VINTAGE

IN A PROVINCE

LAURENS VAN DER POST

Contents

About the Book

Last year the rain went away. It became very dry; there was no water and the sun killed the crops of my father.

Leaving the kraal and misty Valley of a Thousand Hills, Kenon has come to Port Benjamin in search of work. In Johan he finds a master and a friend. For a time it seems their unorthodox friendship can break down the barrier between black and white. But storm clouds are gathering and the forces of love and politics will explode into tragedy.

About the Author

Laurens van der Post was born in South Africa in 1906, the thirteenth of fifteen children in a family of Dutch and French Hugeunot origins. Most of his adult life was spent with one foot in Africa and one in England. His professions of writer and farmer were interrupted by ten years of soldiering in the British army, serving with distinction in the Western Desert, Abyssinia, Burma and the Far East. Taken prisoner by the Japanese, he was held in captivity for three years before returning to active service as a member of Lord Mountbatten's staff in Indonesia and, later, as Military Attache to the British Minister in Java.

After 1949 he undertook several official missions exploring little-known parts of Africa, and his journey in search of the Bushmen in 1957 formed the basis of his famous documentary film *The Lost World of the Kalahari*. Other television films include *All Africa Within Us* and *The Story of Carl Gustav Jung*, whom he met after the war and grew to know as a personal friend. In 1934 he wrote *In a Province*, the first book by a South African to expose the horrors of racism. Other books include *Venture to the Interior* (1952), *The Heart of the Hunter* (1961), and *A Walk with a White Bushman* (1986). *The Seed and the Sower* was made into a film under the title *Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence*, and, more recently, *A Story Like the Wind* and *A Far-Off Place* were combined and made into the film *A Far-Off Place*.

Sir Laurens van der Post was awarded the CBE in 1947 and received his knighthood in 1981. He died in 1996.

Also by Laurens van der Post

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VENTURE TO THE INTERIOR
THE FACE BESIDE THE FIRE
A BAR OF SHADOW
FLAMINGO FEATHER
THE DARK EYE IN AFRICA
THE LOST WORLD OF THE KALAHARI
THE HEART OF THE HUNTER
THE SEED AND THE SOWER
JOURNEY INTO RUSSIA
THE HUNTER AND THE WHALE
A PORTRAIT OF JAPAN
THE NIGHT OF THE NEW MOON
A STORY LIKE THE WIND
A MANTIS CAROL
A FAR-OFF PLACE
JUNG AND THE STORY OF OUR TIME
FIRST CATCH YOUR ELAND

TO
RENÉ JANIN

In a Province

A Novel by
Laurens van der Post

1980
THE HOGARTH PRESS
LONDON

“If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter.”

Eccl. v. 8

BOOK I

“Le présent serait plein de tous les avenirs, si le passé n’y projetait déjà une histoire. Mais hélas, un unique passé propose un unique avenir—le projette déjà devant nous, comme un pont infini sur l’espace.”

GIDE

CHAPTER I

AT THE AGE of twenty-five Johan van Bredepoel fell seriously ill for the first time in his life. When he had recovered enough to be allowed out of doors, he found himself under doctor’s orders to take a long holiday in some quiet part of the country. Some of his more intimate acquaintances, knowing that he was still far from well, talked things over among themselves and decided that he should be sent to Paulstad, a village in the remote Donkerberg district, and they began at once to make all the arrangements for his departure. One of them, Simmering, a violinist in the municipal orchestra of Port Benjamin, had argued the merits of Paulstad as a health resort so convincingly before the others that he was unanimously chosen to acquaint van Bredepoel with details of the plan.

Now Simmering, though he had known van Bredepoel for many years, had always respected him more than he had liked him, and therefore stood somewhat in awe of him. No sooner did he find himself being led to van Bredepoel by a hospital nurse, than he began to have doubts as to the best way of presenting the plan. His doubts were quickly strengthened by long habits of irresolution, and his eyes, never free from a shadow of distress, began to look as if he had just finished crying. Unconsciously his steps slowed down, and once he fell so far behind his guide that she had to stop and wait for him. Luckily he was too busy with his doubts to notice the impatient look she gave him.

Part of Simmering’s trouble was that he was absurdly sensitive. Out walking in lonely avenues, he often slowed down his steps to avoid passing people for fear that they

might find something to laugh at in his manner of carrying himself. Sometimes, in moments of absent-mindedness, he did overtake and pass other walkers, but as soon as he realised this his steps became jerky and unequal; he either swung his arms too much or too little and looked round wildly for something to concentrate his gaze on. Often the people happened to be laughing at a joke between themselves as Simmering passed, and then he would feel cloven with self-consciousness and for a long time worry his perplexed head over probable sources of ridicule in himself. Even at orchestral concerts, years of training had not prevented him from dreading the walk on to the platform, and he felt all the time that everyone in the audience must be looking at him. At times when he forgot himself in the climax of a great symphony—for he had a genuine and intelligent, though diffident, love of music—he would sooner or later pull himself up, convinced that the whole audience had noticed his abandon.

Simmering's respect for van Bredepoel made him unusually anxious to secure his good opinion. When he had left his companions, his task had looked easy enough.

"Look here, van Bredepoel," he would say, "your doctor has ordered you to spend some time, how long depends on the speed of your recovery, in some quiet and healthy part of the country. We, a number of old and tried friends, have put our heads together and decided to arrange for you to go to Paulstad. You have not heard of the place, now have you?" And, of course, van Bredepoel would admit that he had not. "But I, that is to say, we, know it well. We can recommend both its air and situation to you. It is remote and quiet, and has a background of exceedingly beautiful mountains. The people there are simple, old-fashioned, unspoilt, charming, and fit into their surroundings as peacefully and naturally as cows into an English meadow. Moreover, I know an extremely cultured and intelligent German family who live on a charming farm near by, and

who would be only too pleased to entertain you. We have thought this over very carefully. We are convinced that it will be in your best interests to go there. We will hear of no refusal. Admit for once that your friends"—and by friends he meant chiefly himself—"can occasionally know best."

And yet . . . what if van Bredepoel knew Paulstad? Or suppose he knew it well, and disliked it heartily?

"I will have to be careful, he is a fastidious creature," he thought.

Just as Simmering came to this conclusion the nurse, whom he had followed into the hospital garden, stopped suddenly and turned. They were standing on the edge of a lawn. Her uniform was painfully white in the afternoon sunlight, and instinctively Simmering's eyes sought the fresh green of the trees beyond.

"You will find Mr. van Bredepoel over there," she said sharply, and pointed to a deck-chair set up in the shadow of a tree. But Simmering made no sign that he had heard. His doubts were sunk for the moment in the pleasure of looking at the quiet garden, and he was thinking how soothing it was on that brilliant afternoon to see green trees.

"It is almost as if that green puts one's eyes to bed," he thought.

"You will find Mr. van Bredepoel over there." The nurse's voice was sharper still.

"Oh! Thank you," Simmering answered mildly and started forward. She stopped him with an officious gesture.

"Mind," she said, her officiousness now fatally attracted to Simmering's diffidence, "mind you don't talk too much. It's strictly forbidden."

And she walked smartly away, the sunlight flaming on her uniform, the rustle of her skirts mingling with the stirring of leaves.

For a moment Simmering hesitated, then slowly crossed the lawn. So quietly did he approach the chair that he had a good look at van Bredepoel before he himself was seen. And

what he saw agitated him a good deal, which made him more self-conscious than ever. Van Bredepoel was vastly changed. Simmering was not prepared, even though he had heard all the details of his friend's illness, to find him so much changed.

"Poor devil, he is all eyes and nose," he thought as he stepped forward.

Flesh had shrunk away from van Bredepoel's cheeks. His eyes were large and shone dully. His wide, full mouth had gone a dim purple colour, and seemed larger and fuller than before. A firm line of flesh which normally supported his underlip, and had always impressed Simmering as a sign of great self-control, had disappeared. He looked like someone whose whole nature had suddenly become clouded and who saw the world outside himself only as a blur. He sat there in the garden apparently indifferent to everything about him, and Simmering did not even suspect that he was conscious, as he had never in his life before been conscious, of the vivid spring afternoon.

Below them an avenue of slender poplars, shaking sunlight flake by flake from their trembling leaves, carried light into the heart of a sombre and dusty forest. Above them the sky was so blue that their eyes were almost hurt by such blueness, but beyond the forest, over the long curve of the cold Atlantic surf, that same sky sifted dim and yellow through a haze of dust and smoke. The hard lines of Port Benjamin were softly smoothed over. The harbour front was blurred; the haze, where it was thickest, pillared on the masts and smoking funnels of many ships. The roads between the harbour and the town were broad and shining and filled with inexplicably eager traffic, which fed the haze with thin, twisting clouds of dust. Here and there a factory chimney, a pretentious skyscraper or two and the top of a squalid apartment house rose above the haze, and there where the sky was bluest uncurled plumes of lazy smoke. The quiet air was shaken with the rattle of coal hurled into

gloomy ships' bunkers, and clash of trucks, shunted and re-shunted over a glittering mesh of lines, the whistling of engines which left pure clouds of steam to fade on dirty air. A breeze, dry and warm and still guarding the memory of the heat and sand of the desert from which it came, stirred faintly over the town, flickered the movement of the dust and smoke and raised from the trees and grass around van Bredepoel and Simmering a low nostalgic murmur. Between Port Benjamin and the country surrounding it there was no gradual merging of one into the other. There where ended the last row of uniform houses, the shoddy products of democratic precipitation, began a low plain covered with lank untidy bush that concealed only faintly the drift-sand which covered its roots; a plain that still belonged more to the sea than to the earth and man. It gave evidence of an unexpected fertility only where it drew near a far-off range of mountains. There van Bredepoel saw yellow squares of cultivated land, houses flanked by long avenues of oaks, stable and graceful witnesses of a fruitful co-operation of Nature and man. Over the mountains the light was amazingly clear. Their steep volcanic sides were bare and grey, but occasionally streaked with layers of orange and red and black rock. The shadows in their ample laps were transparent and gave fullness to their form. Their peaks followed the horizon half-way round Port Benjamin. On an afternoon such as this they held the sky like wine in a cup; at night, like water in a pit. At one end the mountains pushed one massive peak slanting over the sea; the other one's eyes could never find, for, no matter how far one looked, the shadow of a peak, linked to a shadow just out of sight, still straddled the horizon. To van Bredepoel they looked as remote as if they knew no sound but that of the wind, no master but time; as if in the calmness they gathered round their peaks they pointed an inarticulate moral at the frantic town below him. And he was reminded that Port Benjamin was only a small European pendant to a

long necklace of African land; that behind that barrier of mountains lay the Africa from which he came and to which he might one day have to return.

“You know, Simmerkins,” he said to Simmering, some minutes after he had greeted him, “I have come to the conclusion this afternoon that only adolescents, lovers and convalescents can really appreciate a day like this. I, for one, was never so moved by an ordinary spring afternoon when I was well as I have been to-day. You see those mountains over there? In all the years I have lived in Port Benjamin I have never seen them show up so clearly. Look, there is Booysen’s Kop, the Snow Peak, Fereira’s Buttress; I could give you all their names. Once, a long time ago, I climbed them all.”

Simmering suddenly felt relieved. Many of his doubts fell from him.

“Do you like mountains? I mean, do you like climbing them?” he asked.

“No, I don’t; but the doctor has ordered me to convalesce in some part of the country well above sea level. That’s why I have been looking at those mountains so closely this afternoon. I was wondering if I might not do worse than go there.”

“No, you mustn’t do that.” Simmering was exultant. “I’ve got the place that will suit you down to the ground, with none of your four-thousand-feet koppies, but huge eight-thousand-footers. You simply must. I mean to say, I wonder if you would care to go to a place that I, that is to say we, know of. It’s only a little place, but perhaps you know it already?” And Simmering, faltering, began to put forth the attractions of Paulstad, not, it is true, with the conviction he had displayed before, but with less ambiguity than might have been expected. “And,” he concluded, “if you want company, I’ll give you a letter to a great friend of mine—at least, he was when I knew him a long time ago. He’s an extremely intelligent German farmer, called Moller; at least,

he was when I knew him last, you never can tell how these small places change people. But I think you'll like him and his family, if they haven't changed, of course. It's just the place to send you back to your work a new man."

"It sounds good. But, Simmerkins," replied van Bredepoel, laughing at him, "I've never heard of Paulstad, and you've given me no idea where it is."

"It's on the borders of Bambuland," Simmering said, looking closely at van Bredepoel, as if reading indifference into his friend's remark. If he had any doubts, however, they were dispelled, for immediately he saw a look of keen interest appear on van Bredepoel's face.

"Near Bambuland! Which part of Bambuland, Simmerkins?"

"It's within a few miles of Masakama's Drift, the great gateway into Bambuland. It's one of the centres of European trade with the Bambuxosa. Sometime or other the whole of Bambuland comes to it. It's just the sort of place you would like, and I'm sure it will make you perfectly fit for your work again."

"Thank you, I will go there, Simmerkins."

And Simmering wondered both at the promptness and the firmness of van Bredepoel's decision.

Simmering was so pleased with his victory, a victory more over himself than over van Bredepoel—though, we suspect, he was not aware of any distinction—that he almost skipped out of the hospital gates.

"A good piece of work that. I'm glad I was careful," he told himself, and began whistling as he walked down the street. He did not notice that the fading light was giving the town a brief reprieve from squalor, casting on shabby and pretentious walls severely geometric designs, parallelograms of purest white light, cubes of gold, long pyramids of shadow, levered ever higher and higher by the slanting rays of the sun. In the avenue lingered a faint smell of receding winter which, now the sun was going, subtly

discharged a cool putrescence into the air. Whistling, he walked to the bottom of the hill on which the hospital stood, and then suddenly noticed that people were looking at him from the other side of the street. He stopped whistling abruptly. Overwhelmed with shame, he made a dash for the nearest tram-car, nearly fell as he boarded it. “People must think me mad,” he thought. Looking round furtively as he climbed to the deck of the tram, he saw that he was being followed by a man who seemed to be staring hard at some point on his posterior. “Heavens!” He was at once in a panic. “I hope I haven’t put my trousers on the wrong way round!” Since he had done this once as a child, Simmering had never lost the fear that he would do it again. He touched the seat of his trousers lightly, deftly, as if he was flicking some dust away, and as an additional precaution looked slyly down his stomach. Reassured, he moved on to find a seat. It was some time before he realised that he was on the wrong tram, a tram which was carrying him out of Port Benjamin, and out of this story. To this caprice-ridden spirit, van Bredepoel owed a fateful journey.

Simmering’s words: “It will make you perfectly fit for your work again,” had disquieted van Bredepoel strangely. They drove him once more, for the hundredth time since his illness, to take stock of himself, in terms both of his past and of his intentions for the future. That night he could not sleep. He had never supposed that at twenty-five his mind would be so uncertain. The last few years of his life had been so regularly lived, cast in such a definite groove, that he had unconsciously considered the question which now worried him as disposed of. Yet the pivot of his thought at the moment was: “Is it worth getting better to go back to all that again?”

Outwardly he was calm, and when the night nurse came to see if there was anything he wanted, his face, pressed back on a pillow looked so white and composed that she had

not the heart to disturb him. But ten minutes later he was standing at his window, looking out over the town towards the mountains, where a grass fire was slowly mounting skywards. The night was so clear that each flame stood out sharply as the blade of a spear. In his present mood the fire seemed like a beacon of distress. From the town the only sound that reached him was the noise of the surf on the beach; silence in Port Benjamin was always the sound of the sea. He thought of another silence, somewhere beyond the mountains, where through a long succession of nights it had consisted of the songs of black people on a remote hill, the stirring of restless cattle in a kraal. His past was bound up with that: and if his present was *this*, in Port Benjamin, it was because the first had calmly—rather, with a certain quiet, ruthless logic—wound into the second. But his future?

In the first moments of lucidity that had come to him in the course of his fever he had regarded his illness merely as an unpleasant break in the normal course of his life, which once he was better could be taken up exactly where he had left off. Now he was not at all sure. Illness gives one a licence, a generosity and often a pity for oneself, that in a precariously organised being can have the most disconcerting results. It brings the individual face to face with a purely individual problem. He may have long lost sight of himself in the social pattern, but in illness his eyes are turned inwards. He is struggling with a condition that primarily can annihilate or change only himself. And that private inward world which has hitherto seen in the balance of his actions merely an attempt to silence or to crush it, finds in this struggle which he wages, not for abstractions it cannot understand but for himself, the hope that he is changed from an enemy into an ally. It brings to his attention doubts, desires, memories which his actions have long since ignored, and clamours for a wider share in the future life he is to lead. Van Bredepoel’s case was no

different. That night he was more deeply depressed than he had ever been, and across the orbit of this depression fell shadows of the lives of others, of one other in particular, who had once diffidently set out from that very Bambuland of which Simmering had spoken. To understand his mood, however, now, after Simmering had left him, within a few days of a journey whose consequences he neither foresaw nor suspected, it is necessary to go back many years.

CHAPTER II

MEMORY TEARS FANTASTIC fragments out of the past. It is relevant not so much to life as a whole as to each of the many isolated movements of which life is made up. Looking back, van Bredepoel found that one of the first things he could remember was an amber necklace round the neck of someone bending over him. So clear was the recollection that he thought he would still be able to recognise the necklace to-day, but of she who had worn it one tranquil evening long ago his mind retained not the shadow of a memory. Then hard on this impression came others, though still not any of people; he was surprised how little impression people had made on him at first. One large territory of his mind seemed occupied entirely by vague, impersonal things. There a faint nostalgia hung in the light of ample summer afternoons: the bleating of sheep at dawn and sunset, long trails of luminous dust drifting between him and the evening sun, yellow flowers in grass round a slime-covered pool, bats flapping in and out an avenue of pepper-trees, the bagpipe music of mosquitos, the far-off mutter of thunder and nights horizoned by lightning. In this world there were no footsteps and no faces. Even the first recollection of his room came to him by way of light streaming through the cracks of a faded green blind, the light of an afternoon throbbing like a high-powered motor-car at his window. How long had he lain there, how many years before the voice of his aunt woke him? Was it really his aunt? He knew for certain only that it was someone sitting beside him saying softly: “I see something that thou seest not!” And he answered in a bright excited voice:

“What colour is it?” He could hardly contain himself for excitement. Was it the sail of one of the fleet of ships in the painted border of the wall-paper? Was it the daddy-longlegs spider crawling down the wall, or was it the trembling reflection on the plaster of the light falling in the enamel wash-jug? It was none of them, but all the time this someone at his side called encouragingly: “Cold! Lukewarm! Ice-cold! Warm! Very warm! Thou art burning!” And at last he found it. It was the first large blue letter of the text in Gothic print, which hung over his bed: “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”

There were recollections in which the voice was less soft, when it issued in sharp, commanding tones from a long, cold, white face with cool blue eyes. But even there the person remained vague: a mirage in the roaring summer light, a shadow fluttering in the wind of an oncoming summer storm. Summer storms? He was kneeling on a chair, his forehead pressed against one of the windows of his aunt’s parlour, looking out of wide-open eyes at a storm coming over the veld in wind and smoke, like a brigade of Tartar cavalry. Thunder filled the air, and dust beat against the tin roof of the house like a shower of sleet. The branches of the pepper-trees, which flanked both sides of the road in front of the house, bent low before the wind and their pink and white berries were blown in thousands to mix with dust and paper rags and straw in the sky. The top of a blue gum-tree scratched so persistently against the side of the roof that it sounded as if a flock of black ravens were trying to scramble up its surface. He felt then vaguely that the storm was not the uncontrolled thing it seemed, but a planned attack against the house in which he was living; those clouds, winged with long plumes of dust, creatures of impulses and terrible motives. Often he saw forked lightning strike down into the same place three or four times, just as if someone were controlling it and shrieking at the earth: “Take that! And that! And that!” His heart overflowed with

terror, yet he went on looking. When there came a lull in the storm he heard the bleating of sheep being hurriedly driven home and the sound of people moving about behind him. He turned round and saw his aunt, calm and self-possessed, helping the two black servants wrap up in blankets all the cutlery, scissors and knitting-needles, and hang linen sheets over each of the many mirrors. She moved about quietly. The black gown she wore was so long that it hid her feet, trailed out behind her and disguised the movement of her legs so well that she seemed to glide rather than walk. The gown ended at her neck in a high collar of very fine white lace, clasped together with a brooch made out of one small gold nugget. Whenever she came near a window the light outside, a light both orange and grey from the storm, shone dully on the brooch and made her face look even whiter than before. But her eyes were steady, severe perhaps, but cool and calm and untroubled. For a moment Johan forgot the storm; he wanted to rush up to her and catch hold of her skirts, but he dared not. She took no notice of him until the servants had gone. Then she came towards him quietly, raised his chin with a cool white hand, felt him trembling, and looking down from far above asked: “Art thou frightened, Johan?” He did not reply, but swallowed hard, and stared at her.

“Fear,” she said again, shaking her head gently, “it is not a van Bredepoel’s word.”

She would have gone on speaking, but the storm broke at that moment. Taking his hand, she led him over to a small harmonium, smoothed her skirt carefully underneath her, and sat down. The noise of rain and wind and thunder was so loud and so continuous that she made no effort to speak. She merely made him stand at her side and began playing as loudly as she could some old Protestant hymns. Her eyes seldom left his face and he began to feel calmer, though his fear did not disappear. When the sound of the thunder was once more remote and they could again hear the sheep

bleating outside, she closed the harmonium and said, like somebody concluding a long address: “All the same, God is very good to us.”

On that day he definitely left the warm, luminous impersonal world in which he had so long lived, and linked up his thoughts and actions with those of people other than himself. They were thenceforth not beckoning figures on shining and remote frontiers but strange, thrilling creatures in virgin country. For the first time he became conscious of a forward movement in his own life. Whereas his life had hitherto appeared locked in a timeless and tranquil lagoon, it now began to flow slowly forward like a broad stream. Linked to the hours, a man appeared at his aunt’s side, a man with dark restless eyes, who took disconcertingly long steps and read in a grave, imposing voice out of a large, leather-covered Bible. There was a long procession of candle-lit nights in which he tried in vain not to let this man’s calm, sonorous voice lull him to sleep. One moment he would be listening to this voice and following the whirling candle-shadows round the room, and the next he would be standing shivering in front of the kitchen fire, looking with swollen eyes at the cold, yellow light outside, watching his uncle come in with wet, shivering lambs wrapped in mealie bags and place them beside the oven to dry.

He had vivid recollections of long Sunday mornings, when all the black servants filed into the dining-room and squatted on the floor round a big oak table, while his uncle read to them for an hour out of the Bible and his aunt played psalms on her harmonium. Afterwards the three of them always went out riding, Johan in front of his uncle’s saddle, his aunt on a lively Basuto pony. They rarely spoke to one another on these occasions. Johan’s uncle invariably led the way and his aunt followed in silence. One of Oom Willem van Bredepoel’s rides was to follow an English gun-path to the top of a very high hill, which overlooked an immense stretch of country. On its summit was an old

surveyor’s beacon, from which a ragged white flag still waved. There they would often, all three of them, get off their horses and sit for half an hour or so against the side of the beacon. Johan, who had been there on week-days as well, soon noticed that the atmosphere on Sundays differed from any other day. The wind going through the brown bushes, the cattle and goats feeding on the slopes of the hill, all had for him a special Sunday sound.

“Do you hear that, Margrieta?” he heard his uncle say one morning.

“No. What is it?”

“Listen!”

All three listened carefully. At first Johan heard only the bleating of the sheep. He looked down the side of the hill and saw the wind go like a shadow over the grass. Farther away, a flock of sheep were rushing to a small red-earth dam to drink. The wall of the dam was shaped like a crescent and covered with blue-bush; but in the centre stood three willow trees, who seemed to have their roots thrust into the quicksilver of a mirror.

“Do you hear that?” his uncle asked again.

Very far away they heard the pealing of a church bell.

“I’ve seldom heard it as clearly as that. Fifteen miles as the crow flies. I must tell the verger about that next time we go to church; it will please him,” said Oom Willem, and glancing down below them added: “We’d better get back or we shall be late for dinner. There is old Koos’ flock going down to drink. It must be nearly one.”

On another Sunday, a day so clear and hot that the shining atmosphere reflected into the sky the banks of a river which was actually invisible from where they were sitting, Johan saw on the horizon a number of blue mounds and smoking chimneys, wavering in the air. He asked his uncle what they were.

“Those are the mines, the diamond mines, the mines the English wanted and took,” he replied.

“But do they work on Sundays too?” Johan asked.

“Yes, on Sundays, and on every other night and day too. They never stop working.”

“I was reading in the *Church Messenger* the other day,” his aunt intervened, “that the moon must be simply stuffed like a turkey with diamonds. The moon volcanoes. . . .”

“Don’t you believe it!” Johan’s uncle exclaimed, a strange smile on his lips.

“But, Willem, the man who said that was a famous scientist,” his wife said reprovingly.

“Don’t you believe it!”

“Why not?”

“If there were diamonds on the moon the English would long since have annexed it.”

They both laughed, but Johan went on looking at those chimneys. He had never associated the country in which they lived with things like that, and in later days, after one of the occasional visits they had to make to the mining village, he would lie in his bed at night listening to the sheep bleating in the kraal, to the jackals and striped hyenas barking in the veld, and wonder what the mines were doing in the middle of it all.

On Sunday afternoons there came to “Vergelegen”[1] visitors in black clothes from the neighbouring farms, who were taken round the garden, and sooner or later shown a large gold-framed picture, of which we shall hear more. Johan had to follow them dutifully round the garden and climb into fruit-trees to pick all the choice peaches, pears and pomegranates they wanted. One afternoon he said good-bye to some neighbours very sulkily, and after they had gone his aunt gave him a long scolding. “The van Bredepoels,” she ended severely, “have always been gentlemen, and must always be gentlemen.” For her a gentleman was little more than someone who took off his hat politely to her sex, and did not pass through a door until all the women present had done so. But what her

conception lacked in breadth, it more than made up for in faith. She never ceased to stress its importance to her nephew, and he did not easily forget it.

Soon there came a day when he realised that his relation to his aunt and uncle was not the same as that of other children to the people who took care of them. His curiosity and a vague disquiet was roused. He began to ask questions. They were answered evasively at first, but his persistence in the end got at the truth. His father and mother were dead. The black woman who looked after him told him that they had both been killed by the “Kakies.” His aunt and uncle qualified this later. His father, they told him, was killed at the head of his commando at Dalmanutha; his mother died of hunger in an English concentration camp. Margrieta van Bredepoel claimed that she had saved him from a similar fate only by getting her brother, who was Dutch consul-general at the time, to use every possible influence to have him sent to her at the Cape, where she had found a refuge. He did not understand easily what that word death meant. Almost immediately after learning of the death of his father and mother, he began to dream at regular intervals that he was meeting them on long railway journeys. He used to try and talk to them, but something always prevented him from getting near them. But all the people in the train would be discussing them and saying: “They’ve been hiding from the ‘Kakies’ in the mountains. They can’t come back until the ‘Kakies’ are gone.” Once he dreamt that his father and mother were sent to him by parcel post, but he lost the official slip, and the postmaster in the town near “Vergelegen” refused to give him the parcel. “It’s because he too is a ‘Kakie,’” he said in his dream.

Thus early in his life van Bredepoel was brought to think about death. He never afterwards lost the habit. It became almost an obsession with him. In later years he would be continually worried by the thought that no man can live

calmly unless he has worked out the problem of death to his own satisfaction. “Death,” he would say, “is always with us. It’s one of the biggest commonplaces of life. Everyone expects death, and yet when it does come, everyone is horrified. It’s because they have not faced the problem squarely, that they are horrified, and being horrified, overwhelmed. No system of life can ever be satisfactory unless it has an answer for the problem death poses, unless it can oppose a feeling of spiritual security to our sense of death.”

And now he had another frontier to cross. It seemed to him that his childhood was beginning to recede as some lagoon-locked island in the Pacific falls away behind an outward-bound ship. Between him and that childhood lay a new frontier, marked not by reefs and placid lagoons but by a shadow. In this new world there was much talk of war. For him and his aunt and uncle there was only one war, there could be only one war: that in which his father and mother had died. It was blamed for many things. From the way people talked, he could easily have believed that it had cut them all off from a golden age, and had destroyed many more good things than had since been put in their place. His uncle was very bitter about the War.

One morning, Oom Willem took him up on the front of his saddle, and rode with him to the farthest sheep outpost. The outpost consisted of a couple of stone kraals, a ruined farmhouse, a small red-earth dam, and a steel windmill which pumped a thin spasmodic stream of water with a desolate noise. At the back of the house were the remains of a large fruit orchard. Its borders were traced by straggling and withered lanes of quince- and pomegranate-trees. The walls of the house were still blackened by fire, and Johan wondered if it had been struck by lightning.

“No,” said his uncle bitterly, “the ‘Kakies’ did it. They passed through here one fine morning, and in the evening the house was burnt down. They chopped down all the fruit