of persons I shall offer you my last remaining supply of this astounding, this marvellous remedy!"

A third patient had presented himself at the table. The Jew, after a slight examination, announced that in this case extraction was needless. The lad was treated like the first patient, and with the same result. After a few minutes he declared that he no longer felt any pain. The crowd, much impressed, were eager to question him. To all he gave the same account. The torture he had been suffering had entirely disappeared.

"This wonderful tincture," cried the Jew, "I sell it for the small price of twenty-five cents!"

He sat down greatly exhausted, the perspiration hanging in drops upon his forehead. Presently he again blew a blast upon his trumpet. The crowd began to stir and to split up into small groups. Then in twos and threes, each person bringing a quarter-gulden, they pressed up to the rostrum, and soon the Jew was busy serving out the small bottles, wrapped in tissue paper, which he had taken from his bag. Thicker and thicker the good folk thronged around him, more and more hands were stretched out for the wonder-working medicine. Soon there was a heap of *quarters* on the Jew's table among his spatulas and forceps. An ironical smile played upon his lips and his dark eyes sparkled like jet. At last his stock was exhausted. Now he too might go and have a glass of beer. His throat ached and burned like fire after the prolonged effort of speech in the midst of so much noise.

The crowd made way respectfully for the tall Jew with the calm, inscrutable face and the piercing eye. He walked through them with the majesty of a Cagliostro.

II

Before three o'clock next morning the Hassels began to stir in their cupboard sleeping-places. The atmosphere was very close and fœtid. Dirk jumped out over Piet. Still sleepy, yawning and stretching, every limb aching with fatigue, Dirk shook his brother roughly; but Piet merely growled, turned round, and slept on. This annoyed the elder brother, and he shouted savagely at his father and sister to awaken them; presently went outside the house and opened the shutters so as to let light into the room. Returning, he hastily swilled his face and hands at the pump.

Guurt got up at once, twisted her hair out of the way, and, still in her nightdress, lit the fire and prepared the coffee. Gerrit and Piet, still half asleep, moved about in their red flannel underclothing, and lazily pulled on their outer garments. Piet fell asleep again in a chair with his trousers half on. Gerrit waked him with a shout.

"Now then, dunderhead! Get up with you!"

After a quarter of an hour, the table was set with a cup of coffee and a chunk of bread for each of the men. They sat down, their elbows on the table, and sipped their coffee with silent relish. The stuffy room was filled with a softly glowing golden light. The fire irons and the weights of the cuckoo clock glittered in the early sunshine.

Mother Hassel lay with the doors of her box-bed open, her witch-like face, framed by her cap, very distinct on the grey pillow. She stared at the men as they noisily swallowed their coffee. The sound was familiar, and her nostrils dilated to the fragrance of the charming drink. She looked eagerly at Guurt, knowing that she was the dispenser of the longed-for cordial. But no one took any notice of Vrouw Hassel. The men went on with their breakfast; Guurt, who had now put on a short blue under-petticoat, put another bowl of bread on the table, then helped herself to coffee, which she drank hastily, sitting unwashed on the edge of her chair.

"Now, father," said Dirk, speaking with his mouth full; "you're to have the strawberries ready by three. Then I can get them to town by five. Good market, eh?"

"All right," said Gerrit; "Piet can load up and take the stuff to the boat."

They rose from the table, and stamped out in their wooden shoes. Guurt washed up and tidied the room. Vrouw Hassel lay in her bed staring at her daughter with beseeching eyes, licking her parched lips, but unable to ask Guurt for the coffee she longed for.

Dirk got in an hour's work on the land before it was time to start for the quay. He put one or two things together and shouldered a great basket of parsley. He looked through the window as he passed the house, and saw it was a quarter to five. The boat started punctually at five. There was no time to lose.

He arrived at the quay panting. He was going on the *Gardeners' Joy*, which lay against the wharf, four other boats behind her, their decks piled with loaded baskets.

Men and women crowded together in the narrow spaces left between the piles. There was constant chatter and bustle. The growers pushed past each other, stopped to talk to friends, tried to sell their goods on the spot, so as to save the trouble of taking them to the town market. The scent of fruit and fresh vegetables somewhat mitigated the effluvia from the dirty clothes and skins of the people. The morning sunshine evoked every tint of green from the vegetables; in contrast to them glowed the deep gem-like red of the strawberries.

Still the gardeners crowded on to the boat. The clock of the Catholic Church struck five, the sound quivering and reverberating in the still air. The captain sounded the last signal on his foghorn. The gangway was pulled on board, the gap in the bulwarks made up. The captain took his place at the wheel. The *Gardeners' Joy* moved slowly to the centre of the canal; the engines groaned and thudded in the bowels of the vessel.

Suddenly a yell arose from the chestnut avenue bordering the quay, and a pair of belated growers were seen running at full speed towards the departing boat.

"Piet Groome and Anseeler! Hi, captain, stop! Two men from Lemmer!" called some one.

The captain sent a message down the speaking-tube to the engine-room. The vessel shook from stem to stern, and returned slowly backwards to the quay. The men flung themselves on board, climbing over the bulwark and the wall of hampers and baskets.

Behind the *Gardeners' Joy* lay the other boats—the *Daily Counsel*, the *Welfare*, and the *Well Content*, also crowded, and waiting impatiently for the departure of the *Gardeners' Joy*. One after the other, all the boats disappeared under the railway bridge, and steamed away down the canal, which lay like a silver ribbon across the green expanse of the Polder.

Dirk stood in a tight throng of men and women, close to Klaas Grint.

"Got a plug, Klaas? Damned if I haven't left my pouch behind!"

"Don't take more than one mouthful, old chap!" said Klaas.

The waves of the boat's passage gently washed the banks of the canal. Delicious breezes carried away the unpleasant odours. Incessant babble of tongues discussed the land, the weather, the crops, the prices. The boat auctioneer, a clean-shaven, red-nosed personage, pushed his way through the passengers and sprang grinning to the auction-bench. His function was to sell superfluous stuff before arrival at the town. Would-be sellers gathered round him. From a bag he extracted metal discs, each bearing a number: these he gave to the sellers, thus settling the order of the sale, while an assistant wrote down the numbers and the names as they were given out.

"Now then, who wants a number? Gij's Janse! here you are; number 15!" sang out the auctioneer in the Wiereland sing-song.

"Bekermaan—181. Grint—33. Hassel—36."

"Give me one!" called a gardener, one of a group standing at a distance.

"45—Nells Roskam—hee-hee—Notary Roskam!" laughed the auctioneer, handing out the disc to the man who was lounging near the funnel.

"The devil! That means a long wait," he grumbled, looking at his number.

The auctioneer went on dealing out the discs, keeping up a running fire of coarse chaff with his clients. The crowd was soon pretty dense round the auction-bench.

"40—Vrouw Plenk," roared the auctioneer; "5—Vrouw Boterblom; 19—Mamselle Kiester; 16—Vrouw Zeune!"

At last each had his number and the sale could begin. The boat was forging steadily ahead, making on either side of the bow a thin sheet of foam which curled outwards, broke, and fell like a shower of sparkling gems. The sun-steeped Polder stretched away to the horizon, small patches of hay showing between great stretches of corn. The vast grazing meadows glittered fairy-like in their dress of sparkling dew.

The auctioneer had mounted his bench, and now he called out—

"We begin with twenty-seven pounds of peas sold by——"

"Nelis Skorpioen," said the assistant, consulting the list.

"Sold by Skorpioen. Who says a gulden?—four cents that is to a pound."

The grower had produced the bag of peas from the jumble of baskets and bags, and had forced his way to the bench, on which he laid the peas down. The auctioneer put his hand into the bag and let the fresh green pods pass through his fingers.

"Beautiful young stuff! smells like Oh-de-colony! What shall I say for it?"

"Eighty," cried a voice from the outskirts of the crowd.

"Ninety," said the sharp nervous voice of a woman who stood near the funnel.

"Ninety!" droned the auctioneer, "ninety—ninety-five; any one say a gulden? Have you all done? For the first time; for the second time; for the third time—Rietvink!"

The bag was handed across to the gardener Rietvink, who had made the last bid; and a lot, consisting of eight bundles of carrots, took its place before the auctioneer. Bids came instantly from three quarters at once.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the auctioneer, "come now! Thirty cents—forty. That's right. Hallo! Antje Merle! Come now, Teun, give way, give way! You're not going to outbid a lady, are you?"

Teun grinned, glad to be saved from a bad bargain by this hint.

"Fifty! For the third time. Antje Merle. There, miss, catch a hold! good luck be with them. Not going to eat them yourself, I hope?"

Glasses of schnaps arrived for the auctioneer and his assistant, who drank them off, the former smacking his lips noisily and showing two fine rows of white teeth. Dirk's lips watered, and on all sides were jokes about "the swells" liquoring up so early.

"You'll have your turn soon, eh?" said the auctioneer good-humouredly. "Well now—ten bundles of rhubarb—what shall we say for that?"

Bidding began vigorously, and the lot was presently knocked down to one Vink.

Lot after lot was laid on the auctioneer's zinc counter, sold, and carried off by the purchaser. The sale was noisy, with much shouting, laughing, and rude jesting. The men longed for the breakfast interval, as the boat steamed steadily down the canal, bearing its many-coloured cargo, glowing strawberries, orange-pink carrots, vegetables of many greens, a feast of gem-like colour in the clear sunshine reflected from the meadows, and from the burnished silver of the water's surface.

The last lot was sold; the crowd broke up and melted away to breakfast. Two burly fellows led the way to the cabin along the narrow passage between the piles of hampers, the others followed, tumbling down the copper-edged steps of the companion. In the cabin sat a few men smoking, their newly made purchases before them. Benches filled the centre space and lined the sides. These were soon lumbered with bags, baskets, and hampers, brought in from the auction by the chattering crowd. The atmosphere was close, the concentrated smell of the vegetables highly disagreeable. Shafts of sunlight, direct or reflected, came in through the portholes. Rings and spirals of light danced and intertwined on the dirty grey ceiling in never-ceasing and inextricable play. Still the people poured in, still they crowded the floor with their goods, till the cabin seemed a cave tenanted by survivors of a shipwreck, clinging to the last remnants of their possessions.

A tall fellow, with ferrety eyes, hurried about with coffee poured into cups by a woman behind the buffet. The bar was a confusion of bottles, glasses, chunks of bread, cheese, plates, and cigars. From every corner came loud talk and peals of laughter, the men producing additional victuals from their pockets and falling to greedily.

"Coffee for me!"

"And for me—and me—and me. Quick! Hurry!" they shouted.

They drank from saucerless, handleless cups held somehow in one hand, while the other grasped huge pieces of bread to be bitten in gigantic mouthfuls. When the coffee was finished the men thought they were almost at the end of the voyage, and called for drinks and smokes. The clink of glasses was heard; fumes of gin mingled with the pungent odour of the vegetables. People grew hot, and their dirty clothes of fustian and bombazine smelt horribly. The cabin seemed a whale which had swallowed a tribe of struggling savages, now pushing and jostling each other inside its gloomy maw.

"Hallo, Dirk!" cried Klaas Grint, "hope it'll be good market to-day. I've got ninety boxes of strawberries. Hi there! more coffee!"

"That's your eighth cup!" said the steward.

"What's that to you? Don't I pay for 'em? Keep your tongue quiet!"

"We've thirteen hundred baskets of strawberries aboard, and this afternoon there'll be another boat-load. It's bound to knock the price to pieces," said Dirk.

Rink of the Polder and others joined in the discussion of crops, prices, and rents, which went on till the city was in sight. Then the passengers hurried on deck, pushing and jostling each other up the companion steps; their auction purchases on their shoulder, their bags, and hampers, and baskets dragged out somehow, they thronged to the steamer's side, impatient to disembark.

III

The captain steered his vessel through a throng of milk-boats into the town harbour. Three other freight-boats were already moored against the quay-wall.

The passengers, men and women alike, bustled about among the piled-up baskets. Each grower who had sold anything at the auction carried a paper stating how much he was to receive, and from whom, on the return voyage.

The quay swarmed with brown hand-carts; their owners in white smocks came forward to bargain with the gardeners to the accompaniment of noisy jesting. Fishwives, bare-necked women from Zeedyk, hawkers of all kinds, pushed through the rows of carts, eager to make their morning purchases. The passengers crowded upon each other as they crossed the gangway, each looking anxiously for the cart he was in the habit of hiring. When found, he loaded it with all possible speed, running backwards and forwards between it and the boat till he had disembarked all his goods. They all shouted loudly and impatiently at each other.

"Hassel—here! Has—sell! Your basket's here!"

"Beerbrouwer! Take this away! Beer—brouwer! This thing's yours! Come and get it!"

The whole crowd was infected with the fear of being too late, of missing their sales. The sun beat steadily down upon the swarming, hurrying, worrying throng, upon the Atlas-like burdens with which the men struggled ashore, shoving the Zeedyk women and the Jew hawkers and costermongers angrily out of their way.

Not till the first excitement had a little cooled did the hawkers dare to approach the salesmen. They were furiously eager to make their purchases, thus securing the pick of the market. They glared at each other with unconcealed suspicion and dislike; broad-shouldered fish-women, dried-up little Jews, loafers of every kind, gardeners and growers, formed a dense crowd near the boat and round the rows of baskets whose contents lay glowing in the fierce July sun. Louder every moment came the shouts of those who found themselves embarrassed by packages which did not belong to them.

"Gais Kerredaik! Gais! Come here, you fool! or I'll pitch these goods of yours into the water! I'm not going to hold them another minute for you! They're as heavy as a railway engine."

"Gais Kerre—daik!" shouted another furiously as he struggled to get past the encumbering parcels.

Kerredaik, however, took no notice; he was very busy flirting with a Zeedyk woman.

Business had, however, begun. Dirk quickly disposed of ten baskets of stuff not good enough for his regular customers, to a buxom damsel who sat swinging her legs on the tail-board of his cart.

"Come now, deary," she said in her coaxing Amsterdam accent, sending a thrill through Dirk's whole big frame, "say three cents apiece, and have done with it. It'll pay you handsome, you know it will."

"You'd like it for that, so you would, my beauty! Four cents, not a fraction less! You can't get round me!"

The girl swung her legs faster. She had spied a rival worming her way through the carts to Dirk. She looked up at him cajolingly, but he thumped his baskets back into the cart without a word. The girl made a rapid calculation. As she sat, the outline of her well-rounded thigh was very apparent through the folds of her skirt, and she kept trying to catch the big Wierelander's eye while she smiled enticingly.

"Come, my gold-haired fellow—come!" she whispered.

A small sister, with an incredibly dirty face, stood by the girl's side, making notes of the game between her and Dirk. Everywhere children were darting about among the carts, shrieking and yelling. Now, on all sides goods were being exposed, and buying and selling was in progress. The buyers pushed each other about with much laughter and many oaths, the men playing rude, sensual tricks on the women and girls. Dirk came to terms with his buxom temptress, and she was now removing her purchases, he not stirring a finger to help her. Her stiff curls and her earrings quivered; her blouse, open at the neck, showed her handsome throat and finely-formed bosom; she walked away clasping her burden, panting and very hot, as she zigzagged through the crowd till she had reached her own cart and could throw the weight down.

Dirk watched her, pleased and admiring. Her money, the first he had taken to-day, lay warm in his hand. He had enjoyed the sparring with the girl, and meant to see her again next week. She was a fine, strapping wench. How she puffed under the weight of the green stuff! Ha! puff away, my beauty! We all have to take our turn at that!

Through the roar of the great city, the rumbling of beer-waggons, the clashing of bells, the throbbing of life on the quay, seemed the pulsation of a mighty heart.

Still the women hawkers crowded round the growers. Full of animal passion, they let themselves be mauled and played with, repelling only to attract. The sturdy Wierelanders were intoxicated by the lavish display of charms, by the scent of warm, soft flesh, by the suggestive merriment.

Each grower had engaged a man, who regularly pushed his cart for him round his chosen quarter of the city. Dirk had found his man, and by dint of shouting and waving of arms he succeeded in attracting his attention. Now—his produce attractively spread out for sale—he took his place in the procession from the quay, the carts jolting slowly and heavily away in different directions towards the bustling, sun-baked streets with their tall, gabled houses on either side.

A few Jews, mostly hawkers—the women small, shrivelled, and sallow; the men with baboon-like faces, wrinkled brows, and thick, hanging lips—remained gossiping and disputing on the quay.

Like a giant bomb the July sun scattered his burning rays over the sky, the town, the dock. From the latter rose the smell of sun-scorched tar. On its opposite side, where the milk-boats were unloading, the blue-enamelled milk-cans glittered in the sunshine, and a metallic clangour resounded through the air as they were roughly cast into waiting carts and rattled off to the town. From a little side-street came the plebeian music of a barrel-organ. Market gardeners, from a steamer which had moored at this side near the milk-boats, were disembarking among the cans and milk-carts. They also soon formed a procession, their hand-carts piled high with garden produce, soon disappearing from the quay and mingling with the life-stream of the city.

IV

In the afternoon the men, weary and listless, returned from every quarter of the town to the *Gardeners' Joy*. Dirk was aboard by four. He had sold all his stock, dismissed his carter, and had spent the last hour in the tavern. He had seventy gulden in a bag in his breeches pocket. It felt heavy, but comfortable. His work was not ended, however; he was waiting on board the boat for another consignment of strawberries from Wiereland.

"Must arrive soon," he thought, "and won't take long to get rid of; then, good-night! Blessed Saturday afternoon! blessed Sunday to-morrow!"

He tramped down the companion to the cabin, and asked the captain when the launch would come.

"Another quarter of an hour," said the captain; "look at the crowd waiting! Look at the girls!"

Dirk threw himself at full length on a bench. He must get his breath. He was perspiring like a horse, his shirt wringing wet, slight feverish shivers running through him from time to time.

The other men crowded also into the cabin, all a little drunk, and limp from the heat. Beemster, a big, stupid-eyed fellow, his nose eaten away by lupus, came to Dirk.

"Hallo, mate! Been asleep? Or been talking to the prince, perhaps?"

"You've hit it. Ha! ha! Get me a schnaps!"

The long waiter began to be busy at the bar as the cabin rapidly filled. The women upon entering flung themselves on the seats exhausted and panting.

"Good Lord! What heat! My clothes are on fire!" gasped Vrouw Zeune, loosening her skirts from her hips; "that's better! I'm done up! I couldn't go another step!"

"Have a drink. Beemster's standing treat!"

"Thanks!" said another woman hoarsely, her mouth and throat parched.

"And you, yellow Madam?" said the man, addressing a sallow-faced woman at his side, "have you had a good day? swindled your customers, eh? Have a drink, won't you?"

The yellow Madam declined. She sat huddled up in a corner, creases round her mouth proclaiming her exhaustion.

Klaas Grint came tumbling down the companion, Rink at his heels. The giant's cap brushed the ceiling, though he walked with his head bent forward.

"My stars! You've got an African smother down here!" said Rink, throwing himself down and mopping his face with a dirty handkerchief.

"It's all right!" growled Dirk, blowing furiously at his pipe till his face was lost in a crowd of greenish smoke.

"Damn it all! Don't blow out the guts of your pipe!" said Grint. "Ain't I come to enjoy myself?"

"All right," repeated Dirk, still blowing with swollen cheeks. "I've been on the go since three in the morning. What about you?"

"I—I," said Rink hesitatingly; "well, if I'm to be very exact, I'll say since four."

"That's a lie!" cried Beemster; "you only just caught the boat at five! I saw you puffing and blowing when you got on board.

"'*Here and there I still must roam*
Through the rain to-day;
Oh, now I wish I'd stayed away
With mamma at home!'"

"Shut up with your Maid of Volendam!" shouted Rink.

"Here, Henk! a schnaps!" sang out Grint.

"Give me beer for a change!" said another.

The long waiter hurried with the tray of drinks. The man who had ordered beer, took his bottle lovingly, loosened the stopper, poured out the liquor, and gazed in ecstasy at the froth. One draught and his glass was empty. He called hoarsely for a second bottle, still trying to squeeze a few drops from the first.

Drinking was now going on in every corner of the cabin, accompanied by laughter and quarrelling. Accounts were being settled for the stuff bought at the morning's auction. Several times there was prospect of a row; always, however, averted by the auctioneer's clerk. He was nicknamed "the notary," and was a quiet toper, who could put away the whole bar of liquor without playing the fool or losing his head. He went from group to group, always appearing at the moment trouble was beginning and pouring oil on the waters. He was appealed to on all sides, and treated to drinks as a matter of course by those who required his arbitration in some matter of a couple of cents. The auctioneer's notes were thumbed and pored over. Those who had to pay, haggled and delayed and refused to understand the simplest arithmetic. At last all the money was handed out, but in driblets, each cent being clung to till the last, and surrendered with infinite reluctance.

Above the din two small tenant gardeners were heard in shrill dispute.

"Damn me if I wouldn't sooner make ten gulden as master than fifteen as man!"

"That's all very fine, but what kind of a master are you? You can't dung your land, you're in an eternal worry and bother, you run all sorts of risks. When November comes you've your rent to pay, and you haven't got so much as the half of it. You must borrow, and hunt about for sureties. In winter you haven't enough to eat. But those other chaps—the labourers—they get their wages like clockwork. They haven't any worry—they eat—they sleep—while we go blind and crazy trying to find the money for the rent, for the hay, for the beasts, for sticks, seeds, wood, manure. In the end we earn less than they."

"Oh, I know all that. But you're your own lord and master. If you're a labourer, out you must go if it's pouring cats and dogs. 'Do your work, or take yourself off,' says your master. Suppose you waste five minutes over your dinner?—'Take yourself off,' says he. You haven't a minute to call your own—work from morning till night. Mustn't even turn your head. Drive—drive! No, no! They may make a bit more than we, but we can worry through somehow."

"I'd change straight away, this minute!" shouted another; "they can have my bit of field if they want it, so long as they give me a good berth as day-labourer. Ninety per cent of the labourers are richer than their masters."

"Ay! ay!" broke in another man, "you fellows are paying ten, or perhaps nine, gulden a rod for your ground, and you can't make it pay. But *I* have to pay twelve-fifty a rod! That's pretty stiff, ain't it? And this year everything's done badly."

"You're talking a lot of nonsense! That's not the point, I say. The point is, I'd sooner be a labourer than the miserable little boss that I am. What is it we earn? Too much to starve on, too little to live on. Liberty not to work when we don't want to? That's a fine advantage to be able to starve if we like it. Whew! what a crowd down here! Come up on deck."

Singing, stamping of feet, clinking of glasses drowned all possibility of talk. Dirk had gone on deck with some of his special pals, and was examining the piles of empty baskets, which stood there dull and drab, their ruddy strawberries gone, a few leaves and stalks hanging untidily from their sides.

"I've not had a bite since breakfast," whined a little man, gesticulating with his whole body at once.

"That's no matter, you drink enough to make up for it," rapped out a girl who was carrying more baskets to the pile.

The hand-cart jobber, a smart Amsterdammer, moved about among the gardeners, collecting his money for the hire of the carts, and pouring out a continuous stream of chaff, to which the men listened, open-mouthed like children, occasionally bursting into great guffaws of tipsy laughter.

On the quay, a fresh throng of hawkers, Hebrews and Gentiles both, were waiting for the last consignment of fruit.

The small launch steamed in about half-past four, piled high with strawberry baskets. In a moment all was uproar, the growers carrying their glowing fruit ashore, the hawkers crowding round to buy.

There was a final outburst of work fury on the sun-baked quay; even the half-intoxicated became sober for the occasion.

"The highest bidder has 'em at once," shouted Dirk, ill-tempered under the interruption to his glass and his pipe. The scenes of the morning were re-enacted; the hawkers storming round the growers, the latter shouting and swearing and bandying coarse jests with the women, who with smiles and lascivious glances appealed to the animal instincts of the men, in the hope of getting their goods cheap, but broke into scolding and abuse when they found their blandishments vain. Many of the men, tired out and tipsy, lowered their prices at once. Others, tougher or more sober, held out, taking advantage of the strength of their position, and paying the women in their own coin. A small group of the tipsy gardeners suddenly found out that the women were making signs at each other and combining to bamboozle them. Enraged, they snatched their baskets away, swearing savagely at the astounded girls, and now holding out for high prices even more obstinately than their more sober comrades.

At a little distance one of the men was besieged by a rout of little Jewish women with wrinkled yellow faces and large dark eyes peering from under coloured caps, their owners very conscious that they were breaking the Sabbath. The tall drunken fellow could not escape, and the women got all his goods from him bit by bit at rubbish prices.

Suddenly the captain of the *Gardeners' Joy*—a strong, quiet man, who drank nothing but coffee—shouted that it was time to come on board as he was going to start.

The last bargains were made in nervous hurry. In half an hour all was sold. The crowd of growers, costers, carters, women and girls, barrows and baskets, had dissolved.

The men banged their empty hampers on the deck; after a long blast on the foghorn, the captain gave order to cast off. The boat threaded her way through the crowded harbour towards the rippling, glowing waters of the Ij.

V

A crowd of children were waiting on the quay at Wiereland to receive the empty baskets from their returning fathers and brothers. In quick succession the four boats steamed in and were moored in turn to the quay-side. The men hurried ashore. The quay was soon crowded by a shouting, jostling, swearing throng of men and women, boys and girls, horses and carts, mingled in dire confusion. Soon hand-carts, hauled and pushed by yelling children, got away from the crowd, and rattled off homewards. Their baskets dispatched thus, the men loafed about, fingering the money in the abysses of their breeches pockets; or they turned into the taverns and sat drinking and disputing with their comrades in a thick cloud of tobacco smoke.

Vessels of all sorts and sizes crowded the narrow harbour; barges, sloops, wherries, and lighters, their bright colours glowing in the evening light. Presently the silver notes of a flute were heard, played by a little Jew who had taken up a position beside a huge pile of the empty baskets. Many persons stopped to listen, making a circle round the man and ecstatically drinking in the pure sweet melody. The Jew's whole soul seemed in his playing; he poured out now a plaintive, appealing strain, now a gushing stream of rippling, sparkling tune.

The peasants listened in amazement, delighted by the quick dance of the agile fingers on the stops. The fingers seemed ten little fairies expressing their being in sweet sound. Quicker and quicker they danced; louder swelled the singing tones above the harbour noises. Presently the merry tune was changed for one of melancholy; for gentle wailing minor notes, sweet and moving, which still dominated the surrounding uproar and stirred the rough listeners to the depths of their being. The little Jew's frail body shook with the intensity of the emotion he threw into his piping, as his flute sang for him of sorrow and suffering and tears. Again there came a change, sadness and melancholy were thrown off. A silvery fountain of jubilant melody rose into the air, and overflowed the quay-side and Polder with waves of gladness and delight. The listeners were spellbound; but this was the ending of the music; quite suddenly it ceased.

The crowd, drunken and sober alike, still stood awestruck, held by the musician's spell; others were hurrying from the taverns to join them. The Jew, pleased by his success and himself under the enchantment of his own music, played again, surrendering himself to his inspiration. When he stopped, quarter-gulden pieces rained upon him. To each donor he handed a small flute like that upon which he had been playing, and a book of instructions.

"With this little book," he said, "any one, man or woman, can learn the whole art in three days. A child can play any tune it may happen to know."

The peasants were more than ever surprised. They were ready to kiss the fellow! The Jew had not hands enough to give out the treasures. Youths, still with the rapt smile evoked by the music, were among the purchasers, old men who played the concertina under the trees in the summer evenings, drunkards half-sobered, girls and women, "notables" even, came forward to buy.

On the musician's countenance was an expression of self-confidence and power. Now and again, in the middle of the selling, he would wave the people aside and play for a few minutes, delighting the crowd as before, so that the surrounding noise, the barking of dogs, the shouts of the workers, the rattle of carts, were silenced for their ears.

At last all the flutes were sold except the one on which the man had played. One of the gardeners, winking at his neighbour, offered a gulden if he might have that one. The Jew smiled, took the gulden, and gave the man his flute. Then he took the one for which the fellow had paid a quarter-gulden and played upon it — more beautifully than before.

"The difference is not in the flutes, friend," said the Jew; "they are as like as two sheep. The difference is in the heart—the heart!"

"The *heart*?"

"Yes. I mean it's in the little book,—the instructor," said the Jew ironically; "I tell you, a child can learn it—can master it in three days."

The Jew sold four hundred flutes in an hour. Everywhere in Wiereland—on the quay, in the streets, in the lanes—rose the tooting of pipes, quite tuneless and monotonous. The Jew smiled sarcastically, packed up his music-stand, and called out in mockery, as he went away: "It can be learnt in three days—by the smallest child!"

Evening drew on, the time for steady drinking. In Amsterdam the men had only wet their lips; now the real soaking began. Unrestrainedly the sweet liquor poured down the throats, strained and parched by the heat and dust and uproar of the day.

For the women at home Saturday night meant grumbling, clamour of children, endless tidying up, cleaning, polishing of pots and pans. At home there was no place for a man to sit down, nothing for him to eat. What could he do but make his way to the tavern and sit there drinking with his mates, to the sound of the harbour noise?

The soft tap of the billiard balls mingled with the laughter and the talk. Flaring gas added poison to the foul air. All things seemed to swing and quiver in a haze of tobacco smoke. The smell of gin rose from the bar and from every table. In spite of the stench and the heat, the tavern guests enjoyed themselves.

Dirk sat with Klaas Grint. They drank heavily, and Dirk's fair-skinned hairy neck was fiery red. Kees came for the empty baskets, and Dirk spoke to him, vainly tempting him to a drink. The other men, half afraid of the poacher, had timidly added their persuasion, but Kees still refused, this time with an oath. Kees knew that if he began to drink he would not stop till he had washed away all memory of his misery at home, of his anxiety about his son. Wimpie was there waiting for him; he would not let himself go; he would keep himself strong for the boy's sake.

Dirk was annoyed to learn from his brother that Gerrit was coming himself to the harbour. With the old man poking round, Dirk felt his freedom gone, his money in danger. But by this time his brain was not very clear, his thoughts were vague and fleeting. His mind was running on Grint's pretty daughters, Geert and Trijn, and on the two Hassel cousins who were courting them, and were both in the tavern. Willem Hassel indeed was sitting at Grint's other side, and the girl's father was amusing himself with the jealousy of the cousins. There was no more seasoned toper in the whole place than Klaas Grint. He was in clover, drinking glass after glass without paying a cent, the three young men competing for the honour of treating him. Only Piet was missing. Ah! it was a fine thing to be the father of pretty daughters. Dirk sat in grim and drunken silence, internally furious with his cousins. Dirty beggars! it was like their impudence to look at his girl!

Grint became more and more festive; Gerrit did not come. The tavern grew fuller every moment as fresh groups of perspiring workers, exhausted by the toil of the day, came in, pushed their way to the bar, and ordered their drinks, holding the glasses to the light before pouring the fiery liquor down their throats. On all sides wooden shoes grated on the sanded floor, peasants and hawkers drank and laughed and swore, spitting streams of tobacco juice into the spittoons.

At ten, Grint got up, his small restless eyes bleared by drink. Dirk also staggered to his feet, muttering and grumbling. He dived into his breeches pocket for money, and paid for all the drinks. Willem and Jan Hassel demanded roughly to pay half, but Dirk signified to the landlord to take from his money for all. His change was laid on the spirit-splashed table, and Dirk tried to pick it up, but dropped the greater part on the floor.

"I say, Dirk! remember me if you've too much money!" said a man watching the transaction amusedly.

Dirk got on his knees and searched aimlessly for his money. Some one trod on his hand. He growled a few curses, and, his attention having been distracted, became unable to remember if the lost coins belonged to himself or to Grint. He stumbled up with more oaths, and staggered to the door. Grint had found the money in a spittoon, and now he tried to put it in Dirk's hand. But the young man swore it was not his and refused to take it.

"Damned fool!" said Willem with great scorn.

Dirk stood silent, his nose flattened against the door. He was furious, however; furious as a blue-bottle in a trap. Everything was turning round; he could not understand what was said to him. All he knew was he was going with Grint to see the girls, the lovely girls, Geert and Trijn, Cor and Annie. He did not wait for their father's permission; but he rolled out of the tavern by the man's side as if he belonged to him.

"We'll go too," said Willem and Jan.

Grint was a little annoyed. The devil! Here he was taking three tipsy fools home with him, all the three hot after his girls! The girls would not mind. But Dirk! No, they wouldn't want him. The girls didn't like Dirk; he always looked so glum. Willem and Jan, however, would be good matches; they were welcome to flirt as much as ever they liked—so long at least as they stopped short of getting babies!

Grint looked about as they stepped along the quay, hoping to see Gerrit coming for Dirk. But there was no sign of him, or of Kees, or of Piet. He would have to let the brute come in. Well! he couldn't do any real harm.

"Want another drink, Klaas?" said Dirk, pulling up at the next tavern and speaking with drunken gravity.

"Not at present, thank you," said Grint. "I'm taking a drop home to the young 'uns. Always get a sup out of my bottle Saturday nights. We shall find 'em all busy cleaning up."

"But when they see us chaps——" grinned Willem.

"Steady, boys—steady. Got to behave yourselves, you know. Young girls are like hot cakes, eh?"

"Oh, they know what they're about," muttered Jan.

"Now look here, boys," said Grint, tipsily emphatic,—"my girls are as innocent as the church cross. They're just children, simple children. Good cooks, though! Grand housekeepers!"

He led the way across the meadow to his house. It stood isolated in the fields, behind an orchard and a hedge. Dirk's legs seemed made of lead. He had drunk heavily and could not carry his drink like Klaas. His cousins had not drunk nearly so much. They were comparatively speaking masters of themselves, as Dirk angrily perceived.

The four girls sat listlessly in the house, tired out by the heat and the long day's strawberry picking. They had not taken the trouble to wash off the grime from the fields. Though late, the summer night was not dark and the girls had sat, lampless, in the kitchen. On the entrance of their father and the three young men they moved to the living room, whispering together and giggling as they went.

The younger children slept in cupboard beds round the living room, and the atmosphere was close. Vrouw Grint, flustered by the loud voices of the visitors, brought a lamp and set it on the window-sill, close to a row of geraniums in pots. Behind the flower-pots was a small model of a ship, its slender masts, copper sheathing, and cobweb-like rigging glistening in the bright light.

Grint called out that he had a treat for them all. Geert looked at Dirk and Willem and Jan, half shy, half pleased, her dark eyes questioning why they had come so late.

Dirk stood silent, leering, however, at Geert. Her round white throat enchanted him. She was lovely. Guurt, his sister, was not to be named in the same breath with her!

Willem also devoured Geert with his eyes. Jan at the other side of the room devoted himself to Trijn and Cor.

Now Piet made a sudden noisy appearance; ostensibly looking for Dirk. He was very angry upon seeing his brother staring like a great owl at Geert—Geert who had been keeping company with himself, Piet, for ever so long. She was a regular baggage, that's what she was! A baggage who made eyes at every chap she saw!

Jan Grint kicked off his wooden shoes in the passage and followed Piet into the living room. The girls and their mother made a chattering, tittering group near the lamp. With an air of maudlin benevolence, Klaas set a bottle of gin on the table.

"Now then, mother, we'll have a drink all round, eh?"

Piet approached the girls, greatly to the indignation of Willem. Piet, quiet, sober, and cool, was a spoil-sport. Jan did not care. He was sitting on Trijn's knee and stroking the fair-haired Cor's chin, regardless of Trijn's jealousy. Presently, however, he pushed Cor away and devoted himself entirely to her sister, tickling her neck and gazing amorously into her eyes.

The younger children woke up, and one by one descended from their beds, blinking and rubbing their eyes as they encountered the bright light. Their faces were admirably clean, for they had had their Saturday night wash. The three little girls, in white nightgowns, their sleepy smiling faces still rosy from the soap, came forward to the table. The boys, in baggy sausage-like smocks, pushed rudely in front of them. Klaas, greatly excited, made coarse jokes and followed them with roars of laughter. The children looked forward to this practice of their father's of giving liquor to them all, even the smallest girl, on Saturday night. They elected one of their number to stay awake and rouse the rest as soon as father had staggered in late at night. Sometimes the watcher fell asleep, and then the whole band missed the treat, the family carouse going on without them. Next week they would all try to lie awake, and the first clink of the glasses would bring them to their feet, their father roaring with laughter, proud of his youngsters who would not be cheated a second time.

Dirk sat stolid in his chair, smoking and staring at Geert.

Willem was very close to her. Jan Hassel was romping with Trijn, Piet with Cor, occasionally interrupting himself to give loud kisses to Annie, all to revenge himself upon Geert. The laughing girls panted with heat and excitement, making pretence of pushing the men from them when they became too bold. The young men, half drunk, made less and less effort to restrain their passions, and permitted themselves coarse jokes, gestures, amorous glances. When matters went too far Vrouw Grint and Jan her son interfered with restraining or angry words.

Meanwhile glasses had been set on the table, and a lump of sugar dropped into each. Klaas called for spoons. The little girls sat in a row, their knees drawn up, their eyes still heavy with sleep, looking like a row of white doves. The boys bubbled with delight, affecting a mannish swagger.

"You're not going to give it to the children, father?" said Vrouw Grint.

"Of course I am!" said Klaas; "they've picked strawberries with the best, and shall have their reward. Eh, you ugly little cockatoos! Now! mother! boys! girls! children! to your good healths!"

He drank avidly himself, stood for a moment swaying backwards and forwards, then subsided upon a chair. All drank clinking their glasses. The girls giggled. Geert, tickled by one of the men, laughed and choked. Willem thumped her on the back. The fiery liquor stung her throat; she felt as if she had swallowed the pepper-box.

The children sipped slowly with supreme enjoyment. When their glasses were empty they licked them round with their tongues. Two boys dipped their fingers into the men's glasses. A child of five demanded more. But Vrouw Grint, apparently with sudden recollection of her duty, said it was no hour for the little ones to be up, and drove them all off to their beds. They were excited and quarrelsome, and one little fellow of eight, practically drunk, pulled his sister Christientje along by her hair.

The men now began to amuse themselves with Dirk, who had passed from taciturnity to extreme loquacity. He played the fool, rattled off streams of nonsense, jumped and romped like a clown, stuttered out obscene jokes, and was altogether so unlike his usual grim self that the girls were quite delighted with him. Piet kissed Geert's white neck and rosy mouth under Willem's nose; oaths and threats were bandied between the drunken cousins till the girls themselves had to make peace.

Every window of the little room was tight shut, and the air became momently more fœtid. The recess with the row of geraniums and the little ship seemed to hold itself aloof from the company of tipsy brutal peasants, the lamp cast grotesque shadows on the walls as the men staggered from their chairs and attempted a clumsy *can-can* with ungainly swayings of their arms and legs. The shadows, large, quavering, and indistinct, when the dancers moved about in the middle of the room, became clear and silhouetted as they approached the walls. Smoke of pipes and coarse cigars mingled with the sharp sweet fumes of gin. Dirk was soiled with cigar ashes and dribbles of gin as he stood lurchingly, his glass in one hand, while with the other he tried to stroke the faces of the girls, all of whom were getting frightened as the men more and more lost decency and self-restraint.

Grint kept egging them on, inciting them to rivalry in kissing and hugging and squeezing his daughters; now and then he rolled out of his chair hiccupping.

"All strictly proper, boys! Kiss 'em, and cuddle 'em, properly, all—shtrickly—proper."

The girls, excited, their senses all aflame, though they were angry and ashamed, hit and cuffed at the swains vigorously when they received great sounding kisses; especially Annie and Cor were violent in pushing away the drunken leering mouths reeking of smoke and spirits. Nevertheless a pleasurable giddiness, a sensual glow caused by the drink they had swallowed, kept them from making their escape as they could easily have done.

Vrouw Grint at last resolved to send the men away. Willem and Jan by themselves she could have put up with; paupers like Dirk and Piet did not amuse her at all. She was highly indignant with her husband for having brought them in, and now she pushed the whole four Hassels unceremoniously to the door. The party was a perfect scandal; she had never known Klaas keep it up so late before on any Saturday night.

Unwillingly the men shuffled out of the house, looking back longingly at the girls:—Geert and Trijn, with their soft dark eyes; the tall and slender Cor; Annie, the plump and soft and warm. Klaas conducted his guests as far as to the path, hiccupping a fervent good-night. The cousins staggered away arm-in-arm, a thin film of tipsy good-fellowship imperfectly concealing their habitual hostility. They shouted, sang, and quarrelled as they went, making the scent-laden summer night hideous with bestial noise.

CHAPTER V

THE far-stretching *polder* was suffused with the pale glow of the morning moon. The short summer night was dying. Silvery violet overspread the sky. The grey roofs of Wiereland became visible; soft murmurs of reviving life were heard; the myriad-voiced song of birds hymned the birth of day. Presently warm tints of rose and gold overshot the silver. Rows of haycocks glowed in the fields with magic fire. The crescent moon grew pale; orange flamed across the eastern sky. Cocks crowed in triumphant chorus; gently rustling wind wafted over the polder, the perfume of grass and flowers, clover and new-mown hay. Deeper and more fiery grew the eastern glow, till the grottos, mountains, and ruins drawn by the clouds seemed all on fire. The whole polder was one shimmer of purple, green, and gold; the canal stretching away to the horizon glistened like a ribbon of mother-o'-pearl in delicate tones of white and red, gold and grey. Brown ponies grazed in the meadows beside red and white cows, whose colours stood out sharp and clear as gems in the rapidly increasing light.

Now flaming spears darted from the eastern horizon to the zenith; a point of intense and blinding light appeared over the rim of the earth. It expanded into an arc; with stately majesty the mighty disc of fire rose into the sky, flooding the polder with fervent glow, flinging flaming torches of light over haycock and uncut grass, over beast and dyke and thicket.

A breeze sprang up, sweeping across the rushes and evoking a rustling whisper from the bending corn, which already was gently swelling in the ear.

Now the land lay bathed in morning sunshine; roofs glistened and sparkled; pale haycocks made a pattern on the green carpet of the polder far as eye could see.

About half-past eight Gerrit and his sons, Kees and Dirk, were in their hay-dyke with a waggon. Kees led the horse, telling his father that only raking could be done at present as the hay was still damp. Gerrit walked about examining the hay, grumbling and shaking his head at the look of the sky. Already the July sun made blistering heat; a hot wind was blowing in furious gusts. Gerrit walked backwards and forwards over the loose, last cut grass on the dyke, which crackled under his *sabots*. Kees had brought the waggon in which Dirk was going to arrange the load of hay. In preparation he had kicked off his shoes and had climbed into the waggon. Kees stood beside it, chewing his plug of tobacco and squirting little jets of juice on to the hay. The red wheels and springs and framework of the waggon flamed in the sun, the copper point of the pole shone like ruddy gold. In all directions were haymakers, busily piling hay on to similar waggons, brightly painted with green and red, very conspicuous against the soft colours of the shorn meadows. Dirk was displeased that Gerrit's hay field was this inferior bit at the end of the dyke, and repeatedly asked his father why the devil he had taken it.

The strong scent of hay filled the air, the new-mown grass was like soft warm green velvet. The white rakes passing through the hay made a sound like the crunching of grazing cattle. The rushes in the *sloots* and the swaying corn in the fields murmured and rustled as the wind passed over them. On the garden side of the polder busy workers, both men and women in their red and blue blouses, bent over the peas and lettuce. Cows were dotted about the pastures, here scattered, there in groups, their heads together, their tails swishing. Far away two waggons moved slowly along the skyline, diminished by the distance to the semblance of toy carts.

Kees began to load, pressing his hay fork deep into the cocks, lifting up mighty bunches and pitching them into the cart. Dirk, standing in the waggon, received the hay in his arms and arranged it. Every few minutes a violent gust of wind would make Kees stagger as he held up his burden, and sweep great wisps away from his fork, blowing them back along the dyke. Dirk moved now to left, now to right, backwards and forwards, arranging the masses of hay, pressing and stamping them into their places with his whole weight. Old Gerrit walked restlessly round and round the waggon, now looking at the sky with screwed-up blinking eyes, now watching Dirk in his blue smock as he worked with furious energy on the waggon.

The greater part of one of his loads had been torn from Kees' fork by the wind. Swearing, he threw down the little that remained, and dug his fork again into the haycock, then walked cautiously to the waggon, afraid of another treacherous gust. Dirk, standing high on the rapidly rising load, pushing the hay this way and that, was suffocated by heat, soaked with perspiration.

"Where'll you have this?" shouted Kees against the wind.

"In front here!" yelled Dirk in reply; "damned if one can load in this hurricane! I don't know what I'm doing. Look out there, father! Is it all right, or am I getting it too wide?"

Gerrit, rake in hand, his silvery locks stirred by the wind under his broad-brimmed hat, examined the load critically.

"Ay! ay! it's all right," he said; "but mind how you go on with it."

"Gently, Kees! gently!" panted Dirk. "I've not got a grip of it yet!"

Kees pushed his fork higher up, standing on tiptoe to bring it within Dirk's reach. The latter worked like a Titan, bracing himself against the tempest, which threatened every minute to undo his work. He growled and cursed as he worked, water poured down his face and neck. A hay-seed blew into his eye and burned like a glowing cinder. Enraged he threw himself down on the hay, trying to rub the fiery ball from under his eyelid. He was near fainting with pain and heat and fury. At last a copious gush of tears washed away the seed, and he could see again, though everything seemed covered by a red veil and his eye still burned painfully. Not for several minutes could he look at the hay, or the sky, or his waiting brother. Then Kees swam into view with a green circle round him, and behind him the dim form of old Gerrit. Dirk must set to work again, but more quietly. With wide-spread arms he received the forks of hay, and went on building the load.

"Look at the back, father! Is it all right? I don't mean you, Kees! You go on pitching. Father! Hi! Come here!"

Gerrit hobbled up, scorched and breathless. He was certainly getting the hay-fever! He couldn't stand any more of this! Rake on shoulder he went round inspecting the waggon. The loose hay kicked up by his shoes was caught by the wind and hurled back along the dyke.

"Lord! It's a terrible storm! It's blown you all crooked, Dirk. You're hanging right over on this side! You'll have to shift it."

"The best man in the world couldn't load in a wind like this. I told you how it would be!" said Dirk.

The load, however, grew steadily higher.

"How much more is there?" shouted Dirk.

"About five forkfuls," said Kees.

When the last cock was reached, Gerrit again inspected the load.

"Hallo! It's crooked! perfectly crooked! If that comes safe to the barn, my name's not Gerrit Hassel!"

"Damned if I've ever had such a job of loading!" roared Dirk, infuriated. "The hay's like a wild rabbit—runs away under your feet. Hi there! Kees! What are you about? Gone asleep? Got hay-fever?"

Kees had thrown himself down with his back against this last remaining haycock. His blood boiled, his hands and wrists burned and stung, his eyes were sunk in their sockets. He must breathe for ten minutes or go to pieces altogether.

Glad of the rest, Dirk seated himself on the hay to wait for Kees. Quite silent, he looked straight before him over the interminable polder. The steady hum of countless insects rose into the glowing air. Bees in their gay velvet sang a triumphant song of summer and of their stolen sweets as they sailed swiftly down the wind from the meadow flowers. Wasps, slender-waisted and smart, flew in circles, now high, now low; lady-birds with their scarlet wings flashed like sparks in the sun. The paths were fringed with buttercups and the golden trusses of the bedstraw, which diffused a subtle fragrance.

Everywhere the polder teemed with life. Buntings twittered among the reeds. Peewits cried, starlings chattered; the voice of the golden oriole, clear and enchanting, floated on the breeze.

The grazing cows, excited by the wind, now and then burst into foolish and clumsy gallops, their tails erect and stiff. Sometimes the starlings settled on their backs, snapping at the flies which buzzed tormentingly round the eyes and nostrils of the patient beasts. The mares galloped also, manes and tails flying, their foals sporting at their sides. The hay carts, high laden, came swaying and creaking out of the hay fields to the sandy polder road. High over all the skylarks poured their streams of enraptured melody.

At last Kees pitched up the last hay to the waggon, then threw his brother a rope to be attached to the front of the load. The *ponder* or heavy grooved beam was laid on top of the hay; the rope was passed along it, then returned to Kees, who secured it by means of a pulley at the tail board, dragging at it with all his force till the load sank. Dirk descended; he and Gerrit added their strength to that of Kees, hauling in the rope till the hay could be squeezed no tighter. Then Dirk fastened the rope, and the three men stood panting, assured that their load was no longer at the mercy of the blast. Dirk clambered to the box, where he sat with the mountain of hay towering over him. The horse strained against his collar and with a mighty effort set the waggon in motion. Gerrit and

Kees walked behind the load, which threatened every moment to topple over, as the clumsy vehicle plunged, groaning and creaking and swinging from side to side along the polder road.

In the afternoon the waggon was back on the dyke ready for another load. The wind had gone down. It was cooler, and the sky was flecked with silvery clouds. The sandy road lay like a shining ribbon across the green. Here and there a mill wheel turned lazily, the mill stream glistened like a mirror or in some places showed a dull green expanse of duckweed.

At seven the brothers were busy with their last waggon-load. It was cool now, and they worked more calmly yet more rapidly. Quietly the shadows lengthened and the declining sun touched all things with ruddy gold. In the stillness the chewing of the cows could be heard, and the distant bleat of a sheep smote the ear like a child's cry. On all sides sounded the voice of the haymakers, the carols of those who drove home the laden waggons. The air was full of the songs of birds; small fleecy clouds covering the western heaven were like flocks of silvery sea-gulls or pigeons. The angelus sounded, mysterious and soft, from far villages whose towers and gables stood up dark and distinct against the evening sky.

Aromatic perfume rose from the cooling earth. The light faded slowly, the clouds hanging lower and lower over the darkening fields. The figures of belated workers, at first sharply silhouetted in the evening light, gradually faded and were blotted out as night closed over the vast polder.

CHAPTER VI

I

OLD GERRIT was walking round his garden, admiring his beans; Kees and Dirk were examining the currants and raspberries. Dirk wore his Sunday waistcoat, across which hung a gold watch-chain; Kees was in patched garments, worn and faded with wear. The Sunday leisure was very agreeable to Gerrit; he pottered about among his vegetables, pleased to see them looking so well. The strawberries had done capitally, the beans promised to surpass them. The beans would be his salvation this year. And Dr. Troost, the blackguard, had asked him why he didn't put his whole land under strawberries! Interfering idiot! The idea of putting all the eggs in one basket! If the beans did well, Gerrit would have a balance at the end of the year in spite of all he must pay out in November. Lord! the sums of money he owed! But, come! no need to worry to-day! The beans looked well, and to-day was the day of rest, when he might enjoy himself just looking round.

Dirk and Kees strolled by. They also enjoyed lounging in the garden through the hot Sunday morning, discussing the crops, planning their work, but not lifting a finger to do it. Merely to breathe was delightful among the fresh garden smells, in the blazing sunshine.

The three were going for a stroll before Gerrit went to church. He had discarded his dirty jacket, and allowed Guurt to bring out his best coat of fine black cloth. His silver locks surmounted by a smart green hat, his coat buttoned tight across his chest, he walked out of the house with stiff

Sunday-best sort of air, as if afraid of spoiling his magnificence at every step. He and his sons were all smoking, holding their cigars with thick earth-stained fingers. They walked in a row, keeping step through Droo-geweg, an out-of-the-way corner of the Wiereland township.

All around were market gardens, showing every shade of green in the late July sun. Here and there were the houses of the gardeners, with their red roofs and little patches of flower-garden gemmed with yellow and scarlet blossoms. Poppies blazed along the tanks of the *sloots*; scabious and pure white convolvulus glinted in grass and hedge-row.

Silently and slowly the men trudged along the sandy road, each deep in his own thoughts. Dirk's mind ran on the Grint girls; he was hoarding a little money for the Kermis in mid-August to spend on them. But his fingers twitched whenever he remembered Willem, his fool of a cousin, who was always getting between him and Geert.

Old Gerrit stumped along, ill at ease in the company of his sons. He generally walked alone before church on Sundays. There was almost always something he could pick up; trifles, to be sure, one could not expect better with so many sharp eyes about. But to-day his pleasure was spoilt by his sons, whose invitation to take a turn with them he had been afraid to refuse. He was worrying his head about all sorts of things. First, there was his imbecile wife, who ate and drank and did no work, but sat on her chair in the corner looking like a corpse. Secondly, he was uneasy about the photographer at whose house he had a cup of coffee every day. Two or three mornings ago Gerrit had seen a shining new ten-gulden piece lying in the studio, and had pocketed it when the photographer wasn't looking. It was the first time in his life that he had taken money. It had looked so bright and so shiny, he really couldn't keep his fingers off it! Afterwards he had noticed that the photographer did not speak in his usual friendly way. Various little things convinced him that he was no longer trusted. The man did not leave him alone in the studio, or if he did he first locked the door of his dark room. This made Gerrit nervous. Was it possible that he, Grandfather Gerrit, with his white hair and his good name, was suspected?

Kees trudged along, his thoughts on Wimpie. He was consumed with burning inarticulate rage that his boy could not be with him, that he should lie stricken, paler, weaker, more suffering every day. Every day, too, the child prayed and sang more devoutly, and every day Kees cursed his wife and her mother and her dirty crew of associates more bitterly. He did his work listlessly, though to other people it seemed that he did it well. As he worked the picture of Wimpie was always before his eyes, Wimpie lying in his crib, or in the little cart in the sunshine; Wimpie dying by inches, becoming more pallid, more waxen, more emaciated, day by day. And always he was praying in his weak, little voice, asking blessings on his father; praying for his father's soul!

Sometimes Kees, when he saw the pale lips muttering the prayers, almost longed to silence them by a blow. His own dear little one dipping his wasted hands in the holy water basin! staring idiotically at pictures of the Sacred Heart! his boy praying for his father's salvation!

It maddened him too when the mother said the child's illness was caused by the father's impiety. Hearing that, Kees wanted to stick a knife into the woman's ribs, so murderous he felt towards her. Later, when he had calmed himself by a walk in the free air of the dunes, he realised that the boy prayed because he couldn't help it; that he had no meaning in doing it. Sometimes this thought came to calm the man even at the moment of his passion. But always with it came the further agonising thought that Wimpie was looking more hopelessly ill day by day.

Stolidly, silently, the Hassels walked along, very uncomfortable in the creaky boots which to-day replaced the accustomed *sabots*. A turn of the road brought them to the quay, and Dirk led his father and brother to a tavern. The place was crowded with drinkers and billiard-players. The air reeked of gin, and round the billiard-table was a noisy company of gardeners and labourers, all very stiff and awkward in their Sunday clothes. Rings glittered on the men's fingers, gold watch-chains shone against their black waistcoats. There was a smell of fresh-washed linen; white cuffs and collars shone.

Dirk walked to the bar and ordered gin for himself and Gerrit. The company looked askance at Kees, the poacher,—the devil! But they were not frightened, because it was broad daylight, and it was summer time, the season when Kees was quite respectable and worked on the land like any one else. The black magic atmosphere only hung about him in the winter. True, there was something intimidating about his dour face, his taciturnity, his huge frame, and sledge-hammer fists, but if you let him alone he wasn't such a bad fellow after all.

Kees would not drink more than one glass; Gerrit also drank in small appreciative sips. But Dirk ordered glass after glass for himself, and stirred in plenty of sugar, and tossed the liquor off with eyes half-shut in pure animal enjoyment. After the fifth glass, his eyes sparkled, he criticised the billiard-players and offered to teach them.

"Look out, you fool! You must play through! Hit your ball high. Don't you see the balls are behind each other like potatoes in a row? Now then, hit hard! Let them kiss! It isn't your sister, man!"

Kees was bored and wanted to go back into the air. He pulled Dirk to make him come. It was impossible to breathe in this horrible atmosphere! Gerrit, whose one glass had made things dance before his eyes, was glad to follow to the street. Dirk, however, shook his brother off and returned to the billiard-players.

"The old man's going to hear the parson at ten o'clock. It ain't in my line! like to stay in the five cent church better, eh?" he shouted after his father as the old man passed out through the tavern door.

II

There was again great pressure of work at Gerrit's, and Kees persuaded Dirk to give Ant also a job at the picking.

At first the woman stormed and swore. Certainly not! she wouldn't lift a finger for those dirty heretics! But she was expecting another child, and no one but Dirk offered her work. And money must be earned for Wimpie, who was getting so much weaker, and was more than ever in need of strengthening food.

Gerrit grumbled at the coming of his daughter-in-law. He was certain the Papist crew would bring bad luck. Guurt personally detested Ant, but she said nothing. So the woman with rage and spite in her heart took her place in the fruit garden with the others, and Kees found a little more money coming into the family purse.

Dientje and Jansje, who, as a rule, were not allowed by their mother into their grandparents' house, came also in the morning to help in the picking. Gerrit was glad to have some children, for they—girls especially—worked hard and got very little wages. In the afternoons Ant sent the two little girls to Duinkijk, where one of the gardeners employed them weeding the dahlia beds.

At the end of July the weather changed. Storms were frequent, heavy rain falling from an overcast and lowering sky. Gerrit trembled for his beans; on them hung his fortune for the year. He had an order from the Factory for four million pods; and would require a large supply also for his town customers. The apples, pears, currants, and raspberries were of less account. Still it was exasperating to see the fruit checked and much of it rotting on the trees. Day after day the sky continued black; the wind was blustering and cold; the rain, welcome to begin with, would not stop. The gardeners of Wiereland were dismayed, and shook their heads at each other in ominous foreboding. No one was so much frightened as Gerrit. Sometimes his anxiety would clutch him by the throat so that he could hardly breathe. But at last the weather made another sudden change. The sky again became blue, the sun shone, work was resumed in the gardens at higher pressure than before.

Ant crept about among the beds panting and muttering. If Piet or Guurt spoke to her she looked cross and angry. Why did they never ask for Wimpie? Why didn't they give her something for him? Why was there never a drink of coffee for Dientje and Jansje?

About eight in the evening when the garden was bathed in heavenly glow, Kees was working close to Dirk among the gooseberries. Behind them were the beds of asparagus, now in flower, and flaming red in the sunset radiance. A thin little maid of ten was helping Kees to pick the gooseberries and put them into punnets.

"Oh! oh! oh!" cried the child, putting her hand to her mouth.

"What? Pricked yourself again? You must take more care—you haven't any blood to spare," said Kees grimly.

The little yellow-haired thing sucked her fingers, while the man went on stripping the thorny bushes, with quick unhesitating movements. Blood was trickling down the backs of his hands, but he seemed insensitive to pain. The child cried as she went on with her work falteringly. The sight of her red blood frightened her, and she stopped every few minutes to suck her scratches.

"Now, child, get over there to the currants, then you won't have any prickles. But be careful and don't take them too low down where they're splashed by the rain."

The child shuffled over to the red currants, which hung on the bushes in bunches like glowing rubies.

Gerrit walked about with a spade and a rake, keeping a sharp watch over the workers.

Dientje was in the garden to-night, and she also was picking currants.

"Hallo!" cried Gerrit, "pinch them off! Don't squeeze 'em!"

The child looked up frightened at being spoken to by her grandfather.

"Look here, girl! If you go to that Duinkijk chap to-morrow, you needn't come here any more. One master or no master, do you hear? When you've finished that just go and ask Uncle Dirk if you're wanted any longer to-night. Don't go to your father or I'll send you packing. I can get ten to take your place if I choose! And to-morrow you must be here at sunrise and start on the black currants, the black ones; do you hear?"

The child nodded, and stood gazing at her grandfather's beautiful hair as he stumped away to another part of the garden.

Kees came by carrying a load of fruit to the barn. Passing the strawberry beds he saw his wife picking with Piet and three children. The sun was sinking; strawberries and workers were alike bathed in a rich wine-red glow.

Ant could work no longer. She was within twenty days of the birth of her child, and she felt its thrills of life incessantly. At the end of the row of strawberry plants was a low branched apple tree; this would help her to drag herself to her feet. She was ashamed to ask some one for assistance. It had been a long and hard day's work, much too long and too hard for her. The longing for Wimpie gnawed at her insistently. She had told him that the busy time would not last much longer; that to-night she would be home the same time as father. When she got home half an hour before she was expected, Wimpie would clap his hands with joy and smother her with kisses.

Ant tried to get up from her crouching position among the strawberries. She clung to the trunk of the little apple tree and tried to pull herself up, panting and groaning. She managed to raise herself from the ground, but her arms and hands lost all power, suddenly her hold relaxed and she sank back on the ground, giddy and faint, a cold sweat breaking out upon her forehead. She groaned as she fell back, and the children working near her were frightened and ran to her over the strawberries.

"Have you hurt yourself, Vrouw Hassel?" they cried.

"Shall we call some one? Where is Mr. Piet? Oh, he's gone away to the gooseberries!"

"Never mind. It's only I'm so tired, children!" panted the poor thing as she lay exhausted on the ground. "Now, dears, be kind and help Vrouw Hassel to her feet, won't you? so that she can stand!"

The three little helpers, their hands stained with strawberry juice, sprang towards the woman, and leaning over her, lifted her up. She stood upright, still panting, and bathed with the cold sweat of exhaustion. She had been picking since three in the blazing sun, crouching at her work; now every bone in her body ached and her spine felt as if it were on fire. The children gazed at her; frightened pity in their eyes. They saw her face was drawn with pain; they knew she had an hour's walk to get home. Ah! she knew well she had done too much. But she had to! she had to for Wimpie's sake! How were they to get him the strengthening things through the long workless winter, unless they could earn a little extra now, and pay off some of their debts?

Now for the long tramp home! Kees had passed her, shouting that he must go to the quay and would not be free till eleven. Dientje and Jansje were still in the barn, handing the punnets. All alone, half dead with fatigue, Ant staggered home along the sunlit road bordering the glowing dune. Wimpie was waiting silently, a beseeching look in his big eyes; waiting and gazing at the little picture of Jesus, and at the palm branch which had been hung before him; casting quick, frightened glances at the cross, purblind, peering grandmother, at the taciturn, quid-chewing, expectorating grandfather.

III

The next day was again blazing hot. Gerrit picked raspberries, assisted by Piet and two small children. The old man's white beard glistened against the green background as he moved along the raspberry canes, bending this way and that as he took the velvety red fruit. Behind were rows of punnets already full, exhaling a perfume subtler and sweeter than that of the strawberries.

"You've got into my row, old man," said Piet, "picking out the nice 'uns and leaving the rubbish for me."

"Hallo! So I have!"

"They want looking for. It's a poor crop."

"Now, Piet, you go off to the black currants. I can sell any amount of them at a decent price. If we haven't enough we can buy some on the quay to-night."

"That's good business. Selling to the chemist, I suppose, or the Factory?"

"I've got a private order. But I'm sending to the Factory too. See, this is a nice lot," said Gerrit, holding up a punnet of raspberries to the sun.

"I tell you you're picking only the good 'uns," grumbled Piet. He joined Kees at the black currants. The bushes were laden with the blue-black fruit, hanging in untidy clusters. Their scent was acrid and unpleasant, and they looked food fit only for crows.

"I've come to give you a hand. Dirk can't leave the peas and the young carrots. About the last of them they are. My word! this is a windy corner! The old man's sent me here. Says he can sell all the currants he's got."

The brothers picked silently, throwing the little trusses of berries into large baskets, which were ready on the ground. All around, fruit, trees, hedges, herbs, and shrubs glowed in the bright sunshine. Under the closely planted fruit-trees was deep, cool shadow. Some of the trees were laden with apples, rosy like the faces of children. Little round immature fruits peeped out from the foliage. The pear trees were covered with dull bronze fruit, the plums hung on their trees like large green olives.

Kees worked steadily, carrying the baskets as they were filled to the barn, where all the market produce was collected out of the sun. Hampers of lettuce, bags of peas, punnets of strawberries, raspberries, red and white currants, made a feast of colour as they stood heaped up in the barn ready for transport to the quay. The garden resounded with the chatter of the children as they worked at the picking and carrying. There was always this late-summer fever of work in Wiereland. On market days the harbour was all noise and bustle. The bean harvest was already under discussion. Generally it was in full progress at Kermis, but this year the bad weather in July had thrown back the crop so that the harvest would be outrageously late.

The place was now swarming with the summer visitors. Troops of straw-hatted, bright-frocked little girls played and romped in the lanes; smartly dressed young mothers strolled about carrying sunshades. The Wiereland children, busy at their fruit-picking, looked up and stared at the rich holiday-folk with sour though silent dislike. A cuff from one of their elders and they would crouch to their work again, their little sun-scorched faces bent close to the burning earth, picking, gathering, sorting, hour after hour.

The merry jingle of the tram-horse bells came across the fields from the sea road; a trill of summer pleasure quivering on the sunny air. Carriages rolled past in clouds of dust; bicycles with silver spokes flashed by. Holiday-makers pervaded the whole little toiling township. The fields were thronged with workers, but across the fields the sea-ward tram passed backwards and forwards, merry with children carrying buckets, and spades, and coloured toys. The Wiereland gentry joined in the holiday-making, decked like the strangers in summer finery. In all the quiet, shady lanes was the glint of pretty frocks and gay-coloured parasols. The visitors crowded also in the great avenue of beech trees at the Duinkijk end of the sea road. Dust rose perpetually along the whole road from Duinkijk to Zeekijk, smothering the tram driver, the fruit and vegetables in the carts, the workers in the neighbouring fields. The gardeners and peasants regarded the summer visitors and their doings with complete indifference. They never thought of walking down to the sea. They had heard its roar in the winter storms, booming across the lonely dunes, and that was enough for them. They did not appreciate the dressed-up noisy town denizens who invaded Wiereland so impudently, turning the houses of those who lodged them into bear gardens, smothering the roads with suffocating dust. What did the workers care for ozone, for the taste of the salt breeze, for the pleasure of wrestling with the gale as it blew along the strand? On Sundays, the one free day, they greatly preferred smoking their pipes, or strolling about the lanes with the girls, or dozing indoors, to tramping along the hot sandy sea road, an hour's walk to the sea.

The older men, oppressed with anxieties, tired with the week's work, shut themselves up in their stuffy little rooms, drank their coffee and chewed their quids, occasionally lounging round their gardens to see how the stuff looked. On Sunday evening they went to the tavern, drinking and talking till it was bedtime. Next day they were back at the picking and gathering and carrying of burdens, till the blood under their finger-nails seemed turned to liquid fire. They did not look up even for a moment at the groups of holiday-makers who passed them by. They were afraid of even an instant's idleness and worked feverishly on till far into the night.

IV

A fortnight before Kermis, the weather changed again. The gardeners were in the greatest anxiety about their crops; already the red cabbage was dying off.

Old Gerrit walked restlessly up and down, muttering and grumbling, the sultry air adding to his physical depression. He felt stifled; sometimes the blood rushed to his head, as if his fear were a living thing leaping up and gripping him by the throat. Horrible pictures of disaster swam before his eyes, causing continual torture.

"My beans!" he would say, "my beans! No sun, no warmth! Rain, rain, rain, from morning till night! To-day this awful thunderstorm!"

In the fields, the workers were busy hoeing between the rows of celery, or filling baskets with the late lettuce. Kees was planting endive. Children and adults all worked on ceaselessly as long as there was light. Thrice daily the produce was sent off to the market. While the fathers and mothers were absent in the town, the children cleared away the yellow decaying pea haulms. Soon whole fields were naked, except for the long rows of stakes, to be removed when time was less precious.

The strawberry season was over; already the leaves of the early varieties were turning red. It was still summer, yet even now the first notes of the dirge of autumn were making themselves heard. This rain was no gentle summer shower, refreshing the thirsty fields and cooling the leaves parched by heat; it was a steady downpour, broken only by short intervals of furious wind. All vegetation was chilled and checked; the fields were a morass.

Old Gerrit, cursing his ill-luck, had yet one cause of satisfaction; he had got rid of Ant, his sour-faced daughter-in-law. Once the picking was done Kees also could be dismissed. Guurt could manage all the fruit there was left. A smart lass was Guurt! But what exactly was she up to, with all her many sweethearts? At this moment Dirk was an anxiety. It was increasingly difficult to get from him the money which he brought back from market. When he staggered home drunk Gerrit was always apprehensive that no money would be forthcoming at all. If the father ventured on remonstrance, Dirk would burst into such fury of abuse that the old man would slouch off in terror. Piet always surrendered his market money at once; but Dirk would hold on to his till Gerrit's avarice overcame his fear and he also stamped and shouted and swore in rage. At last the money bag made reluctant exit from Dirk's pocket and the coins were greedily counted.

Day after day the bad weather continued. Gerrit was still more frightened about his beans, more anxious and generally depressed. Sometimes he saw his wife wandering aimlessly round the garden, unconscious how she had got there, or how she meant to get back. Once he found her trampling on the vegetables; he seized her savagely by the arm and marched her back to the house.

"You fool! How dare you step on my celery? Eh? idiot!"

Pushed roughly on to a chair, she sat staring round her in vacant terror while he hurried away.

Still it rained; the workers were soaked to the skin; at night they wrung their reeking garments and dried them at the fire. Then the rain abated slightly, and slowly the beans began to set.

The workers sang at their work in spite of the raw and dismal air. Only three days now to Kermis, the year's great outburst of jollity, the compensation for the long toil, the feast of noise and colour in a city of tents and booths and stalls. Soon every one would be seized by the eight days' fever, would give up all restraint, would wallow in the filth of animal pleasures, in drinking and fighting, and primitive love-making. In his heart Gerrit cursed the Kermis. The fellows would come daily to their work exhausted and good for nothing. His stuff would spoil. The beans were requiring full attention, and here was this horrid interruption of Kermis! He smothered his annoyance, however, for if the fellows heard him grumble, they would strike work altogether, and leave him with the crop ripe and no one to pick it.

CHAPTER VII

I

THE station road, and the stretch of ground behind the quay with its shady avenue of chestnut trees, were invaded by rumbling fair-waggons. Tents with gorgeous entrances rose on all sides; there was unending bustle, and movement of horses and gipsy-like men and women. The waggons rattled and jolted along in an endless stream, making their way through the Wiereland workers, each with its sorry horse driven by a rascally looking person sitting on the back of the shaft. In the caravan doorways stood dirty black-browed women, most of them with babies at the breast. The waggons were surrounded by a slouching, unsavoury, lousy escort of men, girls, and youths. As they passed, the Wiereland swains made coarse love to the gipsy girls, sometimes dancing up to them, with clattering of wooden shoes, grotesque flingings of arms and legs and a bombardment of kisses. The field-workers, too busy to leave their posts, shouted coarse jests to the screaming and giggling girls. Sounds of hammering came from the rapidly rising, mushroom-like tents, from the skeletons of booths and stalls. The sight of embryo shooting galleries, swings, merry-go-rounds rumbling along the road sent thrills of delight through the excited onlookers. A long string of Shetland ponies belonging to the circus made a strange patter with their tiny hoofs as they trotted along the quay accompanied by a crowd of staring children. For two days before the opening of the fair, the whole town echoed with the jolly rattle of piano-organs. Thirty criers, positive volcanoes of noise, assembled according to regulation before the town hall, and departed thence to fill every corner of Wiereland with strident clamour. Swarthy fellows with glossy black hair, copper earrings, and gaudy neckerchiefs, looking like actors in some opera or melodrama, sang wild melancholy songs in a strange tongue to the accompaniment of tambourines and accordions.

The bustle was at its height on the quay, against which barges were moored laden with Kermis properties. The Wiereland lads, full of Kermis madness, fought for the poles and planks and ropes as they came off the barges, and insisted on carrying them to their destined places. School children and unemployed gardeners' boys panted under huge burdens, planks, rods, wooden horses, figures of lions and tigers, parts of the foundations of merry-go-rounds. They shouted with glee at actually touching and lifting the sacred Kermis treasures. They vied with each other as to who should carry the greatest weight; they ran hither and thither through the crowd of tavern frequenters, doing the work of the Kermis showmen, who were only too glad to have their fetching and carrying performed for them. They noted the sparkle in the boys' eyes when anything specially fine was brought out, the furious competition for share in carrying some huge piece of decoration, some daub of a highly-coloured murder scene, or of a ship breaking to pieces in a seething tumult of mountainous waves, or of a Transvaal battle with Boers in furious charge and transfixed and mutilated Englishmen. The boys fought for the honour of handling these masterpieces, which were unpacked in sections, so that Jan went off with the murderer's legs, Gijs with the upper part of the shipwreck; Piet captured the Boer rifles, and Toon had to content himself with the ground. Then came harlequins, coats-of-arms for the adornment of the shooting gallery, stove-pipes, and band-boxes. The youngsters felt as if they were the proprietors of the whole Kermis, now they had actually assisted in putting the fair together.

The framework of the Kermis theatre towered over everything else. It rose up so quickly that it was complete before the town had noticed its beginning.

The day before the fair's opening the sun broke through the grey veil of cloud, and flooded Wiereland with light and colour. The caravans grouped on the grassy space at the end of the quay, with their red stairs and balustrades, their vermilion wheels and yellow bodies, glowed in the August sun; round them swarmed the gipsy crowd, the slatternly, witch-like women, the naked babies, the filthy and ragged children. Mothers suckling swarthy freckled infants crouched round smoky spirit stoves. Girls half lay, half sat on the ground, supporting themselves on their elbows, and talking noisily with groups of men black as charcoal-burners. In one corner was a company of young women dressed in worn velvet finery, the remains of acrobatic costumes. Sometimes a woman with bare bosom would drag a child into one of the cabin-like caravans, or push others out yelling and sobbing to take refuge in the farthest corner of the encampment. Little naked boys played round the wheels, fought among the horses and draught dogs, or teased a little gibbering grinning monkey that scratched itself busily, while keeping a sharp look-out for fresh attacks from its tormentors. Behind the barking dogs, a company of little girls sprawled on the grass in a circle, their chins on their hands, their heels in the air. Every now and then they would break into rough play, throwing mud at each other, and wrestling till they were exhausted and streaming with perspiration.

No one from the respectable quarters of Wiereland ventured into the neighbourhood of the Nomad camp.

II

Noise and uproar reigned throughout the town. The weather had cleared up and the Kermis was inaugurated under brilliant sunshine. In the workers' quarter and in the fields was shouting or singing, somewhat restrained during the day, but at evening excited by the piano-organs almost to madness. In noisy rollicking companies the people all trooped off to the Kermis, men, women, children: impudent factory girls, gardeners' boys, sweethearts and married pairs. Solemn warnings were uttered by the ministers and the schoolmasters, but they were greeted with jeers or ribald laughter and crushed into silence.

The Kermis was opened in the morning by a fête for the Wiereland children all dressed in their Sunday best. Little servant-maids strolled and gossiped, boys romped noisily. Babes yelled at the top of their voices and frolicked like young rabbits. Towards noon the sun vanished behind clouds, the day remaining hot and sultry, with a pall of dull grey hanging low over the swarming streets of the little town.

Dirk, Piet, and Rink of the Polder had formed themselves into an association for the Kermis, and meant to attach themselves to Klaas Grint's pretty daughters. Jan Grint joined them, hoping in this way to have chances of meeting Guurt Hassel. Geert and Trijn, Cor and Annie hung on to Jan, expecting to get share in all the fun which was going. But the Hassel cousins bribed Klaas Koome to join their party, for they knew him as a dare-devil, and trusted he would entice the Grint girls in their direction, putting more energy into the enterprise than they could command themselves. The girls, half frightened, knew they were the objects of furious rivalry between the two parties. But Trijn said to Geert, why bother their heads about the foolishness? What did it matter if the men did quarrel? The great thing was to have a good time and enjoy the fun.

In the evening Dirk, Piet, and Rink called for Jan Grint, somewhat to the annoyance of the girls, who would have preferred the party of the rich cousins. However, they all stood at the door ready to start with their brother, quivering with excitement as they heard the men come singing up the path. The girls ran back for a moment to kiss their parents and the children, then followed Jan and his friends, who were all shouting and singing uproariously, and leaping about with ungainly mirth. Piet wore his wooden shoes that he might make the more noise on the floors of the tents and the dancing booths. The girls also sang, walking along in a row, their arms round each other's waists. They all shouted the Kermis song, the men in their hoarse bass, the girls in their shrill treble—

"*Women and children, see them lie,*
Sent to the murder camps to die!
Oh my God, what a bitter shame!
Let us spit upon England's name!"

They all shouted the chorus in unison—

"*Oh my God, what a bitter shame!*
Oh my God, what a bitter shame!"

The national feeling finding vent in looks of supreme rage and hysterical bloodthirst.

Presently the party ran into another advancing from a side path, singing in chorus—

"*I'll stand by her in weal or woe,*
Daisy—Daisy!"

The new-comers stopped abruptly.

"Damned if it ain't the Grint girls!" muttered Willem Hassel, spitting out a jet of tobacco juice.

"Look out!" said Piet; "it's Willem and Jan, Henk, and Klaas Koome!"

"Hallo, Hazewind!" cried Dirk, half angry, half joking. "Why, who's that you've got with you? I declare it's Bolk! You, Flatnose? *You?*"

The Hassel cousins had arranged with Klaas Grint that they should call for his daughters. Now he had let them go with this cursed crew!

"A Judas trick!" growled Willem; "five times he promised they should come with us."

"Well," said Dirk, pulling two of the girls towards him, an arm round each, "what would become of them with miserable beggars like you?" His voice shook angrily.

"Ha! ha! that's one for you," grinned Rink, then turned to Geert and chucked her under the chin.

"Keep your paws to yourself," said Geert, uncomfortable at sight of the rival party barring the way.

"Make room for the quality!" sneered Dirk.

Klaas Koome, brought for the purpose, answered back with a storm of abuse. Rink joined in threateningly.

The girls, however, did not want a row, as they were much too anxious to get to the fair.

"Listen, you fellows," said Geert suddenly, "it's poor fun for us to have you squabbling and fighting! Make it up, and let's all go on together!"

"That's it!"

"That's right!"

Rink and the Hassel cousins agreed readily; Dirk and Piet were inclined to dispute. Rink, however, pushed the cousins towards each other, the girls laughed, and, with the suddenness of a drunken man's changes of mood, the general ill-feeling was replaced by a kind of maudlin affectionateness. Willem took Dirk's arm, Piet took Jan's, Rink hovered round with a "*Bless you, my children*" air, Henk, quick as lightning, kissed all the four girls. Jan Grint, who had stood by silently watching the incipient quarrel, now took a position at the head of the party, and marched along swinging a thick stick like a drum-major's staff.

The troop proceeded along the path to the harbour, shouting and singing, till, turning a corner, they came in sight of the glow from innumerable lamps and flaring naphtha torches. Walking from the darkness of the dune into the Kermis glare, they yelled at the top of their voices the Kermis song—

"Oh my God, what a bitter shame!
Let us spit upon England's name!"

From every corner the refrain was taken up—

"Oh my God, what u bitter shame!"

The girls, mad with pleasure and excitement, could hardly contain themselves as they approached the scene of the fair, heard its din of voices, its braying of piano-organs, saw its lamps and torches and electric light.

"Bless you, Geert!" cried Willem, "there's a bit of everything here! Ain't there, Dirk? There's a real giantess! Seven hundred pounds she weighs, and you can poke her to make sure she's real!"

"That's nothing!" said Jan Grint; "there's a steam merry-go-round as big as a whole circus, and a *Henny meetoscope* or whatever you call it, and a theatre, and a circus, and five *Kaffy shantins*, and a hundred conjurers and fortune-tellers, and shooting galleries, and a chamber of horrors, and——"

"*Oh my God, what a bitter shame!*" yelled Dirk suddenly, and the girls joined in and Willem too.

"Hold your noise; I'm the music-master!" said Klaas Koome. "Now then, Bolkie, fall in! Now! all together——"

In a deep bass voice he sang, the whole troop joining in unison—

"*We'll sing and we'll dance and we'll make good cheer,*
We'll get ourselves weighed and we'll drink good beer;
We'll look for the wenches, they're easy to find,
And while Kermis lasts they are all well inclined;
We'll shoot at a mark in a linen tent,
And if we can hit, get a fine presént."

"*A fine presént!*" echoed the men and the girls, as a party stormed by dancing a wild *can-can* and drowning Koome's song in the demoniac refrain—

"*Oh my God, what a bitter shame!*
Let us spit upon England's name!"

Dropping their own song, the Grints and Hassels joined in to swell the more popular chorus—

"*Oh my God, what a bitter shame——*"

Thus, dancing and roaring, they raged along under the flaring torches, till they arrived at the front of the largest show tent. Here they were overwhelmed and scattered by a large troop of noisy young people, who, with linked arms, were charging the crowd and dispersing it in all directions. The Hassel party reunited not without difficulty, and stood close to the swings and the cinematograph tent. The gaudy façade of the latter was lit up by three arc lamps, which threw a glare as of sudden daylight on the faces of the crowd.

The Grint girls were taken by their swains into the swing tent, where they waited for the bell which would allow them to pay their money and take their places in the swings in place of the present occupants. When the moment came, Dirk seized the slender Geert and almost carried her off to share his swing. Piet appropriated the mischievous, hot-blooded Trijn. Willem, vexed that he had not been quick enough to secure Geert, had to content himself with the sharp-tongued Annie. Jan Grint was looking about for Guurt, though he feared she was too fine to join his party. Rink had captured a swing and also the fair-haired Cor; but the rest of the party retired discomfited, unable to find room.

Dirk was sending his swing higher than any one, though Rink was not far behind. Up and down flew the little boats, now almost sweeping the ground, now ascending to the level of the tent-tops.

"Higher, Dirk! Higher!" screamed Geert, her eyes sparkling, her cheeks aflame, as she leaned towards her partner, gazing at him like a hungry animal. Dirk felt the pressure of her warm body at each turn of the swing, and pulled like mad till the whole framework creaked and groaned. The wild rush through the air was fearfully exciting; the blood rushed to his head; he scarce knew where he was. Geert and all the girls shared in the wild delight, urging their partners to send them higher and higher, till suddenly the bell sounded, the brakes came into play, and the swings were brought violently to rest.

The swingers, staggering and breathless, joined the rest of their party and went noisily out of the tent. Henk, Klaas Koome, and two other men who had joined them, rushed up, each with a girl whom he had picked up while the others were swinging.

Pretty Marie Pijler, a little fair-haired fury, put herself at the head of the troop, and began a wild dance, swaying her body this way and that, jumping and pirouetting with her skirts lifted to her knees. The Grints applauded violently with stamping and clapping; Hazewind alone joined in the dance, facing the fair bacchanal and performing a complicated hornpipe with much play of wrist and ankle, his wooden shoes beating the boards of the platform like those of an English clog dancer.

The party, led by Marie Pijler, moved off, and at a little distance came upon Guurt Hassel standing in the full glare of an electric lamp and looking vainly for her lover of the Government office. Jan Grint seized her and whirled her off with the troop as they went on their way shouting and dancing.

The men were becoming anxious for more excitement; nor did the girls make objection to the proposal of visiting the taverns and dancing booths.

Marie still sang and danced like a madwoman, making wild rushes round and between the tents pursued by Henk Hassel.

At midnight, the crowds from the theatres and cafés-chantants poured into the street, all in a state of uproarious excitement, after being imprisoned for three hours like mice in a trap. The human flood overwhelmed the Grints and Hassels and scattered them, so that for half an hour the girls were separated from their cavaliers. Reunited they spent several hours more rushing from dance to dance, from tavern to tavern, till they were all hopelessly drunk and staggered against each other as they walked. The Hassel cousins began to quarrel, the girls to scream. Marie Pijler wanted to dress as a man, and began taking off her raiment, but the police interfered and chased the whole party away from the fair.

With imbecile shouting and attempts at song, they reeled homewards through the dark Wiereland lanes.

III

Old Gerrit was highly displeased that his sons should have come home miserably drunk. Next day they were good for nothing. They got up late. Dirk, yawning portentously, began to pick beans with shaking fingers. His eyes watered, he was hot all over, his whole body felt battered. Every now and then he almost fell for sleepiness and exhaustion.

The sun blazed through the green leaves; heat rose in waves from the sandy soil. Dirk's head swam; the hot air overcame him; he sank down among the beans and in a moment was asleep and snoring like a pig.

Gerrit, furious in his sobriety, was making the round of his garden when he nearly fell over his son.

"Good Lord! Good Lord! Did any one ever see the like? Ho, Dirk! Dirk!" he shouted, shaking the sleeper violently by the shoulder.

Dirk woke with a start, and sat up. The sunshine falling suddenly on his face as he raised it from the shade, nearly blinded him. He felt as if pieces had been sawn off his body. The devil! he was falling asleep again!

"What's the matter with you, old man?" he growled.

"My Christ! this is too much!" said Gerrit. "You here, like a log, and Piet there in the endive, and the beans going to the devil! How am I going to deliver the stuff? The pods may rot on the ground for aught you care!"

"Don't you talk! It'll all come right. To-morrow's Sunday, ain't it? And who works on Monday—Kermis Monday? Why don't you come in yourself, and have some of the fun?"

With an oath Gerrit shuffled away. He would have liked very much to have a look at the fair. But he was afraid to show his nose in it. Four years ago a stall-holder at the Kermis had caught him in the act of some petty theft. Gerrit had paid ten times the value of the thing he had been appropriating, and thus had stopped the man's mouth; but shame and the dread of meeting him again, had kept the old thief away from the fair for four years. Might he not venture to go now? No one knew of the little transaction except the one stall-holder, and very likely he had not come this year. Should Gerrit chance it, and go on Sunday night, always the night of the biggest crowd?

He stamped on round the garden, and was relieved to find Piet at work among the cabbages, and looking quite himself again. He had put his head under the pump, and now much refreshed was singing the Kermis song in a strong unfaltering voice—

> "*Oh my God, what a bitter shame!*
> *Let us spit upon England's name!*"

Day after day the fair held its course. Night after night the glare shone fiercer, the crowd grew more dense, the din more deafening, the revellers less restrained as they surged hither and thither, flinging their limbs about in grotesque dances, like night-feasting cannibals leaping round their fire.

Sunday, however, meant the real Kermis. From every side the people poured in, from Lemper, from Kerkervaart, Duinkijk, Zeekijk, Overschie, from everywhere at once, in trains, in carts, in huge rumbling breaks. On all sides the villages were deserted; every one had gone to Wiereland, like the soldiers of a mobilising army to the rendezvous. Farmers, gardeners, nurserymen, labourers, sailors from Dykland, women in gay local costume, they all came. From midday out, the quay and the station boulevard was one vast multitude through which it was next to impossible to thread one's way.

Night came, dark and starless, the clouds hung low; but the fair had burst into light, and a red glare stained the leaden sky. Seen from the station square, the boulevard, bathed in mysterious radiance, seemed a far-stretching avenue, in which dark figures moved like insects, now in glare, now in shadow, among the tents.

A dense pack of people collected before the "try-your-strength" machines, and there was uninterrupted sound of sledge-hammer blows. The indicators stood like a row of telegraph poles. Medals shone brightly on little trays, waiting to be given as prizes to the more successful competitors; attendants walked round inviting the men to the test; girls fingered the medals, and urged their swains to try and win them for their sweethearts.

Bands of men and women, with wild ape-like faces, marched up and down, waving flags over their heads. The nasal squealing of the crowd was heard on all sides; the air was full of the manifold din of organs, whistles, shouts, snatches of song, screams of hysterical laughter, tramping of countless feet.

The noise and the crowd were greatest on the quay, whither every now and then would come a wild stampede from the station boulevard.

The hard violet glare of the arc lamps lit the faces of the people, and showed diminutive ibis-like heads on the bodies of cuirassiers; foxy peasant countenances, cunning, furtive, coarse and cruel, sensual and drunken.

Old women, their yellow cheeks flushed with drink, yelled and sang with the rest, indulging in a last orgy of the *joie de vivre.* Girls screamed like furies. Some had smooth feline countenances; some were like fishes with thin-lipped, unkind mouths; the faces of some were seamed by passions. Young maidens with pink and white doll-like faces were swept along unpityingly in the bacchanalian riot.

Most of the women, many of the men, wore gaudy paper caps on their heads, rosettes pinned to their breasts, coloured streamers from head to heel; all were powdered with confetti. Everywhere resounded the Kermis song—

"*Women and children, see them lie,*
Sent to the murder camps to die!"

In front of the circus the naphtha torches flared red on the faces of the crowd; dancing a mad *can-can*, the women lifted their skirts to show their coloured petticoats, while hundreds of voices roared in raucous unison—

"*Oh——! have you heard how the Englishmen war*
In Africa's bloody campaign?
They have taken brave Scheepers, praised all the world o'er,
And in cold blood the hero have slain!"

Wiereland had become a demon city, in which imps and dragons, satyrs and cloven-hoofed, snake-headed monsters held frantic revel; and the sensual and the bestial in man had broken loose in furious outburst.

IV

The tents, each one ablaze with light, stretched in a long line from end to end of the quay. Through the shimmer of electric light the chestnut trees as if amazed looked down upon the drunken orgy. Men reeled about drinking gin from brown stone bottles, tightly clasped. Sturdy rascals, of the tramp class, chair-menders, saw-grinders, wandering tinkers, formed themselves into gangs and begged for drinks with much whining and snivelling which upon refusal changed to curses and muttered threats.

Among the show tents, the merry-go-rounds, the coco-nut shies, and so forth, were little stalls for fish or fruit, their sellers standing or sitting behind them crying their wares, and turning them over to attract likely customers. Near the steam merry-go-rounds, half suffocated by the reek from the smoking petroleum lamps, sat Dientje, Kees Hassel's little daughter. Ant, her mother, had not yet recovered from the birth ten days ago of a still-born child, and could venture no hawking herself. She had sent Dientje to earn a few cents by selling fish at the fair.

The child's shrill, quavering voice was scarce heard in the surrounding din. She sat in front of her little barrow; her small emaciated form shaken by nervous thrills; her pale face, with its unchildish wrinkles, stained a flickering orange by the glare of her vile-smelling naphtha torch. Every now and then she leaped from her stool to help some drunken man or woman to rise from a fall—as she did so she cast anxious appealing glances at her neighbour, a Jew hawker, whom she trusted to prevent the roysterers from taking her fish without payment.

Sometimes she looked longingly at the merry-go-rounds, and the swings noisy with their clanging bells, and blaring organs. Mother had told her that if she did well with the fish she might have three cents to spend on Tuesday. It was her birthday: she had reached the age of ten, and Wimpie had begged this treat for her from their mother. Dientje was full of excited anticipation as she raised her thin voice almost to a scream—

"Fresh fish—fine fish—who'll buy my fish?"

The noise and movement and the blaze of light filled her with a fearful joy. She hummed in tune with the piano-organs. She sniffed with delight the suffocating stench of naphtha and paraffin, the manifold odours of the fair. She was amazed by the riot of colour, by the glitter of mirrors and of spangles. It was all much more beautiful, much more mysterious than it had been by day.

Later the child had become very tired and was looking anxiously for Jansje, who about this hour was supposed to bring her some supper. Dientje knew that father had been angry with mother for bidding her stay at the fair with her barrow till two o'clock each morning. He had banged his fists on the table, and forgetting Wimpie had frightened them all by his violence. But Ant had said there was no food in the house, because Kees was doing no work; so she had got her own way and sent her daughter to the quay night by night.

Dientje saw no sign of her sister; she was trembling now with weariness and hunger; she sat thinking, her thoughts full of the misery they had to endure at home. She was deafened by the noise; the glare, the unceasing movement made her eyes ache. Drowsiness stole over her: she could scarce keep her eyes open. Suddenly she started up broad awake. A demoniacal uproar had arisen. A great troop of young men carrying Chinese lanterns were rushing past her, all yelling at the tops of their voices, beating drums, screeching, whistling, tooting with horns—drowning for the moment the unending clangour of the barrel-organs. The troop stamped madly past the long line of the tents, out of the brilliantly lighted Kermis ground into the pitchy darkness of the Lemper road. The road was overhung with heavy trees; in their dense shadow the procession of Chinese lanterns looked like a fiery serpent writhing its huge length in the darkness of night.

V

The Hassel cousins stood before the horse merry-go-round, foremost in a staring, shouting crowd.

The Kermis lights cast crude colours on the houses behind the quay; from the windows came reflections blood red, golden, or green of the manifold lights and colours and movement of the fair.

When the merry-go-round came to a standstill, Piet and Willem, Dirk and Jan Grint, accompanied by all the girls, made a rush forwards, some of them tumbling into the canopied cars, some getting astride the horses. Dirk sat down on top of Geert and hugged and kissed her till, half smothered, she threw herself violently against the girl at her side. The merry-go-round started to the accompaniment of much laughter and snatches of song. All the men held their partners very tightly embraced, and covered their faces and lips with furious kisses.

Geert's hair hung dishevelled, her face was flecked with red bruises from Dirk's wild kisses. Guurt was in the same plight from the attentions of the wildly excited Jan Grint. She poured torrents of abuse on him, her whole frame shook with fury, she even bit his hands, and at last he shrank away embarrassed and discomfited. If her friend the Government clerk had seen her, thought Guurt, it would be all up with her chances in that quarter!

Dirk, Hazewind, and Rink could hardly stand when the giddy course was over and they got down from their seats. They staggered against each other, and Rink, dizzy and sick, suddenly measured his full length upon the ground, striking his head against a projecting stall and making his forehead bleed. He was up in a moment, and still staggering he shouted defiantly—

"Now, girls, for the steam whirligig! These horse things are no good. Let's make for the steamers!"

"No, you fool!" said Dirk, seconded by Willem; "we'll have something to eat first. Here, child, what have you got? Let's see!"

Dientje was much alarmed. She recognised her uncles, Dirk and Piet, and perceived by their voices they were drunk. They did not know her, however, and had eyes only for the eatables, which they snatched roughly out of her hand. Rink gave her a dollar and did not ask for the change. The whole party clustered round the stall, devouring the fish in huge mouthfuls. Piet staggered up with the gin bottle, calling it the baby and other endearing names. Then he offered a drink to the girls.

"Nonsense!" said Guurt; "we don't booze in the street, thank you!"

"Don't you? Well, I do!" laughed Marie Pijler, the publican's daughter, who had again joined the party.

This Sunday night Kermis was the height of the orgy. The Chinese lanterns, the coloured lights, the torches, the electric lamps burned more fiercely than ever. The merry-go-rounds plied a brisker trade as their tawdry splendour revolved in the glare, to the din of horns and organs. From the dark spaces behind the tents couples emerged now and again into the lamplight. Policemen mingled with the crowd, keeping a sharp look-out, for in their drunken fury the men were very ready with their knives.

A gang of country fellows, led by a tall youth with a narrow head like a seal's and cruel, shifty eyes, appeared from the cake-shop and marched down the line of tents. In front of the gang danced four Kerkervaart girls all mad-drunk, flapping their skirts and flinging their legs; as they danced, they sang with upturned faces and wide mouths, their fists banging on toy drums. Their dresses were orange red, flaming in the glare. Their savage noise and uncouth gestures seemed to pervade the place. Then a troop of youths bore down upon the peasant gang. Linking their arms, the new-comers formed a ring round the tipsy, shrieking women. The police were already on the watch; they had noted the swelling excitement of the four bacchantes, now they observed the rough assault of the encircling band, the vigorous blows the women gave in self-defence.

One of the four, a tall, slim creature, unable to stand straight, produced a bottle and drank from it avidly, her whole attitude expressive of frantic animal pleasure in the fiery liquor. Beside her danced a small fair girl, her skirts pulled to her knees, as she screamed with tipsy sentiment—

"*Oh my God, what a bitter shame!*"

The two remaining women copied this girl's dance and song as she alternately pulled them to her and pushed them away.

The rush of the men stopped the singing. The women flung coloured confetti in their faces, then hit out with their fists, and made wild, perfectly useless charges that they might break through the ring.

The police stepped forward, roughly they scattered the circle, then flung the drunken peasants aside, crumpling and tearing the paper finery with which they had bedizened themselves.

The shrieking women were exhorted to behave themselves. Now, however, they were quite mad; they stuttered in drunken rage, they screamed, cursed, spat, and tried to "bonnet" the policemen by hitting at their helmets.

The tall girl, having drained the last drop from her bottle, hurled it at the feet of the representatives of law, breaking it in a thousand fragments. She then tied her skirt in a knot round her waist, and stuck her fists full in the face of the smallest of the officials. The fair girl was struggling with another whose sabre she had struck out of his hand.

The shrill sound of a whistle pierced the din, and at once other constables hurried up to the assistance of their comrades. A few flourishes of their swords and the peasants fled, leaving the women in the hands of the law.

Exhausted with fury and excitement the four sank in a heap and lay panting, the tall one flat on her stomach, her three friends on top of her.

The policemen lifted them to their feet, handcuffed them, and marched them off to the town hall. The tall Lies let herself be dragged along the ground till she was seized by the head and the ankles and carried along screaming and kicking, surrounded by a jeering, whistling, catcalling crowd.

The fair girl spat and scratched and tried to wriggle out of her clothes, but the police forced her and the other prisoners steadily on.

"There go four Kerkvaarters to quod!" shouted the bystanders, half rebellious, half dismayed as they followed the captives.

On went the police through the holiday crowd, down a side street, straight to the town hall. The women were half lifted, half dragged up the steps and pushed roughly through the door. Smothered, despairing screams came from them as they disappeared. The door was shut with a bang in the face of the crowd, which sent up an impotent cry of rage and hatred.

The handcuffed bacchanals were thrust into cells for the night. Their partisans turned, and made off with demoniacal yells to see what excitement was still to be found at the fair.

VI

Led by Hazewind and Rink, the Grints and Hassels hurried through the short Cloister Alley which led from the quay to the station boulevard. With them went a crowd of revellers, peasant women with gold ornamented head-dresses hand in hand with girls in fashionable feather-trimmed hats, all racing furiously along the narrow lane in wild quest for new excitement. From the taverns came a din of noises and instruments; here and there an open door showed an improvised dancing saloon, crowded with peasants footing it feverishly in the atmosphere of paraffin and over-hot humanity.

Outside the turmoil of the fair, quiet as a backwater beside a rushing stream, was a row of tumble-down cottages, before which sat a blind man, his face lit by the feeble melancholy flicker of a single candle. His back against the wall, his bald head uncovered, he begged for alms, presenting a little basket with trembling hand. His sightless countenance looked ghostly in the miserable candlelight which cast huge shadows of his head and shoulders on the dilapidated brick wall behind. The flood of Kermis holiday-makers poured past, many of them cursing him for obtruding the spectacle of his woe on their enjoyment. The whole boulevard was pervaded by the rich, sweetish smell of batter cakes from innumerable confectionery stalls, each with its baking stove. Behind the stoves fat women ladled out the batter from shining copper basins on to hot baking plates, upon which it bubbled and spluttered vigorously. Behind the voices of the cake-sellers, the clatter of tongs, the hissing of the batter, was the continuous, insistent, coarsely jubilant clamour of barrel-organs. The row of stalls, red, gold, amber, in the lamplight, looked like the toys of some giant.

Troop after troop of the revellers rushed past; the trees between the stalls, half illuminated, seemed like live things staring in terror upon the hubbub at their feet.

Beyond the confectionery stalls were fried fish shops exhaling a horrible odour of rancid oil. Farther still were brilliantly lighted toy shops, the centre of attraction to a gaping crowd. Then came the "Try-your-strength" machines, and the Wonder tents, each with its brazen-tongued showman, his voice heard above the din, praising the marvels within his tent.

"Here is the sea serpent with three double rows of teeth, shot by a homeward-bound sailor when it was in the very act of rending a living man;" or "Here is the girl from the interior of Australia who swallows live rabbits, and dines upon glass; who will show you how she prays to the moon, and how she tears the gory scalp from the head of the pale-face. Entrance —ten cents per person."

The next appealed to the public to enter and see "The heroic struggle of the Boers of South Africa, on a real battlefield covered with mutilated and bleeding corpses."

Party after party stopped and stared open-mouthed at the portrait of the Australian savage, whose amiable habits were described by the showman with ever-increasing vividness.

"In two minutes the exhibition will commence. She will tear a live rabbit before your eyes; she will eat glass and lighted cigars; she will pull the gory scalp from the head of the pale-face! Thousands are in the tent already; pay your ten cents and join them to see the most marvellous and horrible human monster on the face of the earth!"

Hazewind, Dirk, and Willem, Henk Hassel and Rink, each with his girl, listened spellbound. Geert and Trijn felt cold shivers of fright running down their backs. Piet and Annie kissed each other. Rink shouted in his tremendous trombone tones—

"Eats live rabbits? That's more than even Kees the poacher can do! We must see the creature."

"And glass and cigars!" said Trijn in ecstasy.

"In two minutes the exhibition will commence! Ladies and gentlemen, walk in and take your seats!"

"Eats 'em alive! Tears 'em with her teeth! Just suit me!" said Dirk.

"I couldn't look at it! I couldn't!" screamed Annie.

"You silly!" said Trijn; "it's just splendid!"

She was thrilled through and through with delightful anticipations of horror. The quiet and dignified Guurt Hassel, accompanied at a respectful distance by Jan Grint, who since the quarrel on the merry-go-round had not ventured to kiss her, was no less anxious to see the blood-curdling savage. The performance would be almost as good as a play with a murder in it.

The whole party, even the reluctant Annie, pressed up the steps to the entrance of the tent. Dirk took the tickets. In they went.

At the far end of the booth, on a small platform, what seemed a possessed negress was gibbering and gesticulating. She wore a headdress of black feathers; her black hair was strained through a copper ring; her kangaroo-like countenance was one broad grin; she rolled her eyes, showing their yellow whites horribly, and she kept up a loud conversation in hideous gibberish with the showman. Truly a very devil out of hell!

The air of the tent with its packed mass of spectators was unspeakably close and fœtid. The feeble and flickering lamplight heightened the ghastly aspect of the rolling eyes.

"That's no girl! that's no savage!" shouted a sailor in the crowd. "I've gone about the world for twenty years, and I never saw her like. It's a man out of Amsterdam!"

No one heeded the sailor; the crowd was hypnotised and continued to stare with all its eyes.

But the live rabbit eating was too much for Annie. She moaned and shuddered when she saw the blood stream over the black hands, heard the rending of the furry skin, saw the ape-like fingers plunged into the entrails.

Women and girls shrieked in disgust, but Dirk with huge enjoyment pushed to the front, dragging the Grints after him. As the bloody meal proceeded, the black visage was puckered as with an old woman's wrinkles; the grinning demon licked the blood from her lips, as morsel after morsel of the dismembered rabbit disappeared into her cavernous mouth.

Guurt drank in the whole scene with her eyes. Thrills of bestial delight coursed through her frame. She saw that Rink was also enjoying the spectacle, and she cast enticing glances at him from her big blue eyes. Poor Annie, her lids tightly closed, sat shuddering in a corner.

But the sailor remained sceptical and shouted scornfully—

"That's not a rabbit! That's not a woman! It's a man dressed up! Bowl him over! I've been to India and I never saw a woman like that!"

"You tipsy fool! She's from Australia!"

"Well," said the sailor, put out, "that's in India, isn't it?"

"Hold your tongue! Hold your tongue! We ain't come here to listen to you! Shut up!"

"And now," said the showman, "if any gentlemen can spare their lighted cigars, this courageous monster will devour them."

Cigars were passed up from all sides, Dirk blowing his into a blaze and thrusting it himself into the lean brown hand.

"Hope you'll enjoy the tasty dish, black miracle!" he said. The savage seized the cigar, blew on the lighted end till sparks flew and a red glare was thrown upon her chin, then she stuffed it glowing into her mouth and chewed it up. Hazewind was beside himself with admiration, and again the women shrieked.

To the great annoyance of Guurt, the other girls refused to stay any longer, and the men accompanied them out; Willem having got hold of Geert, was followed closely by Dirk. From the next tent, where the seven-hundred-pound giantess was on view, a great crowd came pouring out. As they gathered round the fat woman the men made coarse jests, exciting to their sweethearts, who came out embracing them and singing snatches of indecent songs. Drunken couples reeled along, passing the bottle from mouth to mouth. The clinking of glasses, the crashing of flasks on the brick pavement as their emptiness was hurled away in tipsy wrath, were heard on all sides. Companies, yelling and howling, would storm by, disappearing into dark corners, the gleam of gold on the women's headdresses catching the eye ere it vanished in the blackness behind and between the tents.

"Now for the Juts' heads,[1] boys!" shouted Rink; "stand round, you girls; and the chap who wins can have his choice among you, eh?"

Off rushed the whole party, and stopped before a solitary Jut which but few people had discovered. Two stout young women in charge of it were calling—

"Come along, gentlemen! Try your luck! Show your muscle! Here's Chamberlain for you! Hit him on the head!"

Rink sprang forward, chucked one of the young women under the chin and snatched the hammer from her hand. The rest of the men and girls stood watching, their faces red with the glare of the torches.

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[1] The try-your-strength machines.

"Stand clear, ladies, please! Mynheer must have plenty of room. Now then, sir! hit hard! make him howl! he won't lose any blood!"

Swinging his arm like a cyclops, Rink raised the hammer high in the air and brought it down with a crash on the Jut.

"That's a good 'un, Mynheer!" said the attendant with an encouraging leer. Rink swung the hammer again, dealing the block a mighty blow which sent the pointer flying nearly to the top of its groove.

The girls applauded, and Rink, greatly excited, dealt crash after crash, till his chest heaved, his knees shook, and he stared with wild and bloodshot eyes.

"For Chamberlain! For Kitchener! For Rhodes!" shouted the Jut young women at every blow. They admired the giant and incited him to fresh efforts. Rink went on hammering till the machine seemed ready to crumble under the rain of blows.

The Grints screamed with delight, and Marie Pijler, the wild, fair-haired creature, tried to hug the hero, crying in drunken falsetto that she would like to murder him with kisses.

"He's a real man! Rink, you're the fellow I want! I don't care a button for a shrimp like Henk!"

She jumped about and slapped her broad hips in mad, brute-like excitement. A crowd had collected to watch the giant's performance. He continued his blows, panting and trembling now, till it seemed as if each stroke must be his death. The other men grew impatient.

"Hi there! haven't you done smashing? We want a go at it now!"

"Another five cents!" panted Rink, swinging the hammer again.

At last, quite exhausted, he gave up, kissed both the young women, and threw himself on the ground behind a fish-stall to recover his breath.

Willem, Dirk, Hazewind, Piet, Jan, all took their turns at hitting Chamberlain's head; and the machine rattled and clanked, and creaked and groaned, under their vigorous assaults. No one, however, hit so hard or kept it up so long as Rink. Marie Pijler snatched the glittering medal from the attendant and ran with it to Rink, who still lay panting and swearing behind the fish-stall. Like a mad thing she flung herself upon him, glueing her lips to his, stopping his curses, covering his face and neck with hot kisses; screaming that he should belong to her and to no one else for the whole of the Kermis.

Still the Jut girls called—

"Strike him dead! Chamberlain! Kitchener!" but the Hassels and Grints moved off, and fresh combatants advanced to try their luck with the hammer.

V

Crowds trooped in and out of the taverns and dancing booths on the quay. It had begun to drizzle, and the people melted away from the wild-woman tent and the other shows, hurrying to get under cover. The taverns were overflowing; the rattle of pianos, the blare of cornets, mingled with the noisy laughter and song of the revellers.

Willem and Dirk persuaded the girls to visit a little cabin-like dancing room, where they spent an hour in an atmosphere as of the pit. The girls were kissed and hugged and pulled about by all the drunken, bestial fellows in the place. Rink half-murdered a man from Lempenaar who had caught Marie by her skirt and refused to let her go. Rink knocked the fellow down, and left him, with a torn ear and a bleeding nose, stretched at length on the ground. He tried to use his knife, but Rink snatched it from him, and he lay groaning, despised and spat upon by the whole crowd.

The Hassel party had had enough of the place. They rushed out, led by Rink and Marie, her face ablaze with excitement and passion as she clung to him. She proposed a café-chantant next; they all shouted approval, and were hastening in pursuit of this object through a side street, when they heard the fire alarm and saw crowds all running in the one direction towards a point on the boulevard.

Rink, Marie, and the whole troop turned and followed, delighted at the prospect of witnessing something disastrous which would make their hair stand on end. They saw flames curling up into the air from beyond the circus and heard the people shouting—

"It's a rotten old warehouse, not worth a cent!"

"It's close to the Auction Rooms! They're saying their last prayers now!"

"It'll be burnt out in an hour!"

The burgomaster, surrounded by an escort of police, was greeting the acting commandant of the fire brigade with official ceremony.

"The right man isn't there! What's become of the lazy beggar?" shouted a street wag.

"He's gone to keep his aunt's birthday!" jeered another.

"Just look at the firemen! they're so drunk they can't stand!" said a third.

The girls soon got tired of standing in the tight press of people. Their excited anticipations had changed to anger on discovering the insignificance of the affair. They pushed their way out, and raced again down the line of tents and booths on their way to the café-chantant.

From a small "tingle-tangle," kept by one Dies, came an exciting rattle of piano-organs, which made the girls' blood dance in their veins. Confused noise of shouting, singing, and loud guffaws, issued from the doors and windows. The front of the café was illuminated by many lamps.

The party forced an entrance, drumming on each other's backs as they advanced in single file. The low room reeked of gin; the air was thick with smoke; the audience—all of the lowest class—shouted a welcome to the new-comers. They clambered over the benches, black with dirt, wet with gin, and found seats. Geert flung herself on a stool next to a very tipsy sergeant who was solemnly kissing a yellow-headed wench at his side. She made no resistance, but wiped away each kiss with the flat of her hand. Dirk sat at Geert's other side. Trijn leaned against Piet; Cor, the quiet Cor, lay back, her head swimming, in the arms of a fellow with a red moustache whom she did not know.

Henk and Hazewind roared and sang; Rink had Marie on his knee. They all held glasses in their hands, and every few minutes Rink called to have them replenished with gin. Rink held Marie very tight; her face was pressed to his. In that little reeking den their shameless passion fired a train of eroticism and stimulated the animal instinct to pair. Soon the excited, drunken couples were indulging in furious embraces and yelling encouragement to the abandoned Marie.

A man in evening dress issued from a door at the back, stood before the piano, and, after the accompanist had struck a few notes, began to sing a song in doggerel full of double meaning. It had a catchy chorus, and the whole company joined in, stamping their feet and gyrating idiotically, glasses of gin in their hands. The barmen moved to and fro, and every few minutes new parties of men and women came noisily in, forcing themselves on to the benches or lurching into the laps of strangers already seated.

Hazewind, trying to get hold of a chair, found on the floor an automatic sweets machine in the shape of head and body of a grinning negro. He picked it up, and executed a waltz with it affectionately clasped in his arms. He stamped on the wooden floor till he was enveloped in a cloud of dust, then stopped his dance, and made the negro bow to the girls, who were in fits of laughter.

"He's got no breeches!" screamed Marie Pijler.

"He's got no legs," said Hazewind; "had 'em shot away in the Transvaal, poor chap!"

He threw the figure to the floor, and it fell on the sergeant's glass, which he had deposited under his seat. The girls laughed louder than ever, and jeered at the grinning doll, hitting and kicking it till it rolled over, now on its face, now on its back. Marie jumped from Rink's knee, slapped the thing on its nose and eyes and cheek, then picked it up and hurled it across the room. Far away she saw it still grinning at her, and she flung herself back into Rink's arms and burst into tears. The other girls were catching the infection of hysteria, but the tavern-keeper picked up the negro and threw him behind the bar, where he lay on the top of a cask still grinning as if triumphant over his tormentors.

A female singer followed the man in evening dress. She was a dark, ugly woman, her petticoats short, and her dress indecently low. She sang a couple of filthy songs, ogling her audience of drunken boors. Geert wished to leave. Her sisters and the rest of the party agreeing, they rushed tumultuously from the tavern and up the station boulevard.

Pausing to see the acrobats and the female contortionists who bent themselves backwards as if they had no bones, the party again hurried on, wandering this way and that in search of excitement. Willem and Dirk went arm-in-arm to a fortune-teller, enticed into the tent by the woman's pretty daughter. Neither of these two men would take his eye off the other, each fearing to be cut out with Geert. Trijn had a horror of fortune-tellers.

"They make me miserable!" she said. "They say such dreadful things! They seem to have one's life in their hands!"

"Don't be a baby," said Piet, but the girls in a body refused to enter the tent.

Dirk and Willem came out.

"I say, Geert!" cried Dirk, "she says I'm to have a dark girl!"

"A dirty lie! It was me!" said Willem. "It was me!"

Dirk was inclined to quarrel. Piet and Rink took his side, the feeling against the rival detachment of men, kept in check till now, suddenly finding vent. Dirk stammered out curses and spat a stream of tobacco juice upon Willem's baggy trousers.

Geert, frightened and half crying, said if they started quarrelling she'd go off with the first fellow who came along. That calmed matters, and they set off again on their noisy tramp, Willem on Geert's left arm and Dirk on her right.

Issuing from a dark side lane, they crossed the polder, where they saw drunken men lying on the bridges or banks of the ditches, snoring heavily or pouring out stupid curses.

Seen from the darkness and the quiet of the polder, the Kermis was like a section of flaming hell thrown open to the earth. The sides of the tents showed distinct in the orange glare, but their tops were lost in the night. Softened by distance, the rattle and clang of the organs was heard across the fields.

Not till the small hours did the stall-holders shut their shops and put out their lamps. Dark gaps appeared in the Kermis glare, and rapidly increased till darkness predominated.

At half-past two Dientje Hassel still sat shivering behind her little stall, scarce able to keep her eyes open. Then Ant arrived to take her home, Ant herself almost dropping from weakness and starvation. She scolded the child because her takings were but a gulden more than they had been on the previous night. Giddy with weariness and sleep, Dientje stumped along behind her mother across the boulevard, down the long road towards the dune.

Quite suddenly the organs stopped their clangour, the few last lights of stall, or booth, or tent, were extinguished, and night resumed her sway. But from the lanes still rose the angry cries of drunkenness and quarrel, while far across the fields still sounded the Kermis song—

"Oh my God, what a bitter shame!"

CHAPTER VIII

I

GERRIT found it almost impossible to keep his sons at work during the day. They stood about, yawning and stretching, swearing and grumbling, threatening to strike altogether unless their father and sister did their share of the labour. Still Gerrit did not feel the annoyance so much as at first. There were but two days more of the Kermis; let the boys enjoy themselves and get drunk if they liked it. He also was enjoying himself.

On Sunday evening, from eight till midnight, he had prowled about the Kermis ground, and had picked up thirteen pieces of booty, his blood dancing with the delight of it. Some of the things he had taken under the very noses of the stall-holders. He would stand with his back to a stall and a noisy crowd would rush by and hurl him roughly out of its path; he would stagger, make a wild clutch to save himself from falling (looking terrified all the time); then quick! a snatch—a thing seized—and for a time a feeling of intense excitement, half pleasure, half fear. Each time his trick was successful. The display on the stalls, the blaze of lights, the noise, the singing, the shouting, the organ-playing, made him mad with excitement and greed. His legs twitched as if he were a lad again. And the delight of doing his stealing under, so to speak, close-range fire, and yet of escaping detection! The fellow who long ago had caught him was not this year anywhere to be seen. Gerrit gave friendly greetings to his acquaintances. The boys and girls chaffed him. What was an old daddy like him doing at the fair? Others condoled with him about his wife, a poor daft creature who couldn't talk and could hardly stand. The knowledge that he was pitied made him more secure in his stealing. He hardly knew where to begin, so bewildering was the wealth of fine things displayed on every side.

Some market gardeners of his acquaintance tried to enter into conversation, but he shook them off brusquely. He wanted to be alone. He had ordered Guurt to stay behind with her mother for a couple of hours; but the girl angrily refused to obey.

"Not a bit of it, father! *You* can stay with her. She's your wife. Do you suppose I'm going to give up my fun for her?"

And the girl was gone before he could reply.

Well, he, too, must go.

"Now, wife, I'm off!" he said to Vrouw Hassel, but she answered only with a vacant stare. Before her window was an organ grinding out "*Behut dich Gott*" with much sentiment. Suddenly in her dark corner the woman burst into tears. "Stop that!" shouted Hassel; "I'm going whether you howl or not. I must see one more Kermis before I'm put underground."

"Kermis? Kermis?" sobbed Vrouw Hassel senselessly.

"Yes, Ker—mis, Ker—mis!" bawled Gerrit in a rage. "Now look here, woman! You stay quiet in your corner. Don't move a finger. There'll be no one in the house, and you must just stay still in the dark till we come back. You're not to be trusted with a light!"

"Stay! You stay!" she stammered, her memory seizing hold of one of his words without fully understanding it. Then a faint look of pleasure flickered across her face as the notes of the organ reached her ear.

"You're to stay here, and not to stir from your place! See?"

"Not stir—from——"

"From your place!" bellowed the man.

"Place! place!" she echoed dully.

Her repetition of his words infuriated Gerrit. He suspected her of playing a part, of simulating imbecility; perhaps she was after some trick in connection with his hoard! He put out the lamp and left the house.

When he returned at midnight, his wife was still sitting huddled in her corner. She started when she heard his voice, but asked no questions.

She had been absolutely alone in the pitchy darkness for four hours, her head swimming, her ears buzzing. For a time she cried silently, then sat motionless in terror of she knew not what. Now and then the light of Chinese lanterns would pierce the blackness at which she gazed, and a noisy troop would hurry past her window shouting and singing. It frightened her; she shook from head to foot, having no understanding of what she saw. Thus she sat for the long hours, quite alone in the close dark room, till her husband came back, his eyes ablaze with excitement and gratified passion.

He was reckless to-night. He spread his stolen treasures before her, and laughed and cried and swore like a madman, kissing his spoil under his wife's very eyes. Vrouw Hassel stared foolishly. Her soiled brown bodice was open, displaying her dirty shift. Her wrinkled face—monstrous, repulsive—was in colour a greenish grey. Wisps of dull hair strayed from under her cap. She twitched her eyebrows nervously and frowned. No idea was conveyed to her mind by the sight of the man gloating over his treasures. There were two pretty nickel-plated extinguishers, a set of copper fruit forks in a case lined with satin, two candlesticks, an alarm clock, a red box with some glittering things the use of which he did not understand. He stroked the red satin of the case; he held up the forks and prodded the air like a child at play. He had taken them while a fight was going on which had attracted everybody's attention. A drunken fellow had drawn his knife and laid about him, wounding three men. There was great excitement, men shouting, women screaming. Then an artilleryman struck the knife out of the fellow's hand, and the crowd set on the now disarmed wretch and threw him down; the gunner, drunk himself, helped the police with the handcuffs. At this moment Gerrit ran into the stall, which had a little door at the back, and snapped up the case with the forks. It was a mad risk, he knew that; the delight of its success almost suffocated him. The thing was done before he knew. Every instant he expected a clutch upon his collar, a blow, a voice crying, "Stop thief!" But nothing of the sort took place. The stall woman and her assistant were looking at the struggle with the tipsy savage; so was every one else. No one saw Gerrit escape through the door at the back of the stall, his booty clasped tight to his breast.

The rest of the things he had got much in the same fashion with rashness little less. One of them, a little mirror with a flower-bordered frame and a red ribbon, disappointed him now. It looked dull and ugly. On the other hand, two silver-topped scent bottles could not be admired and gloated over enough.

His whole haul was spread out on the table; now and then he looked up at his wife or across the room at the dove-cage. He smacked his lips and chuckled with delight. He sang in a harsh voice, much out of tune—

"Oh my God! what a bitter shame!"

Sometimes he burst into a shout of laughter, aware that he was playing the fool. Presently he began to dance, like a lunatic, waving his glittering spoils in his hands. The noise of his clumsy feet waked the dove in its uncovered cage. The bird looked round with its red eyes and cooed softly; the cuckoo clock ticked steadily.

Guurt, Dirk, and Piet were likely to stay out most of the night. Gerrit, secure from prying eyes, felt free to enjoy himself to the full. He ran backwards and forwards between the room and the cellar, examining his hoard, rearranging his treasures. He left the trap open and the light burning. His pulses throbbed; he was beside himself with crazy happiness.

An almost overmastering desire rose in him to beat his wife and force her to speak, to say there and then what she was thinking about his treasures. He shouted at her angrily—

"Well, old thing, how do you like it, eh?"

Vrouw Hassel sat up much frightened and said—

"I won't go with you! No, I won't!"

Her fixed stare and foolish words inspired Gerrit with sudden alarm. He had never seen her look so frightful. He thought she was going to spring up and steal his things. In an instant he was gripped by deadly fear. He hurried his treasure back to the cellar, carrying the lamp with shaking fingers. The very quiet of the house inspired him with panic. He heard revellers singing in the distance, and he thought they were coming to nab him. He thought some one had taken stock of the whole Kermis and found thirteen articles missing. He thought God had pointed him out as the thief. Now he crept about bent and shrinking. He fancied a hand on his throat; as he crossed the byre he thought he saw the faces of those he had robbed.

Of course it was mere stupid fancy, but he could not shake it off. He looked round and saw the faces peering and grinning; he heard laughter in the dark recesses of the cow-shed. Every moment he grew more abject.

A moment ago, in his arrogance, he had wanted to beat his wife; now he was thankful if only she did not look at him. Soon he dared not turn his head; the ghastly stillness paralysed him. He kicked the table legs to break the oppressive silence; but the noise filled him with fresh alarm, and he looked shudderingly at his wife to see if she were watching him.

He broke out into a cold sweat and shook as if in an ague. He rushed to his bed. But the darkness of the cavern-like sleeping-place terrified him again. It seemed full of serpents and creeping things, ready to crawl upon him. He fled to his wife. She must protect him. He dragged her to the bed, tore her clothes from her back. He felt as if his fear would drive him from the house and send him through the town proclaiming aloud that he was a thief. But if he had the woman in bed with him he could shelter himself behind her! What? had he wanted to beat her? the dumb idiot wife of whom now he had such bitter need!

Vrouw Hassel lay down among the pillows. Gerrit crept to her side, closed his eyes, and put shaking fingers into his ears. After hours of torture he fell into a nightmare sleep.

Next morning he rose utterly exhausted; the thought alike of his daring and of his panic filled him with dismay. For long he was haunted by the memory of that hellish night. Depressed, broken, he wandered restlessly through his fields, picking a few beans here and there, saying no word to any soul.

II

It was the last day of the Kermis; on the morrow the fair would disappear with all the dismal bustle of departure, nothing remaining but the stale smell of cakes and sweetmeats.

Gerrit came out of his house, his face pale with rage; he hurried to the bean-field where his sons Dirk and Piet were at work.

"Which of you," he said, his voice shaking with anger, "which of you has been stealing my money?"

Dirk, who was kneeling among the beans, looked up with well-feigned surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"I say, who has stolen my fifty gulden? Fifty gulden, that's what I say; fifty gulden! I'm downright mad. Give it back! give it back! or I shall be sold up in a month! *Thieves!*"

His face was chalky white; his mouth shook; he looked bent and very old. He spoke with an angry whine, and his eyes shone with tears.

His sons had, of a truth, taken the money that they might cut a good figure before the girls, and outshine their namby-pamby cousins, who were richer than they. They were conscious of guilt, but did not intend to be upbraided by their father.

"What are you squealing for?" said Dirk menacingly; "you'd far better hold your tongue. We had to come on your money-bag because you don't give us more than a couple of quarters for wages!"

"A couple of quarters! And what about all the market money you've kept, and the drinking and the card-playing?"

"Well! we haven't murdered you, have we?" shouted Piet; "if you say another word we'll chuck you for good and all! Did you never sneak a penny when you were a young 'un?"

Gerrit was dumbfounded. His *sons*! He was beside himself with anxiety and rage. He cursed the Kermis and the resultant idleness. But that his sons were robbing him, that was the discovery which filled him with terror. How was he to make up the money? He had put it aside to pay for some hay; he was already a month behind in his payment. And the notary had been short with him about it, and had said flatly he would wait no longer. Then there was Dr. Troost's mortgage—and the rent—it was enough to make a man crazed. His sons robbing him! And the beans were late, the beans which he trusted to save him for at least this year; and the fellows had exhausted themselves and become absolutely good for nothing. Oh! he had heard of their goings-on with the Grint girls, night after night of the Kermis! Suppose Dirk were to get one of them in the family way? That would be a pretty business! Suppose Dirk were to marry and go off and leave his father with no one but Piet—Piet, who was after the girls himself? And what were all these stories about Guurt? That she had gone wrong with a wretched little white-faced jackanapes out of a Government office? Well, well, it was not her father's fault, anyhow! Everything was going to pieces! He was no longer his own master. He couldn't keep one bit of his land unless by selling another. He'd soon be shut up in a corner of the house with his slut of a sick wife.

His alarm increased. How could he say anything about his sons stealing when he stole himself? His dour determination to preserve his independence so long as he lived began to weaken. He would let things go. Only he must, he must keep his hoard. No one should rob him of that source of happiness. After all, if the beans turned out well, he might, when November and settling day came, find that he could still pull through.

Better not worry. He had his good character and his secret pleasure. Not the devil himself should rob him of these.

CHAPTER IX

AT the end of August the beans were in full pod. The gardener expected that prices would be high in consequence of the cold winds and want of sun. In fact, at the tinning factory prices did go up rapidly from 90 cents per thousand to two gulden for French beans, and for kidneys from 25 to 90 cents. The picking was awaited with feverish anxiety. A few bushels were already picked here and there, but this was child's play.

Daily old Gerrit was to be seen crouching among his beans and examining their lower growth. His very knees shook with anxiety, and people would shout mockingly—

"Take it easy, old boy! take it easy! You're trembling like a frog!"

The beans were tall, and their long rows were like avenues of little trees. They covered the trellises and the supporting sticks with luxuriant golden green leafage, and cast a sun-flecked shadow on the spaces intervening between the rows.

Gerrit had picked a hundred or so pods. Stiff from stooping, bent nearly double, he hobbled along. The edge of his wooden shoe had made a deep groove on his instep, and he groaned with pain. The backwardness of his crop filled him with apprehension. If the top rows would but set. They were always the best. If they did well it would be all right.

At the end of the month the weather took another bad turn. Cold blasts swept the fields. Heavy clouds sailed across the sky in never-ending procession. Everywhere were anxious faces searching the heaven.

Gerrit was out each morning at five prowling round his beans, examining row after row. The sun was still hidden, the wind rose, thunderstorms broke over the fields. Gerrit shuddered. He could not eat, his face was pale, his words incoherent.

His sons were busy with the summer endive; but Gerrit could see nothing except the grey sky and the ceaseless march of armies of clouds. The rain soaked him to the skin, but he did not know it. His mind was obsessed with fear for his whole crop of beans.

On the last day of the month, at noon, Gerrit was in his garden; his face was white, he plucked his beard nervously. A storm was rising; he watched it with paralysing fear. The wind roared in the trees like a mighty surf. Sinister brown clouds overspread the sky and hung low over the fields. In the yellow light the green of the trees and the garden stuff gained a startling clearness and emphasis. The muttering of approaching thunder shook the earth. Whirls of dust were caught by the wind and driven over the hedges and across the fields.

Suddenly the rain began. It poured in a deluge; furious torrential rain which fell almost with a roar, and was accompanied by wind in violent gusts. The young growth was torn and buffeted in every corner of the garden.

Gerrit was exposed to the full fury of the storm. Dirk and Piet and their two assistants had taken refuge in a shed; but the old man hurried hither and thither regardless of the hail which beat his face till he could not open his eyes, and soaked every rag of his clothing. Now and then he was almost lifted off his feet by the wind; it caught his blouse and bellied it like a sail, then set it flapping about his body as if tearing it to ribbons. On all sides the workers were running for shelter. They called to Gerrit to hide himself, but he did not heed. The lightning played round him in blue flames; the thunder sounded like the crashing down of millions of tons of basalt blocks, or the collision of mighty trains. Lower and lower hung the clouds; more furious was the hail and the pelting rain. The uproar was as the biblical destruction of a city in an outpouring of the wrath of God. The storm made havoc of everything growing in the fields, cutting and beating all vegetation into shreds.

Up and down went Gerrit among the rows of beans with consternation, rage, despair at his heart. He cursed, he groaned, he sobbed aloud. The lightning, the thunder passed unheeded. He could see nothing but his beans—his whole crop—cut, battered, beaten down, so that the spaces between the rows were blocked with a tangle of broken plants through which he could no longer force his way. In one hour the fields were unrecognisable. Trellises and beansticks lay upon the ground, the plants had fallen upon each other in tangled masses, their life sap exuding from the wounds cut by the hail. The whole crop was destroyed.

In an outburst of uncontrollable rage Gerrit shook his fist at the heavens and cursed his God. Then, soaked to the skin, his silver locks plastered to his head by the streaming wet, he fought his way through the hurricane to his house. He entered gibbering like a baboon; he struck his wife a violent blow in her face; he cursed his daughter for a wanton; he shouted out that his sons, and especially Kees, were the cause of all his trouble.

After this he subsided into dumb anguish, and for days uttered no word to any one, but sat muttering and tugging at his beard like a madman brooding upon suicide.

The storm had lasted for two hours, then was succeeded by persistent gentle rain. The silence of utter consternation reigned in Wiereland. The gardeners could scarce summon courage to investigate the damage. Here and there some more sheltered garden had suffered less than its neighbours; but millions and millions of beans had been destroyed. Many of the smaller men were reduced to beggary, and were forced to leave their holdings in November, having inevitably failed to pay their rent.

Nothing was talked of in Wiereland but the "Bean storm." Men wept who had not wept for years. They thought the landlords and the notary would have some sympathy, and would give extension of time for the payment of their debts.

Abatement of rent they did not expect. The few men who owned the land they worked lost their savings of years; the small tenants were completely broken, and for the future must work as labourers instead of as masters. Every year there were times of great anxiety, but never in memory such wholesale destruction of the bean crop.

Much sympathy was felt for Gerrit, though he was absolutely dumb about his misfortune, eating his heart out in a passion of silent rage. The neighbours thought he was going off his head, and were relieved when on the third day he broke into loud lamentation. Dirk and Piet were trying to repair the damage, were putting in new stakes, and training afresh such of the wounded plants as were still alive; but what of that? Gerrit had promised four million beans to the factory: now, with infinite trouble, he might perhaps deliver two hundred thousand. Of course prices rose enormously, but again, what good was that? Extra labour was required for the recovery of the prostrate plants. When Dirk again summoned Kees to his assistance the old man uttered no word of protest.

By degrees Gerrit's first emotion of helpless terror passed. He began to consider what he must do. It was clear he was bankrupt. Of course he must go to the notary and ask for an extension of time; but it was almost certain he would be turned off his land. Then Dirk and Piet must hire themselves out as labourers, while their parents and sister lived in some wretched hovel. Gerrit would have nothing but the trifle he got for looking after the Bekkema garden; he would be practically a pauper, dependent on his sons for support. The deficit in his finances could not be made good in twenty years. Not only the beans but the apples and pears, the endive, and cabbages, and other vegetables, had been destroyed. Everything was ruined! everything! He cried and sobbed like a child and the outburst brought a feeling of comparative calm. Now he remembered his hoard, and the thought of it filled him with joy. In this tribulation it was a blessed thing to know that at any rate he had this treasure—out of the reach of storm and tempest, of the notary, of the chatter of the neighbours. What matter about crops and money and lawyers?—His treasure was there; and he could go and look at it whenever he chose!

The boys would, of course, be mad at having to become day-labourers—but why need Gerrit worry even about that? After all, his own life would be quieter; and he would find increased opportunity of picking up things. No more anxiety about his rent, his hay, his cows, his mortgages; let him enjoy himself and all the rest go hang! And it was impossible his wife could live much longer: that also was all right. Thus Gerrit's thoughts chased each other before his visit to the notary. Next day he presented himself at the office.

Sudden recollection of the successful appropriation of the gold pencil-case sent a thrill of nervous terror through him. But he overcame it; the fellow had not found him out! Calming himself, he followed the clerk into the notary's private room.

Breemsma[1] liked affecting the airs of an aristocrat; he turned to his visitor with the most genial condescension.

"Well, Hassel, my man, and what can I do for you to-day?"

Gerrit stared; he was both surprised and annoyed; of course the fellow knew what he had come about! Wasn't the whole place full of his disaster?

"Well, Mr. Notary—you see—well, the fact is—the storm—my crop of beans——"

"I thought that was it!" burst out the notary with an ironic laugh which froze the words on Gerrit's lips, "the storm! the storm! I hear of nothing else. It's a perfect nightmare! Storm here—storm there—but you needn't suppose I'm going to be fooled by it!"

Gerrit had not expected this reception. He was both angry and frightened; angry because the man did not seem to realise the frightful gravity of the situation; frightened because Breemsma showed so unaccommodating a spirit. How was he to express himself?

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[1] TRANSLATOR'S NOTE.—The author in the early part of the book has called this notary Breemsma; afterwards he is called Beemstra. I have kept to Breemsma throughout.

The notary got up and walked about the room impatiently. Then he said in a harsh overbearing voice—

"Now look here, Hassel! I know what you're going to say, every word of it; that you've no money to pay your rent for the Beek——"

"Nor the mortgage interest—nor the loan——"

"What?" shouted Breemsma. "*What?* You're playing with fire, man! I'm not going to let the matter stand over any longer. You can have till November. If you don't pay then you shall be sold up. That's the last word I have to say!"

The door opened; a servant came in and asked if his master remembered there was a Committee meeting this morning, and did he know the burgomaster was waiting?

"Damn the Committee!" shouted Breemsma. "Is the burgomaster in the drawing-room? *What?* The devil! well then, show him in here!"

He turned to Gerrit again.

"No, Hassel, it won't do. I'm very busy, and the gentlemen must come to this room for the meeting. They are all creditors of yours, by the bye!

"Ha, Burgomaster! come in! come in! Here's another victim of the storm visiting me. They spring out of the ground like mushrooms. Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the notary, shaking hands with the burgomaster and installing him in an arm-chair.

Steps were heard in the passage, the door swung open and in came Dr. Troost, his brother-in-law Stramme, and Dr. Breemsma the notary's son.

It was quite amusing that all these people should enter in the middle of the interview with old Hassel; their presence was quite a support, thought the notary.

"Sit down, gentlemen, sit down! Henry, this little matter will interest you. Hassel says he can't pay his interest on the mortgage."

They all smiled sourly, as if they had the toothache. Stramme looked at Gerrit, and would have liked to make some joke about the lovely Guurt. The old man's air of misery kept him silent, however.

"Sit down, Hassel," said Breemsma in his tone of sham geniality. Gerrit sat down on the edge of his chair as if on eggs.

"If the gentlemen—if the gentlemen——" he began stammeringly.

"The gentlemen want their money, Hassel, that's all!" said the banker, smiling as if he had said something witty.

Dr. Troost shook his head, looking at Gerrit out of the corner of his eye.

"Didn't I tell you to go nap on strawberries?" he said very loud; "you didn't take my advice, and so you've got into a mess. Now you come and ask to be let off your debts. If I were the notary——"

Breemsma whispered in his ear and in Stramme's. The others chatted, and there was much smothered laughter. Then the notary, with some show of sympathy, said in his finikin, fine-gentleman tone, "You see, Hassel, you owe me thirty years' interest on my loan. You're behind with your land tax, which I've advanced for you. You owe a whole year's interest on your mortgage. For four years you've been having hay and bean stakes on credit and haven't paid a penny. I'm affected in this way, that my brother-in-law here, Mr. Stramme, is the mortgagee, and keeps coming to me for his money. Lastly, you're a long way behind with your rent. See—it's all down against you in this book.—We can't go on like this—you must——"

"But——" interrupted Gerrit, throwing himself back on his chair and nervously fingering the rim of his green cap.

"Wait a minute, please; you can say what you like presently. Can you dispute my statement as to how we stand?"

"No; but——"

"But what?" shouted Troost with a hard laugh. "*Mille tonnerres!* You working men are not worth bothering about. My son is quite right! He says things with no *raison d'être* must go. The weaklings in a brood are useless. If you had taken my advice——"

"Wait a minute, Troost. Let me finish. Now, Hassel, tell these gentlemen how much you expect to be short this year."

"Well—you see, the storm——"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Troost, "I suffered too. I had three tiles blown off and the windows broken!"

"Never mind the storm, Hassel. It won't explain everything."

"I tell you the storm has beggared me altogether!" burst out Gerrit passionately. "I could have got through the year but for the storm. It's lost me two thousand gulden. Do you call that a trifle?"

"All very well; but——"

"No, it's not all very well! It's enough to break one's heart. When you've been respected all your life, and you've worked and slaved from morning till night, and nearly killed yourself with anxiety, to have a thing like this happen, so that you don't know which way to turn—after slaving for forty years. It makes one weep, it does!"

Gerrit's voice was tearful with self-pity. But he was furious with the grinning fine gentlemen who sat in a circle staring at him. The notary was annoyed; the burgomaster contemptuous; Troost hectoring and angry.

"Any one who has sympathy with you folk is a fool for his pains! This is all rubbish. You've had value and you must pay for it. That's the law, and law is justice. My son's quite right; he says you people have the morals of slaves!"

"Look here, Hassel," said the notary; "I'm responsible to my principal, and I can't go on paying for you. There's a limit to everything. And it's been a splendid strawberry year."

"But the storm! the storm!" screamed Gerrit; "you don't say anything about that, and it's driven all Wiereland distracted!"

"You should have changed your crops!" roared Troost. "That's what other men have done! Beans are played out!"

"I must be secured, you know, Hassel," continued the notary; "if I had many clients like you I should be sold up myself."

"I've always been so respectable," whined Gerrit.

"Oh, respectable, we know that! There's nothing against your respectability. You've always been honest, and straightforward. I admit that. But you're not the man you were. You don't keep those sons of yours in order. They're a thoroughly unruly lot, and I can't put up with them at any price."

"I've worked here for forty years, and I've always been respected!"

"Yes, yes. But you should pay your debts. I gave you a mortgage of three thousand five hundred on your bit of land. That was a long time ago. The land's not any worse, I'll say that much; and you paid your interest for a certain time. It had to be screwed out of you, but you paid it. Then you took a second mortgage from Mynheer Stramme. Bad year, poor crops, trouble here, ill-luck there, two cows dead—and so forth. In short, you were in a hole and——"

"But all the gardeners know what the land's worth. You knew what you were doing! I believe my ground's now worth double what it was then!"

"Oh indeed! That's what all the gardeners know, is it? And does every one know all the other claims that I have on you? You make me angry, my good man! If your rattletraps are valued at seven or eight thousand gulden, the valuers will be liberal. Now just you count up what you owe me—and all the costs on top of it! I wonder what you'll say next indeed! Respectability is a fine thing, but paying your debts is a finer. I'm about sick of pulling you out of holes! And there's another thing; you run after too many notaries, man!"

"That's a real lie!" exclaimed Gerrit, leaping from his chair in a fury, "I've never been to see the new notary! He came to my house of himself! But if you want to know what I think of the new notary, very well then, I'll tell you! He's not the sort who helps a man off the bank into the ditch! He doesn't make you borrow his money when you don't want it, and then send in his bill when he sees you're in a hole, or have done some little thing without asking him to meddle in it! No, sir! You've brought lots of my kind to beggary with your loans at five per cent. to be called in the moment you see a man in diffculties. You've been the death of many I've known. The other notary—he's a good chap—he's helped more than a few through the bean-storm—like an angel, he is! But we poor devils, we can't shake you off—we're stuck on to you as tight as pitch. You take the very skin off our ears and the nails off our fingers. You're a damned lot of blood-suckers, all of you! There! that's what I think!"

The allies sat dumbfounded, staring at Gerrit in speechless indignation. The old man suddenly felt he had gone too far. He saw Notary Breemsma glaring at him with dilated nostrils and lips quivering with passion.

"You seem to have gone mad, Hassel. I won't hold you to the letter of your words—spoken before witnesses, mind you! If I chose to take the matter up, you'd very soon find yourself in the wrong box. Now then; pay your debts on the first of November, or be sold up. I would have helped you to find sureties; but after you've made a fool of yourself like this—no. I won't help you at all. Bring your money on the first of November, or you're sold up. Now you know where you are. The notary's voice was harsh and uncompromising. Gerrit's description of the rival notary had enraged him. He was tired of being told the other was so good, so kind, so ready to help! It was unbearable that this old fool should break out in the man's praise in the presence of the banker and the doctor and the burgomaster. Breemsma had half thought of leniency. Now he determined to punish the old blackguard with the utmost severity.

Gerrit, frightened by his own outburst, stood trembling and embarrassed, plucking at his beard, running his fingers through his hair. As he faced these gentlemen with their air of authority, and their fine clothes, he suddenly realised what a gulf was between him and them, between his life and theirs. He felt himself guilty of the grossest insolence and wondered why the notary had not turned him out of the house. His anger gave place to anxiety. His words must have set the whole clique irrevocably against him, cut him off from all favours in the days to come when perhaps he would be starving. He must adopt a humble tone at once! His mouth twitched, his hands worked convulsively. The fine things in the room intimidated him; the handsome curtains, the big writing-table, the books and portfolios, the flower garden in the background. Ah! he must try and excite pity by being very abject! He must! he must! Gerrit had suddenly remembered his hoard. Where was he to hide it, if he was turned out of his house? And he suddenly realised how much he valued his bit of ground, his household goods, his tools, his good name, his appearance of respectability. Now he had set all those people against him, the notary, the burgomaster, the doctor, who owned so much of the land—all the chief men in the place! What could he do against them?

"For forty years," he began desperately, "I've had my own land, and have worked it myself. That's no child's play. Now comes this storm and ruins everything in an hour! All my toiling and slaving comes to nothing, and I'm chased off my bit of ground like a mangy dog. Isn't it enough to make one weep? Mr. Notary knows I've always done well, never got drunk—always been at my work. I'm a bit behind with my rent, but a couple of good harvests would put me right. And now in my old age I've got to turn out and beg. It's hard, Mr. Notary; it's terribly hard! Mr. Notary, think what you're doing to an old man nearly seventy, who's always been so respectable! And you know, I've got an unlucky wife—doctor knows all about her—she's helped to bring me down! I do beseech you to have pity. If just now I said anything I shouldn't have said, I ask your pardon, sir. My poor head's distracted. Have pity on a poor devil who has worked so hard all his life."

Gerrit spoke with a sob in his voice. His attitude was very humble; he stood with his head bent forward while he nervously fingered the rim of his cap. The company listened in silence. Breemsma, however, wanted to end the discussion.

"Well, Hassel, I'll forgive your insolence," he said; "it wasn't like you, you were a bit excited. But that's not the point. The fact is, I can't and I mustn't give you any more concessions, or I shall get into trouble myself. Have you found sureties, perhaps?"

"Sureties? sureties?" sobbed Gerrit; "no, no, that's hopeless. Every one knows that the storm has ruined me!"

"Then things must take their course, Hassel. Surely you understand?"

"Mr. Notary, if everything's taken from me, what's to become of me in my old age? Where can I turn? How can I get work? I've no strength left. I have children, Mr. Notary, and a poor sick wife. Give me one more year! If I have a good year, even now——"

"No, no, Hassel, it won't do. You said that last year. I can't and I mustn't wait any longer. Every year makes it worse. You have children, you say? Well, they must work for you. And you get something from the Bekkemas."

"And you have a daughter, about whom I hear very strange things!" said Dr. Troost in his bullying voice. He was furious that he had not been able to get his way with Guurt.

"They say queer things of everybody!" returned Gerrit, forgetting his humility, "of you too, doctor! of you!"

"Come, Breemsma, haven't we had enough of this?" said Stramme, afraid that Gerrit would say something against him next, in the burgomaster's hearing; "we have the Committee to attend to. I really don't see the use——"

"Just so. Well, I've nothing more to say. Hassel, you've got till the first of November. Good-morning to you."

Gerrit in his stocking-feet shuffled to the door; as he went out he heard Dr. Troost saying something about the "poacher tribe," and "a low lot who must be a low lot."

The old man put on his *sabots*, which he had left on the entrance mat, and, clenching his fist, he stumped out of the house.

Now he knew that all was over! He was boiling with rage, he could hardly breathe. That hateful crew! Why had he humbled himself? Why had he not stuck to his home truths? He knew what a swindling set they were! how they played into each other's hands, with their valuations and auctions, and loans and mortgages; and how one and all they had enriched themselves at the expense of the small proprietors and tenants in the whole district! *Helping* they called it; but for any help they gave a man he had to pay twice or three times over! And the poorer he was the more tightly the gang got him into their clutches. Mynheer Notary drove about the country in his carriage, his children with him. He had given all his children a fine education. He stank of money now, for all he had come to the place naked! Well, well! Gerrit had offended the blackguard, and now it was all over! Should he go and see the rival notary? No, no! It was too late.

Never had Gerrit thought it would be so hard to part from his small possessions. Now that he felt them going, he realised what it meant. In an agony of painful thought, he shuffled homewards, greeting no one, seeing no one. He was full of terror as to the future; yet deep in his breast was one thought which gave him a kind of demoniac joy;—the thought that he possessed something of which no one knew, of which he could not be deprived; his hoard, his dear hoard, his beloved treasure! As for himself—it was all up. He was done for. The bean storm had ruined him, and the curs knew it, and they were to sell him up, and his name was to be dragged in the dirt. He must beg his bread, and that brother of his would chuckle over his misfortunes.

Well! he had better look out for a cottage somewhere! And it must have a bit of a cellar; his treasure must be taken care of after he had guarded it so well all these years. Nothing else mattered.

BOOK IV

AUTUMN

CHAPTER I

"WOULD Wimpie like to get up for a little?" asked the mother caressingly, standing by the dark corner in which was the sick child's crib.

"Yes, yes! Very much! Now at once, please!"

Ant turned to Vrouw Zeune.

"Will you give me a hand? I'll take his head, and I want you to lift his legs. Kees manages him all alone, but I'm afraid to. There! that's the way! Capital! Don't look so frightened, my brave little man! See, my arms are under your neck! How's that, my pet?"

Slowly and carefully they carried Wimpie to the window, through which the golden light of the late September afternoon was streaming in.

His ears, which stuck out from his head, were marble white; his face was emaciated, showing all the bony outline. Green-grey in colour, the face looked in the sunshine little better than a death's head. Every pulsation in the arteries of the temples could be seen. The great blue eyes looked out from deeply-sunken cavities above the sharp nose which seemed mere skin stretched tightly over bone.

"Would you like to walk a bit, my mannie?"

"Yes, mother! Oh, I would like it!" said Wim, in his soft panting voice. "Let me try. Stand me up! Only do take care! Yes, that's it! Oh, Vrouw Zeune, do please mind my leg! A little more on that side, mother. Now let me lean against the edge of the table."

He panted as Ant put him down gently from her lap. His dirty nightshirt hung loose about his wasted form; the claw-like hands, bony and yellow, with purple veins, clutched the table rim in nervous terror.

Vrouw Zeune stood at the left side ready to catch the child if he fell. Ant held her arms ready behind him, but without letting him see.

"Poor little chap! he's just like a skeleton!" blurted out the neighbour. Wimpie smiled his precocious smile. The remark did not offend him. He had heard other such speeches, and preferred them to foolish talk of his looking and being better.

His legs shook under his feather weight as he crept round the table, his mother following him with her protecting arms.

"You can stand by yourself, darling!"

"Look, mother! I'm going all the way to that corner. Then I can tell father I have been for a walk; and he'll be so very glad!"

It was as much as Vrouw Zeune could do not to cry. Ant, however, looked hard and angry. Since her miscarriage she had hated her husband worse than ever, for he had not attempted to conceal his satisfaction. It was wrong of him to be pleased, and unkind too! She could curse him for it; curse him too because he had bewitched Wimpie and forced him to say loving words which could not be natural to him.

Grasping the table convulsively, his bloodless little fingers becoming still more ghastly by the anxious pressure, Wimpie pulled himself the whole way along the table. Vrouw Zeune was terrified, but Wimpie's gentle eyes shone with pleasure at having succeeded in getting so far.

Suddenly, however, a cold sweat broke out on his forehead, and his eyes seemed to roll up into his head, so that only the whites remained visible. Ant's arms were round him at once. The neighbour also moved forward to help, and, unfortunately, knocked against the boy's right thigh. A scream burst from the white lips, and the little face was distorted with agony.

"Holy Virgin! You've hurt him!" cried Ant, clasping her child to her bosom. Vrouw Zeune was speechless with distress, and old Vrouw Rams came shuffling from the far end of the dark, low room, calling out piercingly to be told what was the matter. She reached the window, and stood peering about with the *listening* look which comes into blind eyes. Old Rams, by the hearth, coughed incessantly and violently.

Wimpie, quite exhausted by his "walk," lay back against Ant's bosom, anxious now to be restored to his bed as quickly as possible. He had wanted to *surprise* his father; for each day Kees had been seeming more silent and sad. Wimpie understood, from the anguish in his father's eyes, that soon the end must come. He, poor little sufferer, would soon have to die! Wimpie did not know much about death; he was not able to read, though his mother at the beginning of his illness had tried to teach him. His prayers he had learned thoroughly, and a bit here and there from the Catechism; these he was always whispering over to himself. When he asked what would become of him if he died, his mother and the priest told him he would go to heaven and be perfectly happy for evermore. On this foundation he built many strange and beautiful childish dreams. Yet sometimes he felt terribly afraid of dying, because he feared that he would be quite separated from his father and his mother and all his dear little sisters, whom he loved so deeply and so tenderly. Lately he had cried a great deal in his crib, because he felt so much more tired, and was so seldom able to sit up. He wanted to sit up, because it made father happy; he hated growing worse and weaker, because then father was miserable, and sometimes savage.

Often at night Wimpie lay awake, his brain quite clear and active. Then he would bathe himself in the glow of his childish fancies about the "blessed state" they described to him. He saw himself sitting in a circle of little golden angels, like beautiful children with gently quivering wings, radiant with a soft and silvery light. He meant to pray to them for his father, and his mother, and his sisters. He would pray that his dear father might be no longer passionate and angry, that his eyes might lose the red, ferocious, frightening look, that he might stop beating dear mother. But, in the middle of his dreams, if some one, frightened at his pallor, spoke aloud of his suffering, then Wimpie would be frightened, and his little, claw-like fingers would feel for the rosary on his breast, and he would pray to God, and to Jesus, and to the Saints, begging that he might go on living, so that he still could be with his father, and his mother, and the little girls, and old Rams, his grandfather. After a minute he felt that his prayer was sinful; and he would pray again, asking that he might be taken to the eternal blessedness, and so lose all his pain.

Thus Wimpie in his dark crib lived in a little world of his own, praying and singing softly to himself; while old Rams coughed by the fire; while the parents, Kees and Ant, cursed and stormed, making miserable shifts to get and to eke out a few poor cents; while the frightened children, in their thin rags, muttered, and shrank into corners, and cried for hunger and neglect.

Lying on his bed, Wim looked at the bright little pictures which hung around him. God was on a high throne, and the Son of God was by His side, and Mary Mother was at the other side in an atmosphere of blue, and of silver and gold. He would shut his eyes and fancy his little self rising through the wonderful blue sky, pricked with its golden stars, up high into the Heaven where God was, and where all things were happy in His glory; and he would croon softly to himself a wordless hymn of ecstasy.

Later came his mother's and his grandmother's hateful abuse of Kees, and Wimpie would again start from his dream. His true child-nature would reassert itself, and he would be thrown back to earth, falling through the net of his sweet illusions with a shock of pain and terror. He never suspected for a moment that his dreams of future bliss were a sort of web woven in his brain by priest and mother. His childish faith was true, and seemed like a glory shining round him.

For all this he was a mere boy, and he knew it. He wanted to live; to play, and romp, and dig in the garden; to work like his father, like the other boys his neighbours; sometimes he longed to go on the poaching expeditions. Often, long and bitterly he cried because he was sick and could do nothing but lie down all day, growing taller indeed, yet weaker and weaker month by month.

To-night he lay very still in his bed; carried back to it by his mother, far away from the window and the rosy light of the autumn sunset. Beside the window Kees had made a little platform for the bed, so that the sick child could look out and see the golden chestnut avenue of Jonkheer van Ouwenaar's park. Ant, however, preferred to have him in his usual dark corner. He lay now looking drearily into the darkening room, wondering why father was angry when he said his prayers, wondering what father thought about God, and whether he never prayed himself. Wimpie would have liked to ask his father these questions, but he never could summon up courage to do it. Mother said father was a godless heretic, and the little boy could not understand what she meant. He would lie very still praying to the dear Lord for his father, that no harm should ever come to him. Then he would dip his little fingers in the holy water, and end his prayer with the whisper—

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

CHAPTER II

I

AS the inevitable crash approached, Gerrit grew still more anxious and irritable. Dirk and Piet went about their work as usual, but in a state of exasperation. The old man's report of the notary's demands was maddening. What was the use even of working if they were to be robbed of their bit of land within three weeks' time? They reproached Gerrit for wasting the money brought in by the strawberries; they said he was a liar and declared he had spent the money on women. Gerrit made no answer beyond a shrug, and stumped away to the garden.

Dirk grew yet more silent and morose. Piet sometimes achieved indifference, and sang merry songs. But a glance at Dirk's gloomy countenance was enough to remind him of the troubles, and he would break out with curses on his father, on the notary, on the whole rotten pack of the gentlefolks and their train of sycophants.

Gerrit was happiest when he was at his gardening; storing baskets, sweeping leaves, tying up plants. Sometimes he enjoyed a cup of coffee with the photographer, who had been much more friendly lately, he thought, and seemed to have dropped his suspicions.

Everybody in Wiereland had heard of the disaster to Gerrit's beans, and knew how hard he had been hit. The news that he was to be sold up in November spread like wildfire. General sympathy was expressed; the notary was vilified and blamed. Especially satisfactory to the old man was the attitude of the photographer. He had begun leaving his things about again. That magnificent three hundred gulden lens with the brass mounting and the copper screws! Gerrit had set his heart on it!

One morning the old man was busy with his sons cutting endive. He worked mechanically though fast, thinking all the time of the coveted lens and of his hoard. He had added to it several times lately. He had acquired a spade and a bran-new shovel; a small garden frame painted scarlet and a very beautiful seed-drill. The things were spoiling terribly down there in the dark, the mice were playing the deuce with them. How on earth were they to be transferred to the new house without detection? Not yet had he made any plan. He was only certain the thing must be done *secretly*.

Gerrit had taken a little house on the Duulweg. Guurt was angry, thinking this come-down in the world would damage her prospects. Still, she did not say much, for her chances seemed improving with her genteel admirer. He must see how pretty she was, and how presentable! Guurt counted on soon taking her flight from the parental roof. She had told the little gentleman all about her father's misfortunes, and he had not made any change in his manner to her. Consequently Gerrit got surprisingly little of the rough side of his daughter's tongue. The house on the Duulweg was meagre; it had only two dark poky rooms. But there was a bit of a cellar, and Gerrit intended to take this under his own charge. The problem was how to get the treasures into it? He thought of little else.

II

About eleven o'clock he went to the Bekkema garden and from thence to the photographer's, kicking off his shoes at the door, and entering in his stockings. No one was in the studio. The door creaked, announcing his entrance, and the photographer called out of his dark room—

"Is that you, Hassel?"

"Yes, sir—at your service."

"That's right. The coffee's ready for you by the door. I'll come in a minute—only two more plates to develop!"

"Don't hurry, sir," said Gerrit, looking about.

He found the coffee, and drank it slowly, standing, and still peering in all directions. It was very pleasant to be left alone among so many fine things. They were tossed about quite carelessly, as if they were to be had for the mere picking up. From the dark room came the sounds of clinking glass upon metal.

Suddenly the blood rushed to old Hassel's head. What was that he saw? Positively the fine beautiful lens! Not poked away in a corner, but on a camera; very conspicuous. God's truth! there it was!

Gerrit shook with excitement. He crept past the grey painted background till he was close to the lens. He could have screamed for joy. His heart thumped. There was the lens ready to drop into his pocket! If the owner would only go out for a few minutes as he did almost every day——

Louder splashings and clinkings were heard in the dark room. Gerrit moved away from the temptation, as he knew Van Gooyen would soon have finished what he was doing. He gazed out of the window which overlooked a bulb field. The prey was almost his, but he must not get into a fuss or betray his excitement. Lord! what a piece of luck!

The photographer came in, blinking at the light, a pair of dripping plates in his hands. He was a very big man, and looked in his rough grey suit like a beer-drinking German in the garb of an English tourist.

Hassel turned round, but afraid to trust his voice, merely muttered a careless good morning. With all his eyes he watched the photographer to see if he had any suspicions. The latter went busily in and out of his dark room. Was he going out, or was he going to stay in the studio? Gerrit watched him, every now and then glancing at the lens to make sure it was still there.

The photographer was cross. His largest plate was a failure.

"Hassel, make yourself another cup of coffee. I must run out to fetch something. I shall be back in a quarter of an hour. You can keep an eye on the place, and if any one calls tell him to come back later."

"Very good, sir. Very good. I'm not in a hurry, so take your own time," said Gerrit, his voice shaking with excitement.

He could hardly credit his good fortune. To be alone in the studio for fifteen minutes, with every door open and every sort of lovely thing lying about! The money-box! He would take that first as it was so easy; then the lens! He crept into the dark room, almost suffocated by the palpitation of his heart. He felt along the shelf for the cash-box. Yes! here it was! He retreated with it to the studio. He had it! Now for the lens. Blind and deaf with excitement he flung himself at the camera. Should he just look how much money was in the cash-box? No, that would take time. The lens! The lens!

The thought flashed across his mind that he was doing a very foolish thing, for the photographer would see at once that his lens had gone. But Gerrit was too fast in the grip of his master-passion to harbour the thought for more than a moment. He crushed it down, scolding himself for cowardice.

The cash-box in one hand, he tried to take the lens with the other; was, however, unable to remove it. He trembled from head to foot; that lens he must have, come what might! He would sooner leave the money than the lens. He had to put the cash-box down, as he could not get the thing off with one hand. The best plan would be to take the money and put the box back in its place.

Again he remembered that the photographer must find out he had been robbed, as he had left the money and the lens in their places when he had gone out. But hesitation was only for a moment. Gerrit put the abstracted coins in his breeches pocket and the cash-box on the shelf.

"He won't notice for some time," thought the old man, "and I shall have got out of the way. He can't know it was I."

He returned quickly to the camera; pulled and pushed with both hands; tried to unscrew, but still failed to detach the lens. He worked harder. At last the thing moved and he gave a smothered cry of delight. It was getting loose! It would be his in one moment. But it stuck and refused to budge another bit! Gerrit cursed and stamped. He looked round but could see no implement to assist him.

Cold sweat covered his forehead. His beard got in his way and he pushed it furiously to one side. He was now in a fever of hurry and his fingers worked spasmodically. The fellow might come back at any moment! One more try! He seized the lens and gave it a violent wrench which actually brought it away, lifting, however, the front legs of the heavy camera several inches from the ground. This startled him and his head swam; however, here he was with the lens in his hands. It was unexpectedly heavy; still he was ready to shout with triumph.

He was stepping back with his prize and he looked up. There stood Van Gooyen the photographer, his flabby cheeks quite white, his eyes fixed upon Gerrit. Behind him were two men—masons in their dusty working clothes—come from the new house building beside the studio.

Gerrit was overcome with speechless terror, nearly dropping his prey. Like a demon the photographer leaped upon Hassel and seized him by the throat, shouting—

"Ah, you old rascal! So I've caught you at last, and before witnesses! Oh, I knew very well you were robbing me! Now I've got proof, and I've got you, hateful old thief! Every one in Wiereland shall know the sort of scoundrel you are! You saw, my men, didn't you? Now you can swear with me before the burgomaster that Gerrit Hassel with his white beard is a dirty, common thief!" The photographer was quite mad with excitement. He shouted; he shook his clenched fist in Gerrit's face as if he wanted to pound him to a jelly. He restrained himself, however, not wishing to be fined for taking the law into his own hands. Gerrit could not say a word. His throat closed up; he felt suffocated. He was *caught*; caught for the first time in his life; caught to be made a show of. His cheeks were first the colour of chalk, then they flushed a dull red; his eyes dilated; his knees shook; his hand plucked at his beard. He was *caught.* All was over; his pilfering was ended; his hoard gone; his good name lost for ever. This was God's punishment for his sins! The storm which had ruined his beans had been a warning. He had not listened to the voice of God. He had thought he would never be caught.

All this time he still held the lens, his hands closed upon it convulsively. The masons standing beside Van Gooyen stared at the old man in astonishment. At last, trembling and abject, Gerrit burst into speech—

"Oh, sir! sir! Forgive me! I have done wrong! I have done very wrong! Punish me as you will. Oh, sir, it is the bad times which have made me a bad man! All the worries have been barking at me at once; and the storm spoiled all my beans. That finished me! I am going to be sold up—in one month——"

"You are lying, you old rascal! The storm indeed! It ruined a hundred others, and they haven't taken to stealing! Besides, you were at it long before there was any storm. What about my overshoes—my paper—my walking-stick? Forgive you? Not I! I'll have nothing to do with forgiveness. It maddens me to think of your thefts. You shall have the police in your house, I promise you that. Ha! ha! you didn't expect me to nab you like this! I was ready for you. I left my lens out on purpose to prove what sort of meat I had got in the pot. Oh! I've seen you looking at the lens, ever since I told you how much it had cost! And I left my cash-box open too! Been at that also, no doubt, you old villain! Come now, confess!"

"I—I——" stammered Gerrit.

The photographer plunged into his dark room, opened the cash-box and found it empty.

"Oh, you rascal! you devil! Eighty-six gulden, where are they? Robber! thief, scoundrel! Where's the money, I say?"

The man's voice had risen to a scream.

"It's here!" moaned Gerrit, pointing to his breeches pocket."

"Hand it over. Ha! ha! ha! The venerable Gerrit Hassel! A very pretty scoundrel! drinks your coffee every day, friendly as you please, and robs you the moment your back is turned!"

Gerrit produced the money very slowly out of his pocket. The masons stood by open-mouthed. Who would have believed it possible?

"Bad times—worry—Worry takes a man's senses away," whined Gerrit, thinking this his best card to play, for all Giereland knew of and pitied his misfortunes.

"It's a damned lie, you dirty thief!" roared the photographer, searching to see if aught else had disappeared, "you started stealing ages ago. You have been robbing me from the first. I was friendly; but I grew suspicious at last. I missed all sorts of things; and always after your visits. Now I've caught you in the act!" He turned to the masons, "A proper rogue, isn't he? Gentlemen, I'll make good the loss of your time to you!"

A shudder of terror passed through Gerrit, and he became so deadly pale that Van Gooyen paused in his objurgations fearing the old man might drop dead at his feet.

"Sir, sir! I've gone mad with anxiety!" cried Gerrit, throwing himself on a chair, his head bowed on his hands. "I never stole—never even looked at what didn't belong to me. Forty years I've lived here, and always been looked up to! Care makes a man crazy. For God's sake, forgive me! Don't tell any one! God will reward you a hundredfold, sir. I'll repay you. I'll give back everything I've taken. Ever since the storm, sir, I have been quite mad with trouble and worry."

He began to weep; moaning and sobbing very loud. But Van Gooyen had no intention of softening.

"By the Lord! you shan't make a fool of me again!"

"Have pity, sir! have pity! To go to prison at my age! Think of my poor children! The storm destroyed everything—everything! They've sucked me dry, that cursed doctor and the notary. They're selling me up! Oh, my poor dear wife and children! To go to prison at my age!"

He looked up beseechingly, big tears rolling down his cheeks. Van Gooyen was inexorable.

"No, no, my man! You're a dangerous character. You may tell your tale to the police. I don't believe a word of it. Not stolen before, indeed! It makes me sick to hear you. Get out now; go home. I'm going to the police with my witnesses. The magistrate shall decide what sort of man you are. Get out."

Again Gerrit would have spoken, but Van Gooyen pushed him to the door and said he would tell every one in the street, if the old rascal did not go away quietly.

The photographer and the two masons then set out in search of the burgomaster.

Gerrit, with a horrible singing in his ears, and black wall of terror before his eyes, staggered home, muttering as he went—

"You're caught! you're caught! Caught! caught!"

III

Guurt was washing cans and buckets at the back of the house. Now and then she looked into the kitchen to see after the cooking.

Her father, white as a sheet, with shaking knees, bent head, twitching lips, staggered past her towards the house. He flung himself on the ground, but almost immediately got up again, stumbled into the living room and sank heavily on a chair.

Vrouw Hassel only stared, but Guurt ran in thinking the old man was drunk; seeing him in a heap in his chair, trembling in every limb, with a face of ashy grey, she became frightened. He must have had a stroke.

Pale herself, she came over and shook his arm.

"Whatever's the matter, father? What is it?"

No, it was not a stroke. He looked up at her with the expression of one in the immediate dread of the hangman. His eyes were sunk in his head, and he still muttered—

"Caught! caught! You're caught now! *Caught!*"

"What, father? What do you say? Who's caught? Oh Lord! you look like a corpse! Shall I call the boys? I don't know what to do!"

Guurt's lovely face now showed every sign of alarm. Something shocking must have occurred. After a moment of hesitation, she ran to the fields.

"Piet! Dirk! Father's been taken very bad. Come in and see him!"

"Presently!" they answered her from the orchard.

The girl was too much frightened to go back alone. Something awful must have happened. Father had looked as if he were dying. She had never seen such blue splotches on his cheeks—such terror in his eyes.

The brothers stumped up heavily on their wooden shoes.

"What's the matter?" said Dirk dully; but he started when he saw his sister's pallor.

"Come in, boys, come in! There's something wrong with father. He won't speak! He looks as if he'd lost his wits."

Kicking off their *sabots* at the door, the sons hastened to their father. Dirk pressed his hands together in sudden anxiety. No, he had never seen the old man like this.

"What is it, father?" he asked in bewildered tones, shaking the old man till his white head rolled imbecilely from side to side. Gerrit's lips moved, but no sound came from them.

"For God's sake, say something! Have you had an accident or what?"

Gerrit looked beseechingly at his sons.

"Caught!" he gasped; "the police are coming for me. I've—been stealing. Oh Lord! Oh Lord!"

"Stealing? *You?*" cried Dirk with a stab of horror.

"Stealing?" echoed Piet, his jaw dropping.

Guurt said nothing. Vrouw Hassel looked as if she were listening and even understanding. She muttered a few words, looking with distress at her husband.

Suddenly Van Gooyen and the two masons walked past the window and rang sharply at the door.

Piet hurried to answer, but was determined not to let the intruders in. Only Gerrit knew what the photographer could want. Dirk, his hands in his pockets, fury in his heart, stood over the old man. The latter had been robbed by his terror of all clear perception. He expected his children to strike him, his wife to burst out in lamentation.

Notwithstanding Piet's opposition, Van Gooyen and his satellites came in.

"Don't do anything foolish, Piet!" cried the photographer; "you can't keep us out. That father of yours has been caught stealing—in the very act. The burgomaster has heard the witnesses. It's a shocking affair, shocking! He was caught stealing in my studio. He took money from my cash-box—eighty-six gulden. He had got my lens also—my big lens, which cost three hundred gulden. He had wrenched it off by main force. But he's stolen lots of other things too. Yes, you may well look dumbfoundered; I was dumbfoundered myself. You don't believe it? Well, then, ask him yourself. The burgomaster is on his way with the police. He's heard the evidence. Enough to drive you crazy? Well, it's not a pretty business; but the law must have its course. Every one says that, the burgomaster, and the doctor, and everybody."

Dirk's hands were still in his pockets, but his head drooped. He couldn't take it in. The old man caught stealing? The old man? honest old Flowerpot? the most respected citizen of Wiereland! the man who never swallowed a drop of liquor! Van Gooyen must be mad. He turned and fixed his eyes on his father's ashen face and inanely muttering mouth.

"Caught! They're coming for you, old man! You're caught!"

Painful silence followed. No one knew what to say. The photographer felt uneasy and nervous. He did not like Piet's fury, still less Dirk's surliness, like that of a bull which refuses to budge. The wife too was staring at him, the imbecile wife who generally seemed to have forgotten her very nose. He must say something to disarm all these enemies. Fool to have come without the police! They might stick a knife into him or cut his head open! All Hassels were ill-conditioned—these two young men were the brothers of Kees the poacher, the supposed murderer. Van Gooyen spoke hurriedly; he had suspected Gerrit, he said, for many a long day, but had said nothing; he did not want to accuse any one unjustly, so he had determined to put the matter to a test. Van Gooyen mumbled something about the storm, the losses, the bad times; but it was plain that in his heart he thought the old man a mere ordinary thief.

Piet came closer, his eyes flashing, his fists clenched behind his back. The photographer mopped his forehead with his handkerchief, which reeked of chemicals, and went on talking, trying to appease the angry brothers. How could he help being suspicious when so many strange things had occurred? And now he had caught the old man in the act. In the very act! He looked at his two witnesses for confirmation. They nodded but said nothing, and again an uneasy silence settled down on the little room. Van Gooyen could bear it no longer.

"Well," he said, "I must go now. I thought it was only kind to come and tell you how matters stood. There'll be a second hearing of course at the Court-house in your father's presence. We mustn't keep the burgomaster waiting. Come on, my men, we three must go."

He was much relieved when he found himself and his masons outside the house, with no bones broken. He saw the burgomaster and a couple of policemen coming. They marched up to Hassel's door and rang the bell sharply.

Piet opened. A shudder ran through him when he saw the shining helmets, and the solemn magisterial air of the burgomaster. Piet had no choice but to bring them into the living room. Everything was done in the most formal manner. The burgomaster considered the Hassels an unruly family, towards whom leniency would be inappropriate. As there was no commissary in Wiereland, he was invested with all the powers of an assistant magistrate, and he liked making public display of his authority.

Followed by the policemen he stepped into the room. In its corner, Guurt's turtle dove made its gentle cooing. The furniture was disordered, the atmosphere heavy with the smoke of peat. The pauses in the burgomaster's explanatory harangue were filled up by the ticking of the cuckoo clock and the plaintive lamentation of the dove. Gerrit still sat mumbling, his hands shaking as he rested them on his knees.

"Gerrit Hassel," said the official with great importance, "do you admit having stolen the articles referred to?"

"Yes, yes," quavered Gerrit.

Slowly and pompously the burgomaster now read the signed depositions of the photographer, Van Gooyen, and his two witnesses. Gerrit listened, overpowered by the fear that, on the strength of the charges brought against him, order should be given for a search of his premises; a search which would bring his hoard to light, and make it plain that for years he had been a systematic thief.

Guurt thought that to have "the police in the house" was the most terrible, the worst thing that could possibly happen to respectable people. During the reading she sat crying and sobbing like one distracted.

When the burgomaster said that every one had considered the accused the most honest person in Wiereland, Gerrit thought himself choking. He felt an almost irresistible desire to confess publicly to all his thievery, to proclaim aloud what sort of man he was. He would say he had been stealing all his life; he would say also that he had never stolen to enrich himself, or to procure money for drink, but because the instinct to steal was too strong to be combated.

However, he restrained himself. No one appeared to suspect his hoard: why say anything about it? But oh, how Wiereland would talk when in a few minutes he should be seen marched off by two policemen. They would think he had fallen through misery and the stress of hard times; and oh! how his brother would laugh, and the notary, and Grint! Already, he could feel them staring at him, as he was marched along the street.

He felt no remorse; only fear—fear of the policemen, of the burgomaster—of God. When he should be in prison—all alone—oh, the nights would be the worst! His wife's warm body would not be there for him to shelter behind, when he saw the devil's heads and the great flames.

Between her sobs, Guurt asked the burgomaster if the thing could not be hushed up. She begged and prayed. She pressed his hand, and the hands of the two policemen. She almost went on her knees. The burgomaster said the law must take its course; that it was not his business to make bargains; that thieves must be punished.

Piet, quite dejected, hung his head. But Dirk suddenly sprang upon his father, seized him by the collar and shook him backwards and forwards in his chair like a doll, while he roared like a mad bull—

"Speak, you old devil! What have you done? You've ruined us! Slimy old fox! old devil! you called us thieves for spending fifty gulden at Kermis! a fine piece of work you've gone and done! old rogue, devil, thief!

The old man's face grew purple, and he tried feebly to dislodge Dirk's powerful fingers from his collar. The burgomaster came to the rescue. He nodded to the policemen, and the three together wrested the half-strangled Gerrit from his furious son, who had dragged him from his chair and looked as if he intended really to commit a murder. He was pulled off; but he spat full in his father's face.

Piet, uncertain which side to take, stared out of the window. Guurt leaned against the wall and sobbed.

By this time a crowd had collected before the house, chiefly little boys with a few labourers who had seen the police enter and had learned that old Grandfather Hassel had been stealing and caught red-handed. Guurt prayed the officials to wait for dark before taking her father away.

"Out of the question, my lass! Besides, the thing's known by this all over Wiereland; and your brothers are so violent I shouldn't dare a delay. They might kill the old man. Now—the handcuffs!"

The tall policeman produced the handcuffs from his pocket and clapped them on old Hassel's wrists. Gerrit fell back on his chair half fainting. Handcuffs on his wrists! *his!* never again could he hold up his head.

Guurt cried bitterly. All her plans, her whole life and happiness were destroyed. That her father should go in that fashion through the streets! Like Dirk, she would gladly have killed the old man with her own hands. What would not her lover have to say about the scandal!

The policemen lifted the half-unconscious Gerrit from his chair and supported him at either side, as one supports a lame man who has lost his crutches. His eyes were on the floor, his knotted, work-stained hands shook in the gyves. Dirk looked at his father with fury and contempt.

Suddenly Vrouw Hassel started from her seat by the window and threw herself upon her husband. The crisis had recalled her mind to the exigencies of action and of life.

"My Gerrit!" she screamed, "my Gerrit! You will not leave your wife?"

Even at this moment the imbecile woman's resurrection produced general amazement. For months she had hardly left her chair. For a year she had not spoken unless directly spoken to. Now in a sudden and final flicker of nervous energy, she stood erect, she fled to her husband's side, she clung to him so tightly that the policemen could not get her away.

Gerrit's only emotion when his wife flung herself into his arms with sudden return of her faculties was terror. She knew all! was she not going to betray him?

The poor thing kissed him and wept over him and stroked his hair caressingly. He pushed her away with his elbows. The handcuffs, shameful and horrible as they were, seemed nothing in comparison with the fear that she would tell what she knew, tell that he had been stealing for years, and had a hoard of things hidden in the cellar.

"Get away, woman! get away! Oh, she's mad, sirs, she's quite mad!"

It was Piet who assisted the policemen, detaching his mother violently from her husband and forcing her back into her chair by the window.

The instant the struggle was over, the flash of consciousness was extinguished. She resumed her vacant stare. She sat as she had sat for months, without will, without thought; her dull and bloodshot eyes wearing no expression but that of fear. The burgomaster, disgusted by the Hassels as a family, was impatient to be gone. He gave the order to the policemen; they pushed Hassel roughly through the door and into the street, where he was greeted by the yelling and jeering crowd of labourers and boys.

CHAPTER III

THE news of old Gerrit's arrest spread quickly through Wiereland. The market gardeners all stared at each other in dumb amazement. Only those who had seen him hauled off between the two policemen could believe it. Venerable old Flowerpot! who never drank, never swore, was patient with his daft wife and his turbulent sons! Impossible! The gentry discussed the case, shaking their heads over the discredit brought on the township. They pitied the old man supposing money difficulties the cause of his crime; they blamed the photographer for his cruelty. The whole gardening fraternity, half-ruined by the storm, expressed themselves freely in sympathy with their neighbour.

Guurt was distracted! The Government clerk had abandoned her. The daughter of a thief? Out of the question for him. If he caught a glimpse of her in the distance he made long rounds to avoid a meeting. She grew pale and thin with chagrin. She humbled herself and wrote to him. To no purpose: he never answered her. Sometimes the little boys in the street ran after her crying—

"Your father's a dirty thief! Your brother's a wicked poacher! Your father's a horrid old thief!"

Guurt longed for some place to hide her head. The Wierelanders had little kindness for her on account of her old pride and airs of superiority. They laughed at the gibes of the little boys even when they thought them unmerciful. Former suitors grinned at the girl as they passed. No one was faithful but Jan Grint, who still viewed her with dumb but passionate devotion.

The Hassels were sold up. Everything was numbered and officially sealed, ready for auction. All their household goods were going to the hammer. When the creditors were paid there would be hardly fifty guldens left for the children.

Dirk and Piet, silently furious, and already beginning to feel the pinch of want, tramped the district looking for work. They had no credit now; none of the landowners wanted them; the neighbours, fearing they might be asked to lend money or to stand surety, looked the other way when they approached. Their father's crime was thrown in their teeth on every occasion.

In the dark and dismal house, where all their possessions, down to the rickety manure cart, were on view before the sale, Dirk sat grim and silent. A fury of hatred, a longing to destroy everything and everybody, seethed within him. He felt himself his father's victim and cursed the old man bitterly as he thought of him in his prison cell. If Gerrit hadn't lost his character, they might have been able to rent a bit of land even if they were sold up. Now there was no chance. The little boys, when they saw a safe opportunity, yelled also after Dirk that his father was a thief and his brother a poacher. His fingers twitched and he longed to have his tormentors by the throat. The girls shunned him like the plague; that was the worst of all! What was he to do with himself? No more trips to town, no more drinking sprees, no more dice, not a yard of land to call his own. Now he must slave all day for others, ordered about like a dog; not a minute to himself; even under these conditions work was hard and long to find. He was crazed; he was a maddened animal, impelled by the lust to tear and to destroy.

One day, just before the auction, he ran up against Kees and learned from him of the death of the child Wimpie.

Farther on he met Klaas Grint, just outside his house. Grint tried to slip away, but Dirk marched up to him with a look not to be disregarded.

"No, Klaas, you're not going to escape me. I'm not the hangman. You used to have a civil word for me if we met. What's the matter with me now, eh?"

"Talk's a bird lays no eggs," answered Grint.

"That's very true. But I've come about Geert. She's my girl!"

Klaas Grint clenched his fist and his mouth twitched. Forgetting both prudence and policy he shouted—

"You're a liar! Your girl? Your girl? Because she said a few pitying words to you at Kermis, you think you've the right to bark at her heels! *Your* girl indeed! Damned presumption!"

Dirk made no effort at forbearance. He replied, spitting the words at Klaas with all the venom he could add to them—

"No need for so many words. She's my girl, I say! I've got her in the family way, and you know it. Ask her yourself. I've got her in the family way; *I—I*—Do you hear?"

Klaas Grint stood thunderstruck, his face pale with confusion and rage. *What?* Since Kermis he had suspected Geert's condition, but had supposed Willem Hassel her favoured lover. He had not turned the girl out of the house because Willem was rich and highly eligible. If Willem married her—well, a little accident before marriage was of no consequence. But, Dirk? Oh, the fellow was lying! It must be a lie! If it were true, then Geert's father would kill her on the spot.

Grint moved abruptly towards his house, Dirk following him.

"Girl! Geert!" screamed Klaas. "Come here this moment! Where the devil have you got to? Here's your sweetheart! Come here, I say!"

Geert clattered out of the house in her wooden shoes. Her heart came into her mouth when she saw Dirk standing there, quite silent, his hands in his pockets, a challenging look on his pale, resentful face. Klaas met her, put his hand on her neck and pushed her roughly along till she was face to face with Dirk.

"Now then, wench, speak the truth! Speak the truth, or I'll break every bone in your body! Is it this dirty tramp has been with you? The son of that filthy thief, old Flowerpot?"

Geert shook with fear. She covered her face with her hands and sobbed out a few inarticulate words.

"I was drunk—perfectly drunk. That was when they did it—the men! But Willem knows and he'll have me all the same! He'll have me all the same!"

Dirk's face was white; his eyes blazed; his massive shoulders raised, his mouth quivering with rage, he thrust his head down towards her till he could look into her face.

"Dirty common bitch! Dunghill swine! That's what you are! *I* had you! I! *I!* It's *my* child! You're *my* woman! Mine—mine!"

As he spoke Vrouw Grint came in from the street. With instant comprehension she planted herself before Dirk and shook her fist in his face, her aspect that of a fury.

"Dragging my daughter's name in the dirt, are you? Beastly beggar! Look after that strumpet of a sister of yours! Gang of thieves—poachers—gallows birds—scum of the gaols!"

She struck him violently in the face, and the blood spurted from his nose, staining mouth and cheek.

Disregarding it, Dirk waved his arm and pushed the woman to one side. She would have attacked him a second time but Klaas held her back. Dirk's eyes were fixed relentlessly on Geert, who stood with bowed head, her face hidden in her hands. Cor, Annie, and Trijn stood in a group looking on. They knew all and were greatly frightened.

Furiously Dirk sprang upon Geert, with a hoarse and savage shout.

"The child's mine, I say! You're my woman! mine! I spit on you, foul bitch! I spit on you! Tell that to Willem!"

He spat twice on the hands the girl pressed to her face.

She was near fainting—looked as if she must sink into the earth for shame.

Klaas was silent, afraid of Dirk. In his heart he was congratulating himself on the fact that Willem was willing to take the girl in spite of everything. He was ready to endure any unpleasantness if in the end he could secure so fine a prize as the well-to-do youth. It was certainly a dirty business; but all's well that ends well. Let Geert secure Willem and she would hear no more from her parents of her misfortune.

With a swing of his powerful ungainly body, Dirk turned, and strode past Klaas and Geert with a gesture of contempt, wiping the blood from his face so that his fingers were stained vermilion. He strode past the shuddering Vrouw Grint without looking as he went out, striding along the path like one drunk with fury and with hatred; consumed by the fire of passion, blindly seeking for something to quench it. His hands, thrust deep into his pockets, were clenched so that the nails drove into the palms.

He strode along in the direction of the harbour, entered the first tavern and threw himself upon a bench. There he sat alone; drinking till it was night.

CHAPTER IV

I

WIERELAND was bathed in the beauty of autumn; the soft October sunshine poured ruddy gold upon the green of field and copse. In the balmy air, dahlias of every hue, scarlet gladioli, flaming montbretias, filled the garden with colour.

In the bulb grounds, workers were busy with the autumn planting; wheelbarrows jolted along the narrow paths; fields newly dug and bronze in colour stretched in every direction to the horizon. Lanes and avenues were strewn with golden leaves; tracery of branch and twig stood out clear against the silvery blue of the sky, and the leaden grey of transient storm-cloud.

Everywhere resounded the knell of the dead summer; departing birds twittered in the trees; muffled sounds of work came from the busy fields. When the sun shone out again after a passing shower, the leaves were studded with rain-drops, which sparkled in his rays like myriad faceted gems. In the orchards boys were picking the latest harvest of pears and red-cheeked apples.

II

November began with tempest and hail which whitened the fields, the clouds hung low over the land, and the wind, like a mighty orchestra of strings, made wailing melody in the naked trees.

Dirk and Piet had with difficulty obtained work on an extensive bulb farm, where the master knew their sturdiness and industry and cared little for their father's crime

Dirk dug all day by the side of Bolk. Piet planted bulbs in interminable rows. Bolk braced his crooked frame against the blast, and dug steadily, careless of rain or hail, everlastingly chewing his plug, and moistening his lined and withered palms with the brown tobacco juice.

At the end of the day the brothers went together to one of the harbour taverns, generally to that one where the fair-haired daughter of Rink of the Polder officiated as barmaid. Here they would sit and drink heavily night after night. A week after Wimpie's death, they were one night joined by Kees. His cheeks were sunken, his face pallid, his eyes dull. His head drooped, his huge frame was bent like old Gerrit's. He sat and drank glass after glass, stolidly, brutally, in complete silence.

Kees had no clear realisation of what had happened, nor of the change that had taken place in himself.

Coming home one evening after his day's work, he had found the dark little cabin of a room full of praying women, and he saw Ant weeping convulsively beside Wimpie's corpse, the little girls gazing at it in frightened silence. His limbs almost failing under him, Kees had passed through the intruding women to the table where, surrounded by crucifixes and lighted candles, Wimpie lay, his head on a white pillow, his face sunken and emaciated almost beyond recognition, lines of suffering round his drawn and discoloured lips. Now and then one of the mourners would step forward, lift the covering sheet, and gaze at the little dead face.

A murmur of prayers and litanies assailed the father as he entered ; stunned, paralysed by the shock. As each mourner rose to leave the cottage, she sprinkled the body with a palm branch dipped in holy water.

For an hour Kees was dumb, not venturing to touch the little corpse, listening dully to Ant's sobbing, and watching, without attending, the blind grandmother as she shuffled about among the kneeling women. Late in the evening he roused himself and approached to look once more on the dead face of his little son.

Desolating fear and dread settled upon Kees, making him shudder miserably. He was afraid, afraid of everything. He had known that this thing must happen. Wimpie had been taken very ill three days ago. Kees had sat by his bedside night and day, refusing to leave. Early on Tuesday, the child had fallen asleep after a restless night; and the father had whispered to his wife that she must go to the other children and leave him to his watch. Wimpie slept peacefully. About eleven a message came from Breugel that there was digging waiting for Kees if he wanted work. He looked anxiously at his wife. Must he go? She nodded angrily and silently. He went, knowing he would be back at nightfall, thinking he could resume his watch.

He came home thinking over talk he had heard about his father, old Gerrit, lately arrested. He saw the kneeling women, the candles—— Terrible fear pierced to his heart. His little boy was gone; and he had not seen him;—had not spoken to him,—not one word before he had gone.

Kees did not ask why he had not been summoned. Shuddering, abject fear of everything and everybody possessed him. What had they told the dying child of his father? The question seemed to stop the beating of his heart. His energy died down, his passions ebbed, even his detestation of the priest, and the wife, and the wife's mother. He was a stricken, a broken man. Existence seemed a loathsome thing. He looked at Ant with unseeing eyes. The old woman shuffled about with groping hands, but he neither heard nor saw her. Old Rams coughed and hawked; Kees did not hear him. His boy was gone, his only son!

Presently Wimpie was buried. The father saw the little wasted face no more. From the dark corner the pleading eyes no longer looked out at him, holding him in check, helping him to restrain his rage. The little voice no longer sang snatches of hymns; no longer was heard the soft murmur of prayers sanctifying the squalid room. Instead was dreadful gnawing silence, an emptiness which clutched at his throat, and drove the father to the tavern—his only refuge.

Out of work, Kees wandered aimlessly about. Nothing mattered to him now, nothing. He gave up looking for work. He drank and drank, trying to still the gnawing at his heart. Sometimes in the evening, as he trod the lonely path across the dune, he would weep; his huge frame shaken by sobs, his hands clenched in speechless misery.

His fierce and quarrelsome temper had completely changed. The tavern topers, who had once been afraid of the redoubtable poacher, now made him the common butt. They crowded round him and asked him questions; why had he given up poaching? had he lost his skill? and so on. He merely stammered a word or two in reply, shrugged his shoulders, and called for another glass of schnaps. As his liquor took effect upon him, he felt Wimpie at his side, and the lines round his mouth and eyes would relax in a faint smile.

Then the topers went on with their catechism. Had Kees made a private Loard like his father? Was he ashamed to think his father was "doing time" alone? Not the questions or the jeers or the practical jokes moved Kees to resentment. The men grew daily bolder. Why had they ever been in awe of such a fool? who drank with them every night, soaking till he could soak no more, then staggered home drunk but more taciturn than when sober.

Late one November evening Kees stumbled thus along the cinder path to his cottage; stupidly inoffensive he flung himself down upon an old washing bench.

Ant, prompted by her mother, burst out on him with a torrent of angry words.

Vrouw Rams had been asking if her daughter was now convinced of the truth; did she admit now that her man was a sot and a rascal, a thief like his disgraceful father?

Ant's loathing and hatred had become uncontrollable. Winter was near, and already the pinch of want was felt in the cottage; the hungry children huddled together looked a mere heap of unclean rags. The unswept floor was littered with dirt and rubbish. For some time the scanty meals had been eked out with beans given to Ant by the manager of the tinning factory; now he had stopped this alms, on the ground that her husband was a notorious drunkard, who was filling up the cup of his family's disgrace. The insult had rankled in the woman's mind, she determined to throw it in her husband's teeth on the first opportunity.

"Drunken, good-for-nothing beast!" she screamed, "you don't care if we die of hunger! It is all your fault, you wicked atheist! You bring bad luck on every one, you scoundrel!"

She walked backwards and forwards as she spoke, her gestures like those of an angry witch. The children crept into corners. Dientje wept. Their mother's careworn face became ghastly as she hurled her words of vituperation at the man, who took no notice, not understanding, only half hearing what she said. The indifference added to her irritation. She worked herself up into perfect madness, screaming, cursing, banging her fists on the table, foaming and raving.

Now there was no occasion to control herself for Wimpie's sake. And why because Wimpie was dead had Kees allowed himself thus to go absolutely to pieces? Heretic though he was, he must know Wimpie was still alive, and was happy. The Lord had taken him to heaven! In that knowledge his mother could rest content and forget the dumb anguish with which at first she had realised her loss. Why did not Kees take this view?

And the boy was now, of course, free from the demoniacal enchantment which had bound him to his father. Now he must loathe and curse that father whom he surely would have hated on earth if the devil had not thrown a spell over him. For herself, Ant hated her husband more bitterly than ever; Wimpie's death seemed to have fanned into fiercer heat the fire of her bigotry.

Vrouw Rams heard with great enjoyment Ant's screams and curses. She hobbled up nearer to listen to her daughter; standing up so boldly to this thief and murderer and beggarly heretic! She was herself too much afraid of the big man with the mighty and homicidal fists to join in the quarrel. But she had painted a fine picture of him in Wiereland, never growing tired of slandering the "drunken murderer" to her neighbours behind his back.

Ant raved on while she marched furiously about the room.

"You dirty beggar, you! I suppose you'll have us all in gaol with your infernal old heretic of a father. Blasphemous scoundrels all of you! The money! Do you hear? the money, I say! Hand it over. There are twelve mouths to feed, and you are drinking it all! The money! monster, the money! *My* money!"

Kees did not answer. He sat huddled up, listening stupidly with an occasional foolish nod, after which his head drooped still lower on his breast. His silence was exasperating. Ant could not bear it. She must somehow pierce the man's armour of indifference, hurting him somehow, and knowing she had hurt him. In a hoarse shrill scream she went on—

"Curse you, are you going to kill us all, *as you killed my Wimpie?*"

Now indeed Kees shuddered. He rose from the bench, his head swam, his face quivered, his whole frame shook, his eyes glared.

The children crept to Wimpie's empty bed as if instinct bade them seek sanctuary there. Only Dientje still clung to her mother, sobbing piteously, while Vrouw Rams tried to push the furious woman out of her husband's reach. But Ant perceived no danger: she raged on, "Wimpie's murderer, I say! *You* starved him!"

Kees was sober now. He was listening. What was she saying? She had named Wimpie! his boy! his boy! Wimpie's murderer? He? She said it twice.

The blood rushed to the man's head; a bloody mist hung before his eyes. His strength returned. With uplifted fist he sprang upon the woman with a shout of rage and hatred.

The old woman and Dientje interfered but he hurled them out of his path. The children round Wimpie's crib screamed with terror: Kees neither saw nor heard. In a blind fury of destruction he struck his fist into his wife's sallow face, twice, thrice, crashing his knuckles into the teeth till blood poured from her mouth.

The third blow felled her and left Kees reeling above her prostrate form.

Vrouw Rams limped to the door, screaming—

"Murder! Murder! The poacher is murdering his wife!"

Old Rams dragged himself from his chair, took his wife by the arm and pulled her back into the room.

"Hold your tongue, you old devil!" he said, silencing her. "Swine! All swine!" he muttered, hobbling towards his prostrate daughter.

The lamp was still swinging from the blow Kees had given it as he flung himself upon Ant.

She lay motionless, seemingly dead.

Kees stood over her, sucking his bleeding knuckles.

Fear settled down on the little room like a material thing. There was silence. The lamp cast deep shadows, out of which, dim and ghostly, loomed the broken chairs and the dirty table with its few scraps of food. Silhouettes of the children's heads danced upon the walls as the lamp swayed to and fro.

Then Kees, ghastly pale, with bent shoulders and hanging head, staggered out of the house, without looking round at the fallen woman, whose voice still rang in his ears—

"Wimpie's murderer! *you!*"

Away on the dark dune, at some distance from his home, he stopped. He burst into a passion of weeping. He felt himself a broken, ruined thing. He had no more life; it had been torn from him for ever.

III

When Ant came to herself, she was, strange as it may appear, full of contrition and shame for her own part in this terrible scene. The savagery with which he had knocked her down, pleased her better than his abject silence. She had lain insensible for some time. Her jaw was broken and she suffered many days of pain and misery. But she made no complaints, and she never stormed at Kees again. Night after night he came home drunk, but she said nothing. She even attained to some dim comprehension of his martyrdom.

Kees was very quiet. She spoke to him sometimes about urgent matters, but he never seemed to hear her. He became timid; panic-struck. He trembled when he remembered his midnight poaching exploits. Now he never even looked at a gun.

Day after day—perhaps after an hour's digging—he walked heavily to the tavern. He greedily accepted any liquor he was given by jeering companions who wanted to make him talk. But he only drank steadily on; not a word could they get from him.

Vrouw Rams told everywhere that he had tried to murder his wife. All Wiereland knew he had broken Ant's jaw, and that she would have bled to death had not old Rams, who as a rule never stirred from his chair, himself stanched and bound her wound.

The tavern company thought this a fine tale. Now they knew their man again! It was like the old Kees to break the woman's jaw and pound her to a jelly. Half a murderer already, he was now the most desperate drunkard of them all, and any day might break into some ghastly outrage. Meantime he merely staggered stupidly about the streets—Kees the poacher; who in the old days had never been seen drunk by any one.

Thus the end of November came. In the melancholy grey of morning, when a leaden pall hung over the fields and the rain streamed down unceasingly, Kees staggered along the path by his house. He felt himself a hunted outcast. He was full of unutterable loneliness and fear and bitter gnawing pain as he plunged along, not knowing whither. He was afraid—afraid! He longed for death. And he longed for the fiery liquor which dulled his heartache, which warmed his brain and gave him glowing dreams of his lost boy.

A couple of labourers, loafing along the path, tried to get him with them to the tavern. What was he about, moping there in the rain like one daft? But Kees would not go with them; he would get to the tavern quite soon enough by himself.

In the autumn evening, the Wiereland fields lay sad and grey. There was a new master on Gerrit Hassel's land; by his side worked old Bolk. Far across the empty tulip fields, distinct against the horizon, could be seen the dark shapes of Dirk and Piet. The trees and hedges moaned in the chill wind. Wintry gloom settled upon the land. The workers stooped to their toil, their bent and shadowy forms enwrapped in the deepening twilight.

As the day died, melancholy reigned over the wide expanse.

Life and the voices of life were arrested by the oncoming of the darkness and the night.

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