

III Passage Damstraat (1)

But get well again very soon Kees' father did not, and in the ensuing weeks Kees had to go to the doctor and the pharmacist's almost every day. He found it essential to make a good impression on these two people. At the doctor's that was difficult: he had this thick doormat at the entrance to his consulting room, which Kees never managed to step across in a casual way. If he kept ostentatiously wiping his feet on it the doctor would shout at him if he had any plans of ever shutting that door? And then, mercilessly, this mat would get caught in it.

It was also irksome that the doctor always listened with only half an ear, and thus got him confused. Then Kees felt himself a clumsy stammerer; *he, Kees!* On his way to the doctor, and also in the waiting-room, leaned against the wall, he often resolved for this once to enter very much at ease; to have his cap off immediately, to wipe his feet while softly closing the door, meanwhile saying: 'Compliments from...'. But this light-and-airy entrance never succeeded.

At the pharmacist's things went better. For one thing, he could propitiate the man by always remembering the empty bottles. Then he had only to hand in the slip of paper and say: 'A prescription, please sir,' and then to wait. Usually the employee told him to be back in an hour, and then it was a matter of simply saying: 'Thank you, sir.' Sometimes, again, he had to await the preparation, and then he settled down on the brown sofa that stood against the wall, and read the inscriptions on all the boxes and bottles. That was sublime: he then felt himself being watched with interest by the pharmacist himself, who sat in the room behind the curtains, and as with a supernatural thirst for learning he let his gaze rest for a minute on every Latin inscription. Any moment, surely, the man could emerge from his room and ask: 'You would like to learn Latin, wouldn't you laddie?' He'd stammer yes sir, and they'd come to an agreement: one lesson every week for free. In this way he would in secret be learning Latin, too...

His teacher at school was easy-going. Kees was of course late repeatedly, because it was always so crowded at the doctor's. Then he'd just say: 'Been to doctor,' and it would be OK. Every now and then the teacher would say: 'Oh, by the way, how *is* your father now?' But well, what could he say, improving steadily, but very slowly.

Everyone got used to it; the boys had even forgotten that his father was ill. And at home, too, the gravity had worn off. Truus and Thomas were back again, and could play again just as if there were no sick person.

Only, every other day after dinner Kees had to go to his grandparents, to tell them how Dad was doing. That was a bothersome job, because he never really had anything to tell them. If he left too soon his granddad would say: 'Are you on pins and needles again?' And if he stayed a bit longish, playing with the cat for example, that had learnt some tricks, then his grandma would ask: 'Can your mother go without you so long, now that your dad is ill?' You just couldn't please them.

And it always smelled so stuffy there, with a kind of old-folks-smell that sometimes made him queasy. The tea warmer usually smoked, too. Then he would warn his grandmother, for he could smell it even at the front door.

To go there with Truus was out of the question. She couldn't keep still, laughed too much,

and sometimes even started to sing. And then Granddad would say: 'Aren't you ashamed, what with this illness of your father, to make such a hullabaloo?' Therefore he usually went alone.

But even that wouldn't do for them, 'cause then they went: 'Why don't you ever take the children with you, the poor kids. It's such a nice little walk, and for your mother it'd be some relief.'

OK: so they would like to see him coming regularly with both Truus and Tom. Would take him two hours at least for the return trip.

But oh well, if only his father was well again. Then he wouldn't have to go so often to begin with, and they could also not keep harping on about him having to mind *this*, and remember *that*, and what with this illness of his father, always this illness of his father. They made faces as if his father was ill forever...

One evening after dinner Kees had to come to his father's bed. 'Listen, Kees,' his father said, 'there is an errand that has to be run every month: bringing money to an office. I cannot do that, now that I'm ill, and Mum of course can't either. Now you have to do it.'

'Oh, that's OK Dad,' Kees said, 'when do I have to go?'

'You've got to go tonight, but mind you, nobody knows anything about it, and you mustn't talk with anyone about it. Not even with your granddad, if he should want to draw you out. And in the waiting room of that office there's always a lot of people gossiping, but you keep yourself to yourself.'

'Of course,' Kees said, and he blushed.

'When it's your turn you go inside. It'll be noted down in a booklet that your mother will give you. You keep that in your pocket until you're inside with the gentlemen.'

'In my inside pocket,' Kees said.

'And don't jingle the money on the way: five rixdollars.'

'Twelve fifty every month?' Kees thought out loud.

His father gave a short laugh, but then became serious again. Don't let yourself be diverted on the way. You won't take any boy with you of course. You know the Passage in Damstraat?'

'Where it echoes so when you shout?' Kees asked.

'That's the spot. There's a door there on your left hand side. You go up the stairs, room number 19, you'll find that, won't you?'

'I will,' Kees said calmly.

Then his mother came with a slip of paper with the five rixdollars and a little black booklet. Kees put the booklet in the inside pocket of his jacket, and the money in the pocket of his trousers.

'You'll be polite, obviously,' his father said.

'Just keep your hand on the money all the time,' the mother said, 'and put your hanky in the other pocket.'

'Do I have to go every month now?' Kees enquired.

'When Dad is well he'll go again,' his mother said.

'I can go every month, you know,' Kees suggested.

'Not necessary,' his mother answered. 'Just be off now, so you won't have to run. They close at nine, but it's not yet eight now, and you can easily make it in half an hour.'

'In under ten minutes,' Kees corrected her.

'There,' his father said with a chortle.

So Kees went. He immediately agreed with himself that this mysterious errand was something very special in his life. Nobody must know about it, so the surest thing would be not to head for Damstraat directly, and to remain attentive if he weren't followed by some acquaintance.

This he did. Having arrived at the Passage by a detour, he began to study the window of the toy shop with feigned interest. Then he looked carefully in all directions to see if there was no acquaintance in sight, which happily was not the case, and took a quick glance at the door by which he had to enter. A glass door it was: he would have to race the whole straight bit up the stairs, for once he was inside an acquaintance *might* happen to come through the Passage. If only that door would open quickly and easily...

Once again he looked in all directions. Then he rushed at the door, pushed it open and bolted up the stairs. Once past the bend he felt safe.

And then it suddenly occurred to him what a dimwit he had been, what a simpleton. Like some ignorant ninny. There had been such a simple device: limp! That's what anyone would do in these circumstances. Eternally stupid of him. Remember on leaving...

The door to room 19 stood wide open. Kees remained standing on the threshold and looked around. There were some people sitting on sofas along the wall. Fortunately no acquaintance, or he'd have had to turn back on the spot. Under the lamp, at a little table, sat a concierge wearing a cap. He beckoned Kees wordlessly, gave him a ticket and gestured at the sofas. 'Thank you,' Kees whispered, and he tiptoed to a corner and sat down there. As if by chance he glanced at the ticket. Number forty five.

A small jingle sounded. 'Thirty-two,' the concierge said, so loudly that it gave Kees quite a start. A tall man stood up. Hey, he too had this little black booklet in his hand... He walked towards a door, the door of room 20, and went in.

This tall man was in some predicament, Kees thought. He had been exposed, so to speak, because Kees would never forget his face. If they should ever meet somewhere he could give him a bad scare by saying aloud: 'Passage, Damstraat.' But he would reassure him immediately: 'Sir, your secret is safe with me.'

The jingle sounded again: 'Thirty-three,' the concierge said. A boy in trousers, sixteen at least. Didn't even take off his cap as he went in! Some dunce...

A lady came in, out of breath from climbing the stairs. Even more of a fool: opened her little black booklet and showed it to the concierge. If she was in the right place. The concierge gave her number forty-six. She sat down next to Kees, opened her handbag and started counting money. Kees counted along, but resolved never to tell anybody. Even if they'd put him to the rack, he'd maintain that he had never seen the lady and knew nothing. But all the same he now knew that she had to pay twenty guilders a month.

He fell into pondering what kind of office this might be... There was a black panel on the opposite wall, with some calligraphy on it; he couldn't make out what it said from where he was sitting. He got up carefully, as if wanting to stretch himself. Who said you had to remain in the same place all the time? And the panel was there to be read, surely? The concierge didn't even look up, for that matter. At an easy amble he drew nearer to the panel. Could very well be, could it not, that he wanted to admire the pretty calligraphy?

He read:

Procures loans... sound securities... payment by monthly, weekly instalments... retailers and civil servants...

He understood and blushed, so gruesome the secret now seemed to him. His father had borrowed money from this office and now had to repay... Thought he wouldn't understand of

course, had never paid attention to this panel!

He gave the panel another look, as if admiring the lettering was still his main interest. Felt the letters with his finger, as if to find out how thick the paint was layered. And then he sank down on the sofa under the panel. And he was seated again.

One by one the waiting were called and disappeared into room 20. Kees inspected every one of them thoroughly: no, not a single acquaintance. But the danger was in the newly arriving. Fancy, one of the boys from school coming in... Well, so what, he'd immediately get up and say: 'Well, you too have to be here on account of someone else?'

Suddenly he had a jolt: what if Rosa Overbeek came in! How she'd turn red, and try to keep the black booklet out of his sight. Perhaps she'd sit down on the sofa and silently cry, cry with shame. He was overcome with compassion. It was, after all, a dismal thing for her. He'd wait for her outside and then tell her: 'Rosa Overbeek, you can be at ease, I am trustworthy; no-one, not even my own father and mother, shall know that I have seen you here. I myself chance to be here for a customer of ours, who asked me to run this errand.'

'Why, that *is* a relief,' she would say. And then she'd explain how it had come about that her father had had to borrow money: prolonged illness.

'Oh,' he'd say, 'you don't have to tell *me*. Who knows *I* will have to come here for *my* father one of these days, he's also been ill for quite a while.

'Yes, I wanted to ask you about that all the time, but I didn't dare. Is it true what Thingummy said, about spitting blood?'

'Oh, not on your nelly! Damaged his throat a bit by coughing, that's all. To be on the safe side he has to keep to his bed for a while, but the doctor has almost ceased coming. *I* am going to *him* all the time. As you noticed of course, eh? That's why I'm late so often in the morning.

And so they'd get chatting...

His turn came up. Forty five. Cap off, and into room 20. Whack, not much of a room! A little passage, two counters and you exited at the far end.

He passed his booklet through the first window. The employee opened it. 'Bakels, twelve guilders fifty!' Ouch, why so loud. Well, it wouldn't be audible anyway in room 19. He laid out his five rixdollars on the marble slab. 'Next counter,' the man said. Kees moved on.

'Bakels,' the one there called out once again, and gave him back his booklet.

'Now the retreat,' thought Kees. He pulled his cap far over his head and stepped out. There were the stairs again. He didn't hear anybody coming, so he could risk it. He made it safely into the street. With a terrible limp, his face distorted with pain, he hobbled down a good stretch of Damstraat.

He stopped in front of a store and looked in all directions. Waited a bit more to see if any acquaintance would tap him on the shoulder. No, all clear. Good thing, too, that it was dark. He now walked the ordinary way down the street. Now he could safely run into whomever: on *him* no visible trace of the mysterious errand.

His mother immediately locked the booklet away.

'No one has seen me,' Kees said, 'and if they have, then they still haven't recognized me, Mum.'

Mum gave a short laugh:

'Yes, Dad knows whom he's sending.'

'So there,' Kees thought with satisfaction.

To be continued (April 23)