

I A special kind of trot

As a young boy Kees had committed several stupid bloomers, some of which he didn't even remember himself. But his father kept all kinds of papers, like birth certificates, in a nice cloth binding with golden lettering, which had been the cover of a book on Dutch History. You could tell how thick a book it must have been by that cover. 'Yes, Kees' his father said at times: 'That's from instalments to which I had subscribed, but it was a swindle because there was no end to the instalments. It all got twice as expensive as that salesman had said, and then I quit. And you then cut out all the pictures and played with them. And ruined all the instalments of course.'

'What a pity,' Kees sighed. 'Why didn't you slap me on the fingers when I touched them? Fancy having all those instalments now...'

'Not me!' the father laughed. 'Your mother was far too happy that you were being good with them. Only the wrapper I kept: came in handy for papers and such.'

Kees shrugged. What use was a single wrapper? Good to provoke you; had seven coats of arms on it – that fit: the seven provinces; needn't ask what a fine Dutch History could have been in it!

'Up to where did those instalments go?' he then asked wistfully. And that the father didn't remember exactly.

'Was Napoleon in it?' Kees asked.

No, the father was sure *he* wasn't. But Michiel de Ruyter was, he thought.

'Ah god,' said Kees, 'then I could've had the whole Eighty-Years War.'
As a small child you sure could do stupid things!

Another bloomer he could clearly remember. That was when he had been invited to Christmas-tree at cousin Breman's. Quite a posh cousin, rather, at least at the time. They had a piano, and the two nieces had lessons on it from a special mistress. On Boxing Day a whole bunch of children had been invited. First they played games, like forfeits, with all that horrid kissing, but at the end there was a lottery. And he had won a packet of colour crayons. And his cousin, Dolf, who was now in secondary school, sturdy boy, mind you, had won a flying top. And then, how could he be so eternally stupid, he had been very little, not even at the big school yet, - then he had swapped with Dolf, and had come home with this humdrum flying top, the hook of which of course broke off within two days. And then the top, because of its queer tip, wasn't even a decent *normal* top! What an ass he'd been. Because they had been really thick sticks of colour crayon, a pack of sixty cents at least. What fine landscapes he could have made with them. He could simply have gone out a-sketching, to the allotment gardens, where painters often sat, too. One of them would be apt to notice him. Say: Hey, that's not bad, what you're doing there. Here's a better piece-a paper; try do it on *that*. And he'd draw. The water with little waves, with shaded sides. The painter would call another one. Where'd ye learn to do that? Nowhere. - You're lying. - No sir, just at night-school drawn blocks and things, and once a jar. - Go tell the marines. But in the end they had to believe him of course. As a joke they'd let him try with *their* paint. Wouldn't believe he had never held a brush in his hands!

And so he'd start visiting the painters at their homes and make good progress. Some of his paintings would be hung on the wall at home, with his name on them; and who knows how things might have gone on from there.

No chance of that now. Drawing was always drawing, and a drawing would never become real, because colour was the main thing, and colours he had never had. What did it matter that he'd have enough money for colours later. Then he'd be grown-up, and in order to become really famous you had to start from a young age, just like Rembrandt.

Yes, where had this Rembrandt gotten all his brushes and paint from so young an age? Definitely had had richer parents than *he* had...

How he had been obstructed when he had entered night school. The teacher had then said: you will bring with you tomorrow night: one feather, a box of pastel and a piece of india-rubber; and practically all the boys got their father's permission to buy that. Cost thirty cents, if you wanted it good.

But his father had started grumbling. That the school should take care of that. That those were educational appliances, that that was what he paid his precious school-fee for. You give this teacher my compliments, he had said, and tell him it's not my business. In the end I'll be paying for pens and exercise-books, too. What nonsense, wasn't it? The school *did* give you things, but precisely this nasty stuff, with which you could never do any decent drawing: old feathers of earlier boys; these queer pieces of black rubber, 'horse rubber' the boys called it, that practically didn't erase; crayons that gave off dust, and if you broke a piece you'd get a hiding, too. Only the down-and-outs made do with it. But nearly all the boys had a box with their own stuff, and *those* were the boys who became the best at drawing.

He tried to explain this to his father, but his father wasn't exactly cooperative, because he kept saying: you give the teacher my compliments, and this, and that... things he daren't say to his teacher anyhow.

At last his mother had given him a ten cents piece, so he had at least been able to buy a good feather. But the piece of rubber he had, after a long search, bought in a small bookshop had been turned down by the master, because it "devoured paper"; and the cylinder of thin colour crayons at five cents, why, that had been really vicious stuff, scratchy, and far worse than the school crayons. He had fairly spoiled his drawings with them.

And of course, by degrees, it had arranged itself. By swapping and betting and playing at marbles and in a hundred ways he had managed to supply his drawing box with extra stuff, and nowadays he had colours, man, fabulous: a piece of violet he had, all the boys were jealous of it, so delicate... And he had a piece of rubber, ink rubber, the thing they use in offices! But meanwhile the other boys were ahead of him, he was in this crappy second group at drawing, and the teacher let him be, who knows for how much longer... How different things might have been if he'd only had equal chances from the outset...

Well, it wasn't that bad, actually, because this dull school drawing didn't amount to much anyhow: never landscapes or such-like. And one day, once he had a sketchbook, the teacher and his night school could go to hell. And then he'd like to see who'd have the last laugh!

But of course, painters shouldn't take you for a layabout. Had to see, of course, that you were a decent boy. Lately, one Wednesday afternoon, he had gone along with Jansen from seventh form. Was *he* bleak, he was in seventh form and already wore some kind of trousers! *His* mother had better not try that on *him*, Kees! He'd simply cut the legs off. Only his legs would then probably be an embarrassment, because Jansen also had these short men's socks

and queer underpants with strings. But then he'd as soon stay home every day, until his mother simply *had* to give him decent clothes. But Jansen was from the country, and peasant boys all had this men's wear...

If they made sure they were standing at the Baarsjes by two o'clock, then two painters would be passing by. Jansen had often gone with them. OK, they were there, and at long last one of these painters turned up. You should have seen Jansen act dumb: May I carry for you sir, may I carry for you sir. Take this then, the painter had said, and Jansen was made to carry the box and the little stool, just like some beggar boy. Kees, by contrast, showed the man he was Kees, and courteously took off his cap. The painter didn't notice. So there they went. You take this stool now, Jansen said. Well, Kees took it, of course, or else the painter would've said: why is that boy coming along.

They stopped diagonally opposite a wharf. The painter began to draw, and all afternoon he went on drawing, this couple of rotten barges on that wharf. Every few moments he made a mistake, and he was continuously erasing things again. Kees doubted if he was a real painter at all.

The boys sat down in the grass. It was rather boring. The painter said to Jansen: here's a ten cents piece. You go get two ounces of Maryland for me, forgot me tobacco again of course. Jansen ran off. And then Kees was alone with the painter. How great it would be, he thought, if the painter would only start asking. If he, too, had ever painted. If he wanted to become a painter. For of course he would long have noticed that Kees was a different kind of boy from Jansen.

Kees got up and began to study the sketch long and earnestly. Ha! The painter looked at him: 'That imp wouldn't have run off with me ten cents, would he?' he asked. 'Oh no,' Kees stammered with an effort. And he began to walk up and down. Thought of an answer. That Jansen was at his school, that he knew where he lived, and that the painter could, if need be, go to Jansen's father. That he'd find it a vile theft... And so the conversation might have got going. But he didn't very well dare begin, and the painter muddled on, on his sheet.

Behind them there was a fine scenery, and Kees started looking admiringly at *that*. 'Hey,' he said at last, fairly loudly. 'Is he coming?' the painter asked. 'Not yet, sir, Kees answered politely. The painter muttered; didn't even notice how Kees was appreciatively taking in the scenery!

At last Jansen came back. The two cents he could keep, and he didn't give Kees one of them. He would have said anyway: 'I'm not taking any dosh!'

Otherwise the afternoon was dull. The paint box remained closed, the painter didn't get on well. For boredom Kees and Jansen started jumping back and forth across some ditches.

At half past four Kees had to go home; luckily he could just see the spire of the Westertoren. Jansen remained until the painter left as well. 'Well, bye then,' Kees said, and for the painter he took off his cap. That did make him look up at last, and he said: 'Cheerio, eh.'

And Kees understood, while he walked, that the man would be watching him go. Maybe, he thought, maybe he'll ask Jansen about me. If only Jansen would be honest then, and tell him that Kees so loved drawing, and had done so from childhood, but had poor parents. Who knows if the painter would not then send along a message for him...

But the next day Jansen didn't have a message, and when he related with relish how he had escorted the painter all the way home, all the way to Tweede Jan Steenstraat, Kees spoke: 'Well I'd rather be spared being the coolie boy for a splodge painter like that.'

‘Because he didn’t give *you* any money, eh?’ Jansen said.

‘Oh bumpkin,’ said Kees contemptuously, ‘I don’t need anybody’s brass, you lout, you go and be a beggar when you grow up, just wait and see what *I* am going to be.’

No, of course a painter had to see you paint. Not that you followed him like a doggie, but that you were drawing in your sketchbook, your solid, thick sketchbook with its grey cover...

And of course if he, Kees, would later be sitting in the open with other painters, oh well, yes, then they’d have these boys, like Jansen, whom for a couple of cents they made do everything. These shabby boys in long trousers...

Only it was so difficult now, Kees thought, to get hold of a proper sketchbook. His mum and dad would see him coming! They never gave anything just like that. It always had to be his birthday, or Santa Claus. And *that* would be stupid, of course, *then* to ask for a sketchbook. Then you could get more than something of under a guilder.

To be continued.