

**Joseph**  
A Crime Story

(from the memories of an old woman, told by an old fenland kettle which sits on its own hearth and boils quietly to itself)

Time marches on. That is good, at least in most connections. But we have to run with it, without deference to age, sickness and inborn apathy. That is sometimes uncomfortable.

In my childhood, when the proverb "dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed"<sup>1</sup> had a strict application; when families of all classes planted their offspring like banyan trees just in the nearest ground and families became so interwoven that one called every compeer "Cousin" along a route of six leagues without hesitation and was sure to be, among a hundred times, scarcely once wrong. In those times, by the age of ten, an ordinary person knew every place that was meant for the eyes in his head and he could comfortably tread his path for eighty years one after another.

Now it is different. The small states have ceased to exist, the large ones throw their members about like shuttlecocks and the most peaceful subject must either renounce all ties of human love, or spend his life on journeys, travelling around like an air balloon according to the circumstances, or worse still always yawning at the same route, like a transport sergeant. In brief, only the sick unto death and inmates of the lunatic hospices may stay at home, and dying and travelling are become two inevitable conditions of life. I have not exactly looked all too far around me, but always further than I like. There are no longer nations, only cosmopolitans and not only waiters, but also peasant girls in foreign clothes. I can see French and English national costume at home, without its costing me a farthing. It is no fun for me to give a Swiss woman, with tortoiseshell combs in her hair, five silver pennies so that she masquerades in her own national costume, or arranges for a hermit to be in the hermitage for me on the day before the next mountain tour. Were there not the eternally great, invariable Nature in rock, forest and mountain (they have even put rivers in coloured jackets)<sup>2</sup> I would ten times sooner remain with the old, eternally good faces which have lived, suffered with me and buried my dead.

Only two regions (I say only what I have seen – where I have not been the people can grow fishtails for my part, I am quite satisfied with that) are known to me, where I have breathed the atmosphere of a fresh folksiness, I mean the Black Forest and the Netherlands. The proximity of Switzerland benefits the first. Whoever stands before the mountains wants nothing more than to go over into the land of freedom and alpine glow, of chamois and ibex, and whoever comes over from there wants nothing more than to go home or at least a good way away. Thus rolls ruin like a globule of mercury, without trace, across the beautiful pure valley of proud forest, to oxydise only when it reaches the other side. (If in fact mercury deposits oxide, which I certainly may not assert, since I have only reached as far as the Wisdom of Solomon, i.e. to awareness of shameful ignorance in many things between heaven and earth).

The Netherlands, by contrast, this strip of land crisscrossed by road and waterways and inundated by foreign elements, still retains in the nature of its race a hoard of peculiarity warding off everything, which protects better than mountain ranges which can be climbed and valley gorges which can be hunted through, and that one may hold to be indestructible, after he has survived all the latest events. I liked being in Belgium and every reason for that – friendly reception, even friendlier hospitality, complete informality with regard to the way in which I used my time. Of course, I was in the country and in a private dwelling. In towns and inns I always find it miserable. Fresh, invigorating walks through meadows on

the bank of the Maas and in front of every house, every mill, scenes by Wijnand<sup>3</sup> and Wouvermann<sup>4</sup>, pictures as faithful as if they had just climbed off the canvas of a school of Dutch masters. That is just what I like. Whether my old head gardener from the chateau is still alive? His tulips must be in bloom now; but ten years are a considerable piece of a human life, when one already has white hair. I very much fear that he has long hung up his gardening apron and put on his last tasselled cap; or my good lady neighbour at her country seat to which she had given the appearance of clean little dresser with little china figures? She was perhaps only seven to eight years older than I, wore fur shoes summer and winter and I could trot bare legged through the snow, that is to say, I could ten years ago, ere, in a weak moment, I let myself be led astray and talked into running after women by drivelling folk and I acquired gout, and when I really reflect that, a few years ago, I wanted to marry, and a girl of tender years at that! After all, those are follies, corrupt ideas.

I value the memory of Mevrouw van Ginkel – she had suffered much and early – and also of her later, happier situation in the hands of a respected and well to do spouse and of brothers and sisters, and only in a decent living did the opportunity remain to her to think, undisturbed, about the past and to give the name of a beloved, dear deceased to each favourite among her numberless primroses. She had certainly been beautiful; such meek, sad eyes must make any face beautiful and certainly graceful, had she also had nothing other than the enchanting melodious sound of her voice that age probably tuned lower by a few notes, but had taken from her nothing of the maidenly tenderness, and which veiled and revealed at the same time every thought of her soul and could replace the most moving play of facial features, even for a blind man. What a difference, when she was lingering at a dark coloured primrose and said in youthful delight, “That is my dear Mevrouw Gaudart” and at one of the palest with large light blue pupils, “Julie” and walked on quickly as though she feared that a cold eye of an outsider might sink down into the dead part of her life.

In my life, I have never been so in danger of becoming a fool, than with this old, meticulous Dutch lady who never complained, not even about migraine or bad weather, whose whole conversation revolved around blooming of flowers, dairying and other little events of her domesticity, thus, for example, about a few neighbours’ children whom she drawn to herself with slices of bread and butter and milk.

Upon my word, I was close to falling in love with the old person or at least going into an unbelievable surfeit of admiration, which is why I liked best to visit her of an evening when she sat stiffly behind the tea urn, labouring over the flourishes of an embroidery pattern which had great similarity to a Dutch garden full of beds bordered with tiles and yews shaped like peacocks; in front of her the little golden snuffbox, left and right vitrines full of small china figurines and limestone dogs, the whole pervaded by the fine aroma of herbal tea.

Oh, long live the Netherlands! That was a genuine Gerhard Dow<sup>5</sup>, with no adulteration that could have disturbed an even-tempered Philistine. Then the conversation would take a more lively turn and the good lady sometimes even related a few things out of her experiences, obviously more in an attempt to entertain a guest to his taste, than out of actual trust, in the wider sense, that she bore to excess toward everyone, but gave away to no-one. They were usually brief outlines, but very true.

Had I been a romantic coward and had I had the habit of ruining my eyes with diary writing at night (nb. should anyone accidentally have seen me with spectacles, I wear only spectacles with additional, dark lenses) much would appear in it, that I would gladly read again and which, in its insignificance, would provide more information about populace, period and the human heart than much that is written ten times better. One

incident, however, perhaps the only really remarkable one in the good lady's life, I later noted down and copied and, as my good Mevrouw van Ginkel is, without doubt, long dead in her fur shoes, and furthermore no circumstance comes to mind, which could make publication unpleasant for her and my youngest nephew who, heaven help us, has thrown himself into literature, but is earning a pretty penny at it, is at the moment lost for a contribution in a comfortable style, then he may take the essay – I, however, declaring that I have only quoted the good lady verbatim and guarding myself in the strongest manner against both all poetic expressions and the suspicion of authorship, which could, in my remaining mode of living and personality, only make me laughable.

Caspar Bernjen, man of private means.

Please note; the nephew and the reader have to imagine the neighbour to whom the good lady is speaking and who is, naturally, none other than I, Caspar Bernjen, man of private means and owner of a decent country estate in Lower <?>schen, as a corpulent man with a healthy colour, in his best years, wearing a blue coat with steel buttons, and a clay pipe in his mouth, on the left side of the tea table.

There is nothing better than clarity and order in all things.

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Yesterday you mentioned a matter, dear neighbour, which took place in your fortieth year and about which you wrote at the time to your parents. Heaven sent you great good fortune therein.

I know what it means to have no mother and to lose one's father in one's fifteenth year. Of my mother I knew only the life-size portrait that hung in the dining room. A beautiful woman in white satin, a bouquet in her hand and a dear little Lowchen<sup>6</sup> dog on her lap. I do not know, whether it was because it was my mother, but I think have never seen such a beautiful face and never such expressive eyes. I still dare not think about how stupidly I lost that picture and how it is now perhaps regarded as of little value. Why my father did not marry again, I do not understand. A merchant who spends the whole day in the bureau and on the exchange and through trading connections has guests at table almost daily is, without a housewife, a beaten man exposed to all sorts of embezzlement and underselling that he himself cannot possibly check. Even his clerks are less shy before him than before the lady of the house, whom they see going in and out, observe her dress and behaviour toward the servants and who is aware of things everywhere in town, that never reach the master's ears in his lifetime.

However, my mother was already my father's second wife. The first had brought him a fortune and a grown-up daughter, already engaged at the time, at whose wedding she soon suffered a fatal sickness through wearing clothing that was too thin. It was said, because she, as a so-called young wife, did not want to appear too matronly beside the bride, which is also fully understandable as consideration for her husband. In brief, she lay eight days later fully incapacitated in bed and lay thus for six years, at last so pitiable that her best friends had to wish only death for her.

After my father had remained a widower for a year and a half, he married a young woman of good descent, but entirely without a fortune. This was my mother and, praise God, I may ask whom will, yet hear only good and nice things of her, but she is supposed to have brought the germ of consumption with her into the marriage. One sees it in the picture that was painted right after the wedding.

She kept going fairly well a whole year long, until my birth, although the busy life and the impossibility of sparing herself are supposed to have accelerated her complaint. I would that she had not married; God would have created me somewhere else, for, sir, one never quite overcomes

having brought about one's mother's death. They told me much about my father's sorrow and how he later rejected very many offers of marriage. I can well believe it, for I have never seen that he would have shown the slightest interest in any woman, apart from what happened to be demanded of him by politeness and it was always the Mamas and Grandmamas whose conversation he preferred. Otherwise, he lived only in his business. Up at five in the morning and working in his room, at six into the bureau, at eleven on to the exchange, from one until two to lunch, which was perhaps the most difficult time when, head full of thoughts, he had to play the pleasant host.

Afternoons, working again, pursuing speculations and finally writing until midnight in his room. He had a bitter life.

In the meantime I grew up, with a governess, Madame Dubois, in a couple of pretty garret rooms and saw diverse things in the house, which began, bit by bit, to seem odd to me. Thus, for example, almost everyone had a skeleton key that he used not exactly guardedly in front of me, but still with kind of caution that finally had to make me attentive. Even Madame Dubois had one to the library, for she spent her life reading novels, which is also why I have learned nothing.

One is not cautious in front of children until it is too late. Here, however, it was unfortunately not too late, for as Madame Dubois – who by the way knew nothing of my knowledge of her key and was speaking only in relation to others – explained to me that keeping silence is better than making trouble. I was too young to realise how utterly necessary speaking out would have been here. I felt myself honoured by her trust and unfortunately helped to hush up a few things. Children act according to their wisdom.

I saw, as often as my father went on to the exchange, the clerks spying out of the window like hares until he had rounded the corner of the alley and then scurrying off to God knows where. I saw the servant, wearing my father's silk hose and shoes creeping out of the back gate; at night I heard the coachman trudge past my door down into the wine cellar and tossed and turned in my bed for vexation, but repeat it – not for anything in the world. I was too sensible for that.

I even heard how somebody told Madame Dubois that Mijnheer Steenwick, the cashier, gambled every evening and had lost two thousand guilders the night before and as the Dubois woman replied, "For God's sake, where does the man get the money? One could have a fainting fit here in this house!"

This was shortly after my fourteenth birthday and the first time that the thought occurred to me that keeping silent could, in the end, also have its precarious side.

The matter filled my head the whole evening – where Mijnheer Steenwick was getting the money. I knew that he was poor, he received only 1000 guilders salary and I had often heard that his parents were poor fisher folk at Zaandam. At van Gehlens I once heard tell of a clerk who had gambled with money from his master's bank, although I could not connect that with a familiar face in the house as far as my memory reached, and of whom Madame also thought much and recently embroidered a pair of braces for him, an instinctive fear overcame me, which was not entirely free of mistrust and yet merged again and again with the tale of that clerk. Madame was quiet and more distracted than usual; time and again she took out the novel from beneath her sewing work, read a few lines, hid it back again and at last almost knocked over the lamp, and then bustled hastily to bed. When we had been in bed about an hour, Madame and I, we heard Mijnheer Steenwick's door opposite us open and then rapid footsteps going away across the corridor, down the stairway. It was not the first time that he left his room so late and I gone to sleep without hearing his return, but for the first time I noticed that he walked much faster and his boots creaked less than by

day; I pushed the pillow away from my ear and listened. At the same moment I also heard Madame drawing back her curtain and half sitting up in bed. Below in the entrance hall slunk a soft, careful rustling then the street door was, at first, half opened, silently, then fully with a quick pull and then on the other side of the alley a key fell to the pavement. Madame sighed deeply and murmured, "Keep silent, silent, only keep silent". I felt a sudden courage within me and shouted, "No, Madame. Tell everything to Papa"! You cannot imagine the poor woman's shock. "Connie"! she cried, "Connie, are you not asleep"? and soon afterwards I heard her sobbing bitterly – I was scared to death. I did not know x-x that the poor person who in fact was in very bad health and with her forty-eight years had dismal prospects of the future, had pinned all her hopes upon Mijnheer Steenwick who had for so long brought her books, full of tender love that betrayed itself only through glances and delicate kindnesses, posies etc. until she saw herself as more than half engaged, since she had found a casual dog ear at a very meaningful passage in one of the books.

She was otherwise a good, honourable person, but Sir will well know, the drowning man clutches at straws!

When Madame had composed herself a little, she begged me to keep silent, calling upon heaven and earth and even lied to me something about a rich aunt who often gave the cashier large presents, but in such an unsure voice that it was obvious even to me. At last she promised to watch out properly; she certainly would not burden her conscience with such an important matter, although silence was always the most advisable, where nothing other than vexation without benefit would come out of the investigation and all damage and expense would fall back to the plaintiff. "Has the Master time to investigate"? she said. "Does he ask anyone other than the cashier and the housekeeper? And if these had wanted to speak, have they not had the opportunity a hundred times, and the power as well? Trifles, a couple of lumps of coal more or less, burnt, a couple of bottles more or less, drunk – it is no object in a house like this; but this is too wicked! Just stay silent, child, I shall watch out and if it is enjoined upon me by Heaven that I shall take the risk, then in the Name of God, in the Name of God"!

When I think of what a heart rending tone in which she said this, then I have to forgive the poor woman all her weaknesses and am convinced that she was determined to sacrifice to her duty, a whole life of happiness which admittedly existed only in her delusion; but, sir, the intention is really as good as the deed. In fact, Madame went out very early next morning, contrary to her habit. She came back pale and downcast, packed her novels and had them taken to Mijnheer Steenwick, with the request to send her no more, as she lacked the time for reading, for the time being. From now on, I listened in bed every evening and noticed that Madame was also listening every evening, but furtively, not until she had peeped through the curtain to see whether I was asleep, and every evening I heard Mijnheer Steenwick creeping past and Madame's suppressed, sad weeping, often throughout half the night. By day Madame was as though shattered, taking up everything wrongly, conducted the lessons even more neglectfully than usual. She continually sat at the window, sewed for all she was worth and as often as the door of the bureau went, a broken needle fell to the floor; semi secret days off were ventured now and then. After about a week Madame said one evening, "Connie, tomorrow I shall speak to your Papa". In doing so she looked completely pale and had something noble about her face, that impressed me more than if I were being scolded. I went so quietly and considerately to bed as if in the presence of a princess. Madame left the light burning and read long and eagerly in a book of Thomas à Kempis. Suddenly we were both startled. Mijnheer Steenwick's door was opened and shut noisily and he stomped across

the landing, whistling a street ballad. Then he suddenly stood still and seemed to be thinking or listening and then softly, softly with catlike steps down the stairs. The sand in the hallway crunched underfoot, the street door went, everything more quietly than ever. I looked at Madame and met an expression of shock, which dazed me; she was sitting upright in bed, hands clasped together. "Jesus, Maria"! was all that she said, then she got up, opened the window and listened outside for a while, quickly came back, lay down and put out the light. That night I did not hear Madame weeping, but as often as I became awake, breathing heavily and moving in her bed, for although I had actually not known how to justify my feelings, yet that noisy walking, that wild whistling into the silence, but cut off, and the subsequent catlike creeping, rippled over me with dread, such that I was almost afraid of the frills on the bed canopy and the curtain.

When day had scarce broken, Madame was already once more sitting upright and she looked at her pocket watch – several times – at six thirty she rang and gave the maid a muddled errand to Mijnheer Steenwick. The girl came back; he was not yet in the bureau. "Well, go into his room." The door was locked. We rose – there was no question of lessons – I sat in the corner with my knitting and Madame sat at the window with her sewing. Three or four times she stood up and went downstairs and came back ever more pale. No word was spoken.

When we went into the dining room at two, my father was not there at first and sent to say that we should start to eat. We asked about the bookkeeper. He was with the Master. We ate a few spoonfuls of soup for the sake of the domestics, sour though we felt.

Then Father came in, very red and excited. He served himself, contrary to his habit, played with the spoon and then, as the servant went out, asked as if casually, "Madame, your room is opposite the cashier's. Do you not know when he went out this morning"?

A glowing flush passed across Madame's face, to give way to a noble expression. She stood up and said in a firm voice:

"Mijnheer, Mijnheer Steenwick was not in the house last night".

My father looked at her with a face that betrayed fear rather than consternation. He stood up, gave a few orders outside and then continued his interrogation.

"Did you notice, yesterday, when he went away"?

"Yes, Mijnheer, at half past eleven" and after some hesitation she added, "we, Connie and I, heard him creeping away".

"Creeping away?" my father shouted and became almost as pale as Madame. "Well, then. It is true! Be honest, Madame, was it the first time"? It was as though the poor woman was collapsing as she stammeringly answered "No, Mijnheer, no. Every evening for a week now".

My father looked at her fixedly.

"Oh, Mijnheer, ask Connie. Connie knows that I wanted to tell you today".

My father did not answer. He went hastily to a wall cupboard which contained files, pincers and all sorts of keys. Then he called out sharply at the door for the bookkeeper. Doors opened and closed and as a servant was just bringing in food, we heard, by a crash in the counting house next to the office, that the money chest was being broken open.

We sat at table like statues, had one dish after another taken away and had courage neither to leave the room, nor to stay in there.

Father did not come back, and not to supper, also not the next midday meal, neither did the bookkeeper.

The young clerks strolled about in the house and we noticed from chance words that Mijnheer Steenwick was supposed to have been sent on important business, for none of us had the courage to enquire.

On the second evening the bookkeeper burst out of the counting house and shouted "Water! For God's sake, water! And quickly to Doctor Velten. The Master has had a haemorrhage".

Madame and I heard the shouting in our room and I know not how we got down the stairs. I only know that my dear father was sitting in his leather office armchair, pale as death, eyes half glazed over, sweeping around fearfully and that he looked at me with a long, sad glance, such that I shuddered as I trod in a stream of blood that was already flowing towards us at the entrance.

By the time that Doctor Velten came, I was already a poor, forlorn orphan.

I can say only little of what happened straight away. I understood only half of most of it and all seemed as nothing after what had happened.

The servants well knew how I felt, for when I was once leaving my room, I saw them fairly openly carrying silver cutlery, beakers and the like to their rooms. I saw it and saw it not. Had I afterwards had to make a statement on it, I would not have been able to name the culprits.

I felt as though I must choke when the incense wafted up into the top of the house. I heard the funeral music below our window, saw the torches flickering and hid behind the bed with the burning desire to die.

Then they dressed me in black clothes and my guardian, the banker van Gehlen, took me into his house temporarily.

Madame Dubois had to stay behind. Our parting was very painful and almost lost my senses when this woman whom I had for so long obeyed, slid toward me on her knees, kissed my hand and cried, "Connie, Connie forgive me! I am guilty of it all! O God, I have been an old fool!"

I felt as though I should fall upon her neck, but I remained standing rigidly, with eyes closed for shame and as I opened them Madame was gone and instead of her, Mevrouw van Gehlen was holding my hand.

Our financial circumstances then turned out to be very deplorable, as you well expected. My father had taken up a government loan and had competed very hard for this business, since we in no way belonged among the first houses of Ghent. Whether money had already been received and forwarded, I know not, but 600 000 guilders had disappeared from the money chest. That was exactly our own fortune, including my sister's dowry that she had left in the business – thus I was in dire need.

They wanted to be kind to me in van Gehlen's house, but there was nothing but pomp and display. They gave me my freedom in my room, but the laughing, piano playing and coming and going of carriages sounded up from below and when I appeared, there was suddenly silence as if a ghost appeared and all eyes were on me as though there were no impoverished orphan in Ghent apart from me.

Mevrouw van Gehlen did, indeed, do her utmost, to help me over such moments, but even her effort hurt me and really made feel how much had to be concealed here.

Daily, I hoped for the arrival of my stepsister; she did not come, my brother-in-law also did not come, but only their business manager, Mijnheer Pell who looked so askance at me, as though I had robbed his patron – right from the start and even worse, after he had been closeted some hours with Mijnheer van Gehlen.

However, he had the commission of taking me back with him, if no other accommodation were found.

I stood, shivering like an aspen leaf, at this negotiation and took every cold utterance from the little, spare man as directly out of the mouth of my sister, by which I was quite surely in the wrong. For, after my marriage, I have often since then been in her company in her house and also in my own and admittedly, she was a somewhat formal woman, but always full of honesty and familial considerateness and she even credited me with too much when, after my husband's death, I sought to

reimburse her losses that were incurred through our misfortune, which was really no more than my strictest duty.

The discussion in the bay window was at its height when a visitor for Mijnheer van Gehlen was announced. The name I understood not and used that moment to creep away unnoticed.

In the anteroom I met the stranger, a small, clerically dressed, lean man who was engaged in brushing the dust from his sleeves with a coloured handkerchief. He looked up and his eyes followed me right up to the door, with lively curiosity.

Have you never seen an impoverished orphan before? I thought.

After half an hour that I passed in great emotion and thinking about my sister, I was called downstairs.

I found the three gentlemen together. Mijnheer van Gehlen and Mijnheer Pell sat at the table and leafed through mounds of paper. They looked red and exhausted. Mijnheer Pell did not look up from the papers. Mijnheer van Gehlen smiled embarrassedly and seemed to want to say something to me, when the stranger stepped from the window bay, took both my hands and said in a trembling voice,

“Connie, Connie, I am your Uncle. Had your father then never spoken of the old Uncle Pastor, the old pastor in G..?”

I was quite confused, yet a few shadowy memories returned, although Father seldom touched on former relationships.

Thus I kissed Uncle’s hand and looked at him in a way that must, without doubt, have been somewhat pitiful, for he said,

“Be pleased, child. You shall not go to Roermond. You are going with me.” And then, in a raised voice, half turned to the others,

“Even if I cannot bring up a fine young lady, then you shall still get pink cheeks and also not grow up wild like a nettle in the hedge”.

Mijnheer van Gehlen nodded in agreement. Pell shut his pile of files and said, “If your Honours wish that so – temporarily at least, I shall report it to my patron; perhaps, – otherwise Roermond is open to the young lady any day”.

My uncle bowed ceremoniously. “Certainly, yes. We wish to thank Madame. Roermond is open any day – but Madame must let me have the child. It is my sister’s child, whom I loved very much, even if she was only my step-sister”.

Nobody answered. I felt that some sort of depressing misunderstanding prevailed here and was glad when my uncle continued

“Now, Connie, I cannot remain away from home for long. Pack your belongings and thank Mevrouw and Mevrouw van Gehlen for having looked after you, poor, abandoned child, so faithfully”.

Two hours later we were sitting in the carriage. That is how I came from Ghent. I must still tell you that Mijnheer Steenwick, after he had partly gambled away Father’s money chest, did not run off with the remainder, as you, without doubt, believe and also everybody believed at the time.

After three weeks, his corpse surfaced in the Schelde. He had nothing in the bag, other than his usual green purse with six Stuyvers<sup>7</sup> in it and a little, empty moneybag that he must have put in there mechanically out of habitual carefulness. They ought really to have become aware of this in the first instance, as nothing in the least was missing from his few belongings; nothing, other than the clothes that he was wearing on his body and his old silver watch.

But people always like to think the worst. It is, dear God, bad enough, to be sure, to gamble away other peoples’ money and then – such an end! But sir will know, it does not seem as disgraceful as another’s theft.

A gambler is like a drunkard, like one possessed, through whom the Evil One is acting as a second, alien soul. Am I not right? Mijnheer Steenwick served our house for twenty long years, worked through many a long night and never let one little bit of string go to waste. He was truly even



more fiercely bent upon the business than the master himself, and now such an end!

Meanwhile he had, praise God, received an honest grave because there were several people who had seen him at dawning, staggering like a drunkard and, in fact, in the homeward direction. Thus it was assumed that he had, as unlucky gamblers often do, imbibed too much courage and had gone, unintentionally, too close to the bank of the Schelde.

Madame Dubois is also supposed to have planted her garden balsam<sup>8</sup> on his grave afterwards, but was overheard, poor soul. She was truly good natured, just somewhat muddled through reading novels and no longer knew, whether she was old or young and had also become too timid as a result of the feeling of her dependent situation and even more so her daily diminishing ability to fend for herself. But her will was always the best and she sought to protect me from every harmful impression, with a loyalty for which I am still grateful to her in the grave.

Now she has long been dead; she died the year following, as I moved to my uncle's and her savings in our service lasted out until her end.

Thus do we labour in vain and the good Lord smiles down upon us.<sup>9</sup>

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At this point Mevrouw van Ginkel appeared to want to end her report. She poured more tea, took a pinch from her golden snuffbox and looked at me with that well-meaning look which, among polite persons, expresses the desire to listen to the other person. Her face was completely calm, even smiling, yet something shining hung in her eyelashes, which came no further.

I, in contrast, had reached a mood with which I had not reckoned for this hour and would, for the life of me, have gladly seen the lady in her village farm, the more so, since both innocent children and elderly bachelors excite in me an equally strong interest and one seldom finds both united, as here.

Thus I posed a few chance questions about the location of the village and how many servants and how many cows etc. The lady guessed my intention and said in a very friendly way, "I see that the gentleman is interested in my good uncle and there has surely never been a better man, or a more reverend one". She added with an expression of childlike shyness, which almost gave her back the appearance of a small, well brought up maiden of fourteen years.

"Nevertheless, there is little to be said about our life. It was very simple and so monotonous that, if there had been no church feasts and the seasons, our days would have been as alike as peas in a pod".<sup>10</sup>

At this point she poured water on to the tea and I observed a drop hanging on the kettle, which, however, seemed to promise little conversation.

"But", she continued, "it was not to remain so and I should like to tell you, sir, about my uncle's catastrophe – I daresay, my fate – so that you see what sort of a man he was, to whom I have to be most grateful in the world. But there is another curious story interwoven there, which will certainly interest you, sir, but which is somewhat long. Have you, sir, guarded yourself well against the evening air"?

I assured her that I had taken all necessary measures, although, in all honesty, I had left off my third waistcoat today for the first time and my one concern was for the dew.

However, I had never seen the good lady in such a communicative mood and was determined to use this to extend, at any price, my knowledge of human beings. Thus I assured her that I never eat an evening meal after tea – which is also true – and would long have taken an occasional moonlight stroll along the bank of the Maas, which, to be sure, did not correspond with my usual taste and my usual habits.

The good lady looked at me so astonishedly, as though a tortoise were preparing to walk on its hind legs; however, she went on without further remarks in her narratives, only occasionally making small pauses, in order to pour tea for me or to partake of her little golden snuffbox, inviting me in such a well-meaning manner, that I had to think of the pipe of peace of the Indians. These interruptions I shall show by paragraphs and leave the reader to visualise the little interplays. Then the good lady continued:

*[not completed – published posthumously]*