

I A special kind of trot (2)

Besides, if he should get something on an ordinary day, there were a hundred things he needed more than a sketchbook. For example: gym shoes!

For these days Kees worshipped a friend who was in a gym club. The friend had white gym shoes and white trousers, and on Thursday evenings he walked in the street in them. Kees then accompanied him up to the door of the gymnasium. There was always a crowd of boys, and nearly all of them wore the white trousers, the glorious white trousers, and all of them had white gym shoes on their feet. Not one of the boys would be standing still. They all stood trampling and jumping on the comfy shoes, and Kees found this only too natural. It wouldn't have surprised him at all if one of the boys had suddenly flown right across the canal. On his own feet he felt his leaden shoes.

One of the boys had a red and white striped shirt on his naked body, and loosely on top of that his jacket, and Kees found that even the jacket sat on him in an extraordinary way. The shirt had a name on it: 'The Batavian'.

'He's a foreman,' Kees' friend said, and Kees answered: 'Obviously, eh.'

'You should feel his muscles!' the friend then swanked.

Then the gym coach arrived and unlocked the door, and the boys went in. All except for Kees. He hung around the building for a bit, and listened to the gym coach shouting his commands.

But the windows were too high to look inside, so Kees just walked off and mused on the gym shoes. He stopped to look at every shoe shop window. Eighty cents they cost, the real gym shoes with gutta-percha soles. A shame, that they didn't sell this handicraft in *their* shop. Otherwise a pair might have been left over for him sooner or later, one that had some fault that you didn't see anyway. You cleaned them every week with pipe clay. Chalk would ruin them. Oh, they could last you a long time.

At home he would put out a feeler, when his shoes were broken: much better to buy gym shoes than have the shoes repaired. But his mother said that *that* would be out the back door. And when he gave it a little try and said that you walked so smoothly on these shoes – he dared not call them gym shoes – his mother retorted that he would *then* in all probability hang out in the street the whole blessed day. He might be grateful that he got whole shoes on his feet in time...

This friend had picked up a peculiar way of trotting at the gym club. Had learnt it from a 'foreman.' Whenever you wanted to make good time you inclined forwards a bit, as if falling at every step, and then you just swung your arms back and forth. To this way of trotting Kees specially applied himself. It *ought* to be done on gym shoes, of course, but the main thing still was that your arms went back and forth. He imported this kind of skating at school and had great success with it. For weeks on end the boys of that school could be seen practising the new trot with serious faces.

When between twelve and two they went to the swimming pool they were always in a hurry, and then the skating came in handy. The boys told each other to the half minute how little time it had taken them to get from school to the swimming pool, and started dubbing it the 'swimming pool trot'.

For Kees the swimming pool trot was a bliss in his life. Whenever he had to go on some distant errand and was trudging along the canal as any insignificant boy, he would, all of a sudden, set off in the swimming pool trot. And truly, he would see himself being watched after by many a one. He imagined having gym shoes on his feet; gradually felt himself dashing forth in white gym trousers. Sometimes he even came to the point of imagining a flashy name printed on his shirt. The name 'Vitesse' appealed to him. He had seen it on a small boat on the Amstel once. Locomotives could also have such exquisite names!

One day Kees was going with his mother on an errand. The mother walked rather fast and Kees, quite a small boy still, for his mother was a big woman, Kees took the swimming pool trot. He spoke not a word, but enjoyed it in silence. Ever more energetically his arms went; everybody would certainly think: look, that must be a boy from the gym club...

Suddenly his mother stopped dead. 'What's wrong with *you*?' she asked cruelly. He said nothing was, and they walked on; Kees calmly skating at first, but by degrees his motions became more sensational, and the mother ordered: 'For *goodness* sake, stop waving your arms like that! You look like an afflicted. The *one* time you're out with me on the street can't you behave yourself?'

Kees didn't answer. The swinging of his arms he left out. But still, furtively, he kept trying to give something special to his gait. Oh well, that his mother was grumbling about the swimming pool trot he could understand. In that he felt her usual hate against gym shoes. For surely, that would have been possible, instead of repairing? Would save some costs again, after all...

So he kept his peace. Didn't even explain that it was the swimming pool trot. Then he saw a shoe shop, one with gym shoes in the window. He blushed. Fancy that his mother wanted to surprise him and said: Well, Kees, let's just step in here. But oh yes, they walked right on. After all, you were bleak when you walked with you ma. Only a drear did...

What was fortunate: the gym teacher at school was very impartial. Some of the boys would come to school in their gym shoes, and with their shirt, the striped shirt, under their blouse. And they thought they'd get good marks because, naturally, they could do all the tricks better than the other boys, like Kees. And they thought that because of the good marks they would walk first in the row again the next month. But lo, the gym teacher would then give precisely no marks at all, and simply say: 'Don't you imagine yourself to be a hotshot just because you happen to be wearing a pair of gym shoes: they won't cure you of your humpback if you sit slumped, or of your pale face if you smoke fags.'

Very impartial the gym teacher was, and because of that Kees regularly walked with the first three in the row. And when the teacher once asked: 'Who can run an errand for me this Wednesday afternoon?' and practically all the boys raised their hands, then he immediately selected him, Kees.

It was a nifty errand. With a message to the 'gym-building'. There he was let into a large hall, an enormous hall, with eternally high horizontal bars, and from a special storage box the caretaker got him two fencing masks, a whole bunch of those funny, thick gloves and a bunch of floppy foils. All of this had to be brought to the gym teacher's house. 'Don't you play any tricks with them, mind,' the caretaker said, and Kees smiled: the very thought was akin to

blasphemy to him, and with a head filled with glory he set out on his journey. The swimming pool trot was a bit awkward now, because with one hand he had to hold the masks and the gloves, which dangled over his shoulder, and in the other he held the foils, that would better have been bound together with a piece of string. But some gymnastic-like quality he did manage to put into his gait.

Nearly all the people stared.

Thought, of course, that boy is on his way to his fencing class. Is bringing his own foils, that he's so accustomed to.

A boy stopped him: 'What's them there?'

The ass didn't even understand what fencing masks were. Kees had never seen them either, and yet had understood at first sight.

'Masks,' he said curtly. 'You put 'em on when you go practice fencing.'

'Put one on me then,' the boy asked.

'If I were batty,' Kees said, 'I'm far too careful with my masks,' and he walked on.

So the gym teacher was a fencing teacher too, he thought. Well, fancy, quite possible: presently he'd arrive at his house.

'Well, Bakels, you there already? Just hand them over, thank you. But don't run off now so fast. You're not in a hurry, are you?'

'No sir, I've got all afternoon, we only eat at five.'

'Well, then I might as well teach you some fencing. Or can you do it already?'

'No sir. Did hear and read about it, though.'

'Put your head into this, then.'

And the two of them would put on their masks.

'Come with me to the garden, we'll have space there.'

And they'd start.

'You've been telling me tales, Bakels, you've done it before. I'm hard put to you.'

'No sir, honestly.'

'Well, you're talented then, boy, very talented. Let's pause a minute. Tiring, isn't it?'

And they both sat panting on a bench in the garden. The teacher's wife or mother or some such brought them a glass of lemonade.

'Don't down it too fast, that's dangerous when you're sweating.'

Of course, Kees drank carefully.

Again a boy stopped him.

'Are those real swords, kid?'

'No, they're made of candy,' Kees said, and he walked on.

The idea, that he'd be walking with wooden foils!

'Right, gloves on, masks on and at it again,' the teacher would say. (Had taken them off, obviously, to drink that lemonade.) Came the Mrs with a box of biscuits.

'No, thank you madam, I don't fancy biscuits.'

'Come on now, silly boy, no need to pretend.'

'No really, madam, I don't much care for biscuits.'

'Why, you're just like your teacher!'

For he, too, would decline, naturally.

Then they fought another game. It ended a draw.

He was there and rang the bell. Third floor, he saw by the name plate. So no garden. In the attic then of course: the teacher had a large, spacious attic, specially fitted up for it. Who knows flying-rings would be hanging there, too.

It was the teacher himself, in his shirt sleeves, who opened the door.

‘Well, Bakels, that *is* fast. Can you carry it up for me as well?’

Of course, Kees was already climbing the stairs. Clumping a bit, because they were narrow stairs, but he got there.

‘Right, put ‘m down there, will you? Thanks a lot, eh. And... wait a moment.’

Kees saw him reach for his purse.

‘No sir,’ he said hurriedly, ‘no sir, no thank you, that’s not what I did it for.’

‘Oh come.’

‘No sir, I can’t take any money: my parents won’t have it. I’m not allowed to.’

‘Well,’ the teacher said pensively, slowly putting away his purse again, ‘why, that’s a pity, boy, and I haven’t got anything else to give you.’

Kees groped his mind for a way of explaining, to convince the teacher that all thought of accepting money had been far from him, then to intimate that he had long been a silent admirer of the art of fencing; but he couldn’t find the words, and said, sighing sheepishly:

‘Yes...’

‘Well,’ the teacher cut the Gordian knot, ‘in that case, just thanks an awful lot, Bakels, and I’ll see you later this week.’

Kees took off his cap and went.

How stupid he had been, how darn stupid he had been again! Couldn’t he simply have said: ‘Accept something for it I won’t. But I *would* rather like to find out more about fencing, and actually see it done.’ Or if he had just run his fingers over the foils, and said:

‘Fine foils.’

Then he might now have been fencing in that spacious attic.

But who knows...

‘I’ll see you later this week, Bakels,’ the teacher had said.

Who knows...

He came home and gave his mother a short account.

‘Fencing masks?’ she asked. ‘What kind of things are they?’

And Kees explained it all minutely, described the foils, too.

But much impressed his mother was not: ‘I don’t see what such roughhousing is good for,’ she said.

And Kees understood: if ever he were to become a great fencer, it would all have to be done in secret.

To be continued (April 2nd)