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DAYS OF OUR YEARS

by
Pierre van Paassen



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• MONDAY • TUESDAY • WEDNESDAY • THURSDAY • FRIDAY •		• SATURDAY • SUNDAY •
MONDAY • TUESDAY	Contents	SATURDAY • SUNDAY
• WEDNESDAY • THURSDAY • FRIDAY • SATURDAY • SUNDAY •		

1. YOUTH IN HOLLAND	3
2. IN THE BACKWASH OF WAR	51
3. PARISIAN DAYS	99
4. MEN AND EVENTS	162
5. THE STREET OF OUR LADY	210
6. NOTES FROM AN AFRICAN DIARY	252
7. ETHIOPIAN INTERLUDE	300
8. AFTER SEVEN CENTURIES	347
9. L'INFÂME	421
10. WORLD WITHOUT END	492
11. VOICES IN THE STORM	505
12. AFRAID OF VICTORY	513
13. IN THE SHADOW OF TOMORROW	553

DAYS OF OUR YEARS

CHAPTER ONE

Youth in Holland

I

MY EARLIEST RECOLLECTIONS go back thirty-five years to a silent street in a small urban community of the Netherlands. One side of the street was deeply shaded in summertime by a row of mulberry trees whose branches projected from an adjacent orchard over the top of a crumbling stone wall. At one time men must have passed in and out of that garden through a low door cut in the wall under a sculptured arch, but in my days that door was never opened. The orchard lay abandoned and neglected, a desert of weeds and rank grass. Boys carved their initials and those of their sweethearts in the worm-eaten door and used the wall as a rampart in games and street battles. Everything inside the orchard, the summerhouse, the fountains, the ornamental benches, was given over to decay, but to us it was a world of miracles. No matter where you scratched the moss and creeping vine, you came upon myriads of spiders and ants and bugs rushing about on their mysterious business: weaving their webs, waging their wars and founding their colonies and empires amidst the accumulation of dust and saltpeter. At the end of the street, rising like a steep mountain from the plain, appeared the green earthworks of a dismantled military fort. Its moats had been dry a hundred years and the sharp pikes on its encircling palisades had been twisted into inoffensive rings, or entirely removed by successive generations of boys eager to climb to the bastion's summit for a view of the river with its endless procession of flat-bottomed ships, steamboats and fishing rafts. On the farther shore, under a blue sky dotted with disklike clouds, the immense panorama of Brabant's friendly

villages extended as far as the eye could reach both to east and west. You picked out the church steeples and windmills which protruded like marble needles and thimbles from the foliage of beech and birch, and prided yourself on knowing the names of the communes to which they belonged. From our observation post on the crest of the fort those hamlets with their white cottages and red roofs looked as tiny and as neatly ranged as children's toys on the festive table of Saint Nicholas' Eve. In midsummer our bastion hill was for a few weeks transformed into a magic mountain of color. Then, patches of buttercups and wild sorrel, lady's-smock and daisies, streaked with ribbons of blood-red poppies, covered its flanks with a carpet that rippled softly in the river breeze. But with the first days of August the feast of flowers came to an end. The silhouette of the mower could be seen from the street, swinging his implement against the southern horizon. After he had passed, the fairy mountain was an earth-brown knoll again, covered with stubbles, and waiting disconsolately for the rains and snow of winter. Facing the abandoned orchard, across the cobblestone roadway, stood a line of nine unpretentious houses of red brick, all alike in outer appearance, except that the windows of the structure in the middle of the row were devoid of curtains. In its shallow porch above the entrance hung a signboard with this inscription painted in vivid letters of black on white: HERE IS A SCHOOL WITH THE BIBLE. THE FEAR OF THE LORD IS THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM.

In that institution I spent seven of the most impressionable years of my life.

Not a single detail of the school's interior arrangement has faded from my memory. . . . I still see the long line of wooden shoes in the hallway and the austere whitewashed classrooms where our eyes smarted from the clouds of acrid smoke which poured from the potbellied stoves on winter mornings when the wind blew from the northwest. On such days, we boys were required to take turns in inducing the smoldering peat and coal fire to burst into flame by means of a pair of bellows. I do not recall anyone ever succeeding. And small wonder! For reasons of economy the coal was doused with water before being put into the stove! Back of the principal's desk hung a rack for his collection of long clay pipes which he used in rotation. Occasionally, when we judged that reprisals were in order for some measure of collective punishment the master had meted out, we secretly smeared the mouthpieces of his pipes with

a certain invisible and unmentionable concoction. We then sat back to watch his grimaces of disgust when he placed the stem in his mouth. Another object of amusement in the classroom was a large-sized wood gravure of "Johannes Calvijn." Calvin was pictured in profile in a high-collared toga. The side of his face was almost covered by a long velvet flap which descended from a flat beret to his shoulders. Besides the tip of his nose, which had been daubed a violent purple by some youthful iconoclast, a deft touch of crayon had prolonged the reformer's black goatee into something that looked like a cross between a corkscrew and a rattlesnake. It bristled forth with so Mephistophelian an effect from the mass of pleats and ruffles around his neck that whenever the principal, pointing to Calvin's likeness, awesomely mentioned the name of "our beloved father in God," we had all we could do to keep from screaming. Above Calvin's portrait, but safe from the disfiguring pencils of would-be vandals, hung a row of yellowed prints representing the other reformers—Farel, Beza, John Knox—and a colored lithograph of William the Silent, Prince of Orange, the father of the fatherland.

Thinking of that now distant place and day, it is as if I feel a breeze from the Middle Ages blow into my face. That school was a model of authoritarianism: the pupils were considered and treated as little automatons without a will or inclination of their own. The discipline was ascetic, almost penitential; while the curriculum did not differ in essentials from that in use in Dutch schools a hundred or even two hundred years earlier. Before I had learned to read or write, the principal made me memorize long quotations from Holy Writ and from the Heidelberg Catechism. At the age of six I could reel off, without a single error, that whole list of Hebrew "begetters" from the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel which is supposed to be Christ's family tree. For this almost incredible feat of memory in a child of six, an uncle of mine, more in pity than in admiration, presented me with a leather-bound copy of Hans Andersen's *Fairy Tales*, from which he was good enough to read me a piece each night before I was put to bed.

The headmaster, a tight-lipped, sallow-complexioned old fundamentalist whose protruding blue eyes were enlarged to twice their natural size by a pair of enormously thick lenses, was a descendant of a Huguenot family which had settled in Holland after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Gaunt, his face a mask of deep wrinkles, his bony fingers tapering off into nails as long as those of a

Chinese mandarin, he inspired me with so much more terror than respect that I still see his ghost at times. There was not a spark of humor in that man. Not once in all those years did I see his face soften into a smile. He had come to the teaching profession much in the same spirit as an Inquisitor approaches a victim in the torture chamber. His conception of his task was not to guide and shepherd, but to correct a crowd of hopelessly bad children, who were inclined from birth—as that lovely Catechism specified—“to do evil and hate God.” In fact, the whole system of “Schools with the Bible” in Holland was set up to counteract the rational mode of thought which swept over Europe in the wake of the French Revolution. Against the spirit of inquiry and free thought of the nineteenth century, which was deemed to have poisoned two or three generations of Dutchmen, these schools were to provide an antidote by instilling respect for the ancient verities.

The “instilling” was frequently done (in our case) with the aid of a brass-edged ruler of ebony wood, which the principal, in spite of his reputed shortsightedness, manipulated with uncanny precision. He never missed. Upon the slightest provocation: a mere whisper in the classroom or a giggle, he advanced upon you without a word, seized hold of your wrist, and brought down his stick on your knuckles, not in anger, but with calm deliberation. If you wept in pain and humiliation after one of these punitive ministrations, he locked you up for the rest of the day in a small dark room where the coal was kept and which swarmed with rats and mice.

The principal was assisted by three younger men, who constantly quarreled with him because of his merciless severity. Every term saw a new set of assistant masters, but rheumatic and asthmatic “Monsieur”—the title was a remnant from the Napoleonic era—seemed both immovable and immortal. He grew more inflexible and forbidding as time went on. I still see him suddenly jumping from his chair at his desk where he had been silently reading our compositions, and, in a blaze of anger, his lips curled in a tigerish leer that revealed his yellow stumps of teeth, pouncing upon a fellow pupil in whose copybook he had just discovered a sentence that displeased him. He went on beating until the boy sank fainting to his knees. The offending sentence, I happen to recall, dealt with “snowflakes fluttering from a pitilessly gray heavenly roof.”

Heaven, it appeared, was never pitiless. . . .

In springtime, when the windows were opened, we could hear the

carillon in St. John's cathedral tower sing out the passage of the hours with selections from the patriotic hymnology. Often, too, a wandering band of German musicians would stray into the street. If they played Luther's "A Safe Stronghold," or some such solemn chorale, we children were permitted to listen, the music being judged edifying by Monsieur. But upon hearing the umpah-band striking the first bars of so "worldly" a piece as "Oh, Susanna," the master would almost suffer an apoplectic fit. He turned purple with rage, the veins in his scrawny neck suddenly stood out like thick blue cords, and he slammed the windows shut with a loud bang. A kinder reception was accorded the local operator of an organ of Barbary, a bearded individual who was popularly known by the onomatopoeic name of Jan Rêketetè. A fellow Calvinist, Jan knew Monsieur's predilections on the subject of music. When he came near our school, he always changed the record he was playing to Sankey's well-known revival song, "Lord, I Hear of Showers of Blessing," in which we were allowed to join our voices, Monsieur leading off. But neither the master nor Jan Rêketetè suspected, I am sure, that there existed another set of words to this tune—far from edifying.

When I first came to his school, Monsieur was in the habit of including in his morning prayer a fervent appeal to the Lord God of Hosts for the support of our kinsmen, the Boers of the Transvaal, who were at that time defending the independence of their republic against British usurpation. He prayed in a harsh and rasping voice, speaking to God as to a fellow schoolmaster in a succession of short, staccato exclamations: "Go Thou to their aid. . . . Delay not. . . . For the water has come up to their lips. . . . Smite Thou the enemies of Thine elect. . . . Consume the perfidious foe with the fire of Thy nostrils. . . . Revenge Thy servants, our brothers, so that the earth may be filled with Thy terror and glory. . . ." Some mornings this went on for a quarter of an hour before a group of boys six years old, who had to keep their eyes closed, and their hands folded above their desks while Monsieur laid down the law to the Almighty. After prayer, we sang a stanza or two from a rhymed version of the Psalms, whereupon the master read a goodly portion from the "*Staten*"-Bible before passing on to the order of the day: spelling, arithmetic and the history of our fatherland. Upon the conclusion of the religious exercises we were allowed to unfold our hands and were given a minute to blow our noses, while Mon-

sieur took a pinch of snuff. This made him sneeze so vehemently that he staggered on his feet. It was the only physical exercise he indulged in.

It soon became evident, however, that Monsieur's daily intercessions failed to have the desired effect on the course of hostilities at the other end of the world. The heroism of the Boers was of no avail against the overwhelming military pressure England was bringing to bear: Generals Buller and French crushed the farmer commandos one by one, President Kruger fled to Holland, and Botha signed the peace of Vereeniging. The war "for freedom and right" was over, and lost.

Britain's triumph in South Africa cut a deep impression in my youthful mind. After listening to Monsieur's solemn apostrophes, I could not understand how a God whose chief attribute was said to be justice could have permitted the forces of evil to overwhelm a people that had completely placed its trust in Him. The facile explanation advanced in the fundamentalist milieu in which I grew up, that "God's ways are inscrutable and past finding out," left me unsatisfied and ill at ease. I thought, but took good care not to voice a sentiment which might have seemed to cast doubt on the divine perfection, that the God, who had in the past stood steadfastly by Holland in its long struggle with Spain, had damaged His reputation irreparably by giving the victory to England in this case. I had never yet heard of Napoleon's theory that God is always on the side of the best artillery, nor had I come to the conviction (which I gained after fighting as a soldier in the Great War) that no cause, whatever its merits, warrants the closing of men's eyes to the goodness of the sun.

Some of the most intransigent Boers, who preferred exile to swearing the required oath of allegiance to Edward VII, settled in our community after the war. They became the heroes of my youth. It was from them, on long winter evenings at home, that I learned the details of that uneven struggle for the possession of the diamond fields and the gold mines of Kimberley and the Rand; the ghastly concentration camps wherein Boer women, separated from their husbands and children (Kitchener had said in one of his communiqués that he had found Dutch mothers to be totally bereft of a normal maternal instinct), were given over to the lust and the cruelty of a whisky-crazed soldiery. It was enough to make you boil

with rage and vow, along with other little boys, to go forth some day and take revenge in that not distant city up the Thames.

Our elders, although less martially inclined (they knew Holland's weakness), deeply felt the shame and the humiliation inflicted on our race by England. And I vividly recall one Sunday morning in our church: an exiled South African dominie, choosing for his text the episode which deals with the Prophet's experiences in the lions' den, proceeded to compare the woes of the people of the Transvaal with the ordeal of the Hebrew seer in the midst of ferocious beasts. He so deeply stirred us all that one member of the congregation, suddenly rising in his seat, exclaimed with shaking fists: "But I say to you all: the God of Daniel still liveth!" Upon these words that entire congregation of undemonstrative Dutchmen, tears running down their grim faces and the organ crashing out the tune, burst into the Boer national anthem:

*The four-color of our dear Transvaal,
Will surely fly over the veldt again!*

It was an incident never to be forgotten. Whenever in later years, in Geneva or elsewhere, I heard a Haile Selassie or a Dr. Chaim Weizmann affirm their faith in England's high purposes, or I listened to Captain Eden or Lord Cecil repeat Woodrow Wilson's prophetic phrase about self-determination for small peoples, or heard Gandhi or Azaña talk of the British sense of fair play, the pathetic figure of Oom Paul Kruger going the round of Europe's chancelleries rose before my mind's eye, and his words, pronounced at a meeting in the city of Utrecht to which my father took me, came back to mind: "England told them to shut the door in my face and all of them obeyed."

2

The population of the community of Gorcum in which I was born had been stationary between twelve and thirteen thousand for fully three centuries, ever since the foundation of the Dutch Republic. Hemmed in by a ring of old-fashioned bastions, palisaded redoubts, and deep moats, the town was incapable of expansion. For the building of a doghouse or a cowshed outside the gates, permis-

sion from the War Department was necessary, and since that body invariably refused to sanction the erection of anything "that might offer a visible target to enemy guns," the burghers had long ago given up trying. We lived in a house that was built in 1644. The building next door was a hundred years older. It bore a sculptured inscription on the façade which read: PRAISE THE LORD. HONOR HIM. FOR THE DAY OF RECKONING IS BEARING DOWN UPON YOU! Cannonballs were embedded in its walls, and of one of these projectiles the story was told, that before coming to lodge between two windows, it had taken off the head of my maternal great-great-grandfather as he stood quietly smoking his pipe in the cool of the evening. The argument as to whether it was a Prussian or a French ball that had decapitated the old gentleman was occasionally revived in our family. Nobody could be quite sure, it seemed, inasmuch as the incident had occurred at a moment when two rival armies were contending for possession of one of the town's outer forts.

There were men living, when I was a boy, who remembered having seen Louis, the first King of Holland, and his brother the Emperor Napoleon. Half an hour from the city walls, near the village of Dalem, the spot was pointed out where Bonaparte had stood one winter morning, watching the river pile up immense blocks of ice against the dikes as he passed by in a carriage on his way from Paris to Amsterdam to make peace between Louis and Hortense. In order to save the dike, Napoleon, with his quick grasp of a dangerous situation, had ordered the batteries of the town wall to fire into the river to break up the buckling glacial pyramids.

Except for the Emperor's visit, the community's only claim to fame was that it was the birthplace of Jan van der Heyden, the inventor of the fire engine, and that it had harbored (albeit for a few short hours) one of Holland's greatest sons, Hugo Grotius, the jurist and father of the League of Nations. Grotius had been imprisoned for his political and religious beliefs in the castle of Loevesteyn, an early, medieval bastille which stands on Monks' Island at the confluence of the Meuse and an estuary of the Rhine a mile above Gorcum. He had managed to escape from that prison by hiding in a double-bottomed bookcase which his jailers carried out themselves. The famous bookcase stood in the Orphan House in our town, and many times I sat in it, breathing through the holes that the author of *The Right of War and Peace* had cut in the false bottom with his own penknife.

Nothing ever happened to disturb the peaceful flow of life in our community: children were born; the singing tower changed its tune once a year; old men sat on wooden benches by the river's edge watching the ships drift by; women gathered around the pumps to gossip; the young lieutenants of the garrison strolled about after four in the afternoon and let their sabers rattle a little on the cobblestones when they spotted a pretty girl; there was a fire occasionally, or the body of a drowned fisherman was washed up on the shore; and once a year, on the Queen's birthday, the troops held a parade and everybody, except a handful of Socialists, wore an orange-colored ribbon and drank lemonade. By seven in the evening, earlier in wintertime, the streets were deserted, and after ten, the night watch with his lantern went the rounds to see that all doors were locked. This man, Ary Struyck, a rheumatic cripple, lived in a small chamber in the clock tower and looked after the carillon, winding it up when it had run down. Many times I climbed to his loft to watch the bats swarm out of the belfry at sundown and to listen to his reminiscences. When he grew old and failing, I clambered the narrow spiral stairway on Sunday afternoons to read to him, at my mother's instigation, a chapter from a ponderous book of no less ponderous sermons by a divine named Kohlbrugge. The trouble with Ary in his later years was that he was worried about the here-after. Not that he had been a spectacular sinner in his day—that would have been almost impossible in our community—but because the doctrine of predestination, in which he was a firm believer like everyone else, made eternal salvation uncertain for any man, no matter how righteous. The same problem troubled me not a little in my adolescent years, and when I was a student at the local gymnasium, I decided that when I should have become a pastor, I would compose a book of answers to questions of doubt and anguish that men and women might ask on their deathbeds. If I have not carried out that high resolve it is because I grew more interested in the way men live rather than in their last agony.

3

With my uncle Kees, a landscape painter, I roamed the neighboring countryside looking for picturesque sites: quaint bridges and

old churches. In the long summer vacations I crossed the river with him and walked south into Brabant and Flanders. We often stayed away for weeks on these excursions, and when we finally returned home, sun-tanned and weather-beaten, he had a book full of sketches to work on during the winter months. In the evenings we lodged in the humble village hostelrys and I listened to his talk with the peasants. If the hour grew late, he let me sleep in the mornings, while he went out with his palette and brushes. After the noon meal of black bread and beer, we invariably pushed on to the next place.

From Uncle Kees I learned more history than from all the school-books combined. His favorite subject was the Franco-Prussian War, the era of Napoleon III, and the Commune of Paris. That period, he used to say, was the turning point in the evolution of Europe. He described it as the beginning of the trustification of business which would, he predicted, cause the peoples, after a short time of comparative well-being, a series of bloody nationalistic wars wherein rival states would seek to eliminate each other by the most ruthless means conceivable. I never asked him how he knew all this, but I must acknowledge after all these years, that my uncle Kees saw the future clearer than many a contemporary statesman who went on blandly holding forth the vision of poverty abolished and all classes of men enjoying the fruit of human ingenuity in a managed society.

I believe that the secret of Uncle Kees' knowledge of the world lay in the fact that he had spent several years at one of the art academies in Paris. There he had met all types of men: he had been the companion of painters, amongst them Vincent van Gogh; of poets, dreamers and ne'er-do-wells. He had seen the great Tolstoy on the banks of the Seine, and had heard Victor Hugo, Renan, Élisée Reclus and Bakunin in popular assemblies. The giants, he called them. Uncle Kees knew the story of the Commune's every barricade, and on our walks, he patiently explained to me the meaning of the decrees issued by the first Popular Government in Europe. Breathlessly, his eyes aflame, his fists clenched, he would suddenly come to a halt on one of those rural roads in Brabant and tell me again the story of the last butchery in the cemetery of Père Lachaise.

"On that day," he would burst out, "all the hyenas of Europe, all the crowned and uncrowned wolves thought they had squelched the voice of freedom for all eternity. They set about to re-create the world in their own petty image. What we see around us today is the result: pettiness in art, pettiness in economics, pettiness in love,

pettiness in religion. But mark my words, *you* Pierre, *you* will live to see the day when the whole European kettle is going to explode and the debris will come tumbling down to bury this bourgeois world."

"Who will make the kettle explode, Uncle Kees?"

"They will do it themselves, my boy! They live by violence and they will perish by violence!"

The kilometers were shortened by his talent for storytelling. He spoke with passionate simplicity. He was a champion of every struggling cause in the world; he seemed to experience the joys and sorrows of others as if they were his own. He would grow as excited about Irish independence or about Macedonian nationalism as if he had been born in Cork or in the Balkans. I drank in his words with fervor, and till this day I remember whole sentences from his wayside conversation. But there were also days when we trudged along for miles in silence until, weary with his own thoughts, he would suddenly break into song: "China is a charming land which will surely please Your Highness," or would recite from Shelley, whom he knew in translation, or from Victor Hugo, his favorite. Often, too, we lightened our step by whistling in unison, while he took from his knapsack the tin provision box and drummed out a march with his fingers.

If ever there was a man of whom it could be said that he had two fatherlands, France and his own, Uncle Kees was that man. In the years of our constant companionship, he communicated to my spirit something of his boundless admiration for France and the French people. They represented, he would assert, the vanguard of humanity, and whatever was done in Paris was of importance to all of us Europeans. I do not mean to infer that he held Holland in low esteem: all the Dutch in him revolted against men who talked disparagingly, or even lightly, about our people and our country. He followed with almost religious passion the painful developments of the Dreyfus affair which had thrown not only France, but half of Europe, in turmoil. He would seize the newspapers and read the latest news from Paris with exclamations of joy, or, depending on the occasion, with snorts of indignation: "Ah, those Jesuits!" When he exclaimed thus, I knew that things had not gone so well for our hero on Devil's Island. A hundred times I heard from him what Zola had written, what Picquart had said, why an attempt had been made on the life of Maître Labori, and why Major Henri had committed

suicide in the prison of Mont-Valérien. It was my uncle, too, who took me to see my first moving picture, which dealt precisely with the Dreyfus case. We went no less than four times to the local meeting house in Gorcum to see the same film, and that is why every detail of the scenes remains vividly engraved in my memory. I do not remember the names of the actors, but it seems to me that it was a more realistic portrayal than the American production in which Mr. Paul Muni later starred with so much *éclat*. For one thing, Zola's wife and mistress were shown in friendly relationship, something which is, of course, inconceivable in Hollywood. Clemenceau, who was not an advocate, did not wear a lawyer's gown in the court scene, while Anatole France, that man of taste and feeling, conveyed a more dignified impression in the Pantheon scene.

Although farm machinery had begun to make its appearance, we noticed on our roamings in the rural regions of Holland and Flanders that the peasants still cut their grain with a scythe. Children of orthodox parents in the outlying hamlets, where no "School with the Bible" existed, walked four or five miles to town and back in their wooden shoes every day. We sliced our long beans by hand in the late summer, and made apple cider in November; the wheat was ground to flour between flat stones turned by a windmill. But a change was in the air. I well remember the first automobile puffing up to the ferry, and the shower of stones with which the peasants pelted the occupants of the monster that frightened their horses. The sight of a motorcar was said to turn the milk in the cows' udders. For years, one of my schoolmates bore the humiliating nickname of "the liar" because, having been taken for an automobile ride in a southerly direction, he had returned a few hours later, declaring that he had been as far as where the signposts by the roadside were in the French language.

Uncle Kees was one of those men who looked upon industrialization with mingled feelings of pride in human achievement and fear for the future. He was not optimistic about the miracles of technique and the invention of more and more ingenious machinery for the production and distribution of goods. Unless the whole human race could benefit from this change, he saw in technical advance a limitation placed on human progress rather than a spur. "Some day," he would say, "the common people will pay dearly for these newfangled contraptions." He was not wrong in that prediction. For industry, as time went on, engaged armies of work-