

The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short

Johan Daisne

An extract pp (21-31)

Original title De man die zijn haar kort liet knippen
Publisher Manteau, 1947

Translation Dutch into English
Translator S.J. Sackett

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Yes, everything considered, there had always been “something.” Hence I am here now and am well here, as everyone should be in the place where he really belongs. I can define this something only with great difficulty, but no matter how long I think about it, so long as I can remember it has always existed, although it has altered its appearance. But it must have been always the same. Everyone must have something like this sometime. With that thought I have often consoled myself, and I have judged it unnecessary to inquire into this knowledge or to interfere in what it must be. For that matter, I have always been very skeptical, or rather very hesitant, about such interference. Nevertheless, I admire science a great deal. I cherish a boundless admiration for everything that pertains to knowledge and an almost childlike affection for those who investigate it. I feel myself growing clammy from very humility whenever I think of them, of their enormous labors and of their majestic personalities. They are so serene, so lucid, so strong. Even in the smallest of them – I mean the slightest of build, with bald skulls, gray features, and thick spectacles for their myopic eyes – even in one of these I still recognize the giant, one of Phidias’s giants of ivory and gold, a revered demigod from the harmonious world of the ancients. There has always been something in me, a child, a child, at once dreary and at the same time glowing with enthusiasm, that wants to fall at their feet. Our director is such a noble spirit, with moreover all the distinguishing physical characteristics of his type. If I choose to examine his hands, his smile is charming. When he smiles, almost nothing changes in his countenance; no wrinkles intrude themselves; his face remains gentle and strong, clean-shaven and ruddily handsome. His expression is always clear and placid and kind; his eyes are as transparent as the sky, and whenever he smiles it is as if the sun rose with a golden light. It is beautiful. And yet I prefer his hands. For it is the basic rule of a look that it should be really a look; and, although the eyes are said to be the mirror of the soul, it is not always there that the spirit speaks. But we have read and heard that so often when we were young that we accept it almost as a universal truth. Now let it be asserted also of the hands that they are such mirrors, at least to the elect. But never have I been so fond of hands as I am of the director’s. When I sit with him I scarcely dare to look right at him. My admiration, and then the other thing makes me embarrassed. Therefore I let my gaze rest on his hands, which he always allows to repose calmly before him on the glass plate of his desk, gracefully, but in a by no means unmanly fashion. In fact, for a long time I have recognized our director entirely by his hands. I no longer look up at him; I see everything in his hands. He never gestures; they hardly move at all, but in the clear space between left thumb and left index finger I hear him speak as if aloud. I see him speak – and when he smiles, oh, then I immediately notice his rings, his wedding ring and his seal ring, the gold of which then shines even sunnier than his eyes, though still very gently. I may not speak here of our director any longer; I do not want him to think, if ever he should read these lines of mine, that it was my purpose to flatter him, perhaps in order to receive

even more favors from him than he has already, in his great goodness, permitted. For that matter, I have also admired Professor Mato, and he is still dear to me, notwithstanding the terrible events which he witnessed and by which he must remember me, although probably it gives him pain to do so. When he stood there in the doorway in his white pajamas, his appearance was not in the least ridiculous, not only because a man learned as he has something, at all times and in all places, which raises him above any situation, no matter how serious it may be to those who also experience it, and all the more when the situation may appear silly. Therefore impressionable children do not laugh when a Charlie Chaplin, who is also of the race of demigods, does a so-called comic thing, that is to say when something touches both his oversensitive earnestness and the joke of a situation. Professor Mato's nose is a little hooked, and he has sparse black hair through which you can see his skull. Also there is something unhealthy, sallow, in his complexion, probably from much work and the abominable nature of his labors. His upper eyelids are thick and black, as though incurably tired, and without the independence and expressiveness of his eyes his glance would surely appear proud and haughty – but the eyes compensate for everything. Also they are fleckless as an Aegaeon sky, still young and even almost roguish, yet naturally without the frivolity of youth – very earnest rogues they are, as though disguised in the vestments of humanity and enormously burdened with a high mission. I will say nothing of his hands, because of the horrible work that they must perform; for that matter, he usually clothes them with gloves, even when he does not execute that work, as though he himself did not wish to be reminded of it. But his white apron, even though it is concerned in that work and is so often soiled by it – that apron is dear to me. It is so white, so clean, that the stains serve only to show how clean it really is, and undoubtedly a divine serenity exudes from the whiteness and from its spaciousness. Well, I shall try not to think of it anymore, but now as I think back for the last time, first of all I see the apron, in that corner of the churchyard, on that red-hot Saturday afternoon, when Professor Mato cut off the head of the corpse.... The first thing I see is that apron. I don't want to see anything else but that apron, to consider how white and fair it was, how it arrayed Professor Mato like a priestly robe, and, in the gestures of the horrible gloves which delineated them, like the harmony of the ancients. But that "interference" of Professor Mato was and is post mortem, and even our director does not really interfere more than that. He takes care of; that is a far different thing. I have always hesitantly opposed the actual interference of science, at least in human affairs, and I consider an appendicitis not as a human but as an animal affair. For between science, no matter how glorious I consider it, and what I should like to call God, if it is no sacrilege, gapes an abyss that cannot be leaped, I believe, even by giants or demigods: the riddle of the soul. And now I want to acknowledge that, since the soul influences the body, it can also be influenced by the body, and thus an operation on the appendix also interferes with the soul. But actually distinctions are sometimes only differences of degree, and I feel it is so here. Dostoyevsky's heroes are burdened with his epilepsy, others suffer his tuberculosis or his miraculous insanity. For my part, I heartily approve efforts to cure misfortunes, but yet they may be only good tries; and so far as I have grasped Dostoyevsky, he judges the case similarly, notwithstanding his boundless affection for suffering humanity. And certainly that was a matter of the soul. For there undoubtedly exists a causal and purposive bond between the soul and the eventual state of the body's health. There must be resolute souls – and they should not be considered inferior because of this, perhaps the contrary – who cannot set forth on their journey otherwise than in an epileptic body, others who would flourish in bodies suffering from tuberculosis. This can have a very beautiful meaning, and it is a sacrilege, as well as fruitless, to want to interfere in these and to disturb higher causes and purposes. On the other hand, I well know that we feel that it is a sacred obligation to mitigate the sorrows of our fellow humans, and from that standpoint it would be criminal to wish to prevent the increase of knowledge or to wish to withhold from someone the balsam which would give him surcease. Life is full of such contradictions, which we may not solve by eliminating one of the terms. We must try to reconcile both, for I cherish a respectful diffidence toward everything that is, even for the absurd. If it is, it is

sure to serve its purpose. And I see that reconciliation in what follows. We must try to help as much as possible, but we must not force anything to happen, and especially we must never do certain things which make us feel that they are unnatural interferences. And is the territory thus restricted—not the nerves? The appendix may be a distant dependency of the soul; but on the contrary the nerves are directly tied to the body, they are rooted minutely in the earth, like a cobweb on a cask of wine. Do not spit on the ground, do not dig in it, for no matter how cautiously you do so you will always bruise it and damage it. Thus have I always felt, vaguely but deeply, even when I was only a child. And when I became physically uncomfortable, when my earth became nervous, I have withdrawn without inquiring into science. Each of us has something of the sort, I considered, and it certainly does not deserve more attention, but still I have never been entirely able to turn myself away from it, and perhaps therefore it has become more important for me than for other people; indeed, it has always been more important for me than for others, and I have therefore had to bestow more attention on it. There is an example of that “something” of mine: I always see the truth in duplicate or triplicate and can never come to a singular conclusion. Hence it is that I seldom or never have been able to think “clearly.” As soon as I want to deliberate on something, everything always becomes mixed up; I work myself into regular snarls and must seem deplorably obscure and circuitous to other people and finally even to myself. We all live in the reeds, but I have never been able to make beautiful, let alone useful, pipes out of them. I was entangled in yarn; the world always appears to me as to someone who squints and perhaps is even insane with just such a spiritual strabism. The worst, however, or at least it must be considered bad, is that I believe in the tangle. I believe everything, everything. For everything is only if it is, and yet it is if it has to be. And what is squinting but to look in another way, which certainly cannot be considered possible unless the different ways now and then exist? And what if, squinting, one sees a spiritual sickness, perhaps, on earth and even in heaven? O Lord God, forgive me for the possibly hazy notion which I have of Your Kingdom, if any particle remains to me of my youth, which was on the outside so pure, and spent with books and movies. . . . Perhaps it is depraved, but I swear to You that I consider the shivers which I have received from that Beauty as only madness. And You know, You still know how I, ardent with love, also humbled myself before the bright whiteness of Knowledge. I was a sturdy boy, and I am still big and strong. But there has always been, deep within me, something frail, something almost ridiculously fragile, something that wears out with miserable quickness, but still remains almost continually quivering, though it be at no more than a painful yawn. I could feel equally—and that again is one of my squinting truths—healthy and strong, and yet there was at the same time someone or something in me as helplessly sick as an animal. I have been for many years a stomach and liver patient, but I have never really believed that it was that, and it wasn’t. It was “something” else. Even when I played on the street or went walking with my parents Sundays, I have more than once lived through these experiences, little, but to a child unaccustomed and seemingly painful, so that I felt constrained repeatedly, for long minutes, to stand apart from myself, in order to consider myself and what I was doing, with a great exertion not to squint any more but to see properly and clearly and to wind a firm ball of yarn out of the snares. To establish some rules in my limitless need: this afternoon I shall read, and look at pictures in the morning, and then play in the street—it was necessary, it was absolutely indispensable that everything should be laid out so fixedly, in order to weigh what I should and should not do. And in doing that I always trembled so, in my neck—in my neck, which was like a buzzing telephone pole—and throughout my whole insides, as if they were full of murmuring wires. Therefore, in order somewhat to combat that, to make me bare in ram and wind, I have always had my hair cut shorter and shorter. Perhaps it was even from a kind of animalistic atavism, for I went to the barber with the greatest pleasure, in order to feel him working on me often, and long, and thoroughly, like a dog who looks beatified because he receives a pat on the head. That Saturday afternoon when Fran left school for good, I had sought the barber beforehand. First because I felt myself so quavery again, and then in order to make myself somewhat handsome for the occasion. I

asked the barber to use the finest clippers, and I needed to hear and to feel the cool-warm steel of the grumbling machine quivering on my scalp, pressed hard against my head; in this way my own internal turmoil was drowned. Then I had my hair washed, two times, one right after the other, shivering under the cold trickle of the shampoo. The barber massaged me vigorously, for a long time, and formed much luxurious lather, great emerald bubbles, and then, in a gush, threw the silver can of water over my head, which was distended over the basin, in order to rinse it all away under a gloriously tepid flow. I always used lotion, and that time I chose an even stronger scent. And, moreover, then I had him rub oil on my hair and comb it into a part and brush it down flat. When I looked into the mirror, I saw myself much younger, and my hair almost black again—in any case, the gray top which grew on my scalp was all sheared away. It was the end of the school year and bewilderingly warm. While the barber was working, we had talked about one thing and another, as is customary in the barber's chair. The man had expected that I would complain about a headache, and, pleased by the working of his hands, I certainly didn't want to disappoint him. However, I had no headache—only I was quivering so in my neck and in my spinal column and indeed everywhere. But there on the barber's chair, that was not entirely unpleasant. For that matter, I connected it with the afternoon's festivities which I awaited. That internal, inward noise was especially annoying and painful on ordinary days, because then it was so foolish in contrast with the pale grayness and inasmuch as it cost me so much effort, both spiritually and physically, to overcome it, even partially, for my work. I say partially, for the efforts have never been very fruitful—and the longer I try, the less fruitful they are—so that even the simplest and easiest work finally becomes a torture. I have never been able to come to a full stop. No matter how wretched my work became, I wanted to get it done all the more furiously. Then the barber said that he had something very efficacious against headache and also against stiffness of neck due to colds. And although I saw myself there in the mirror, sitting so youthful and so strong of build, blushing and cheerful as a lad, I gave him permission to try it once on me. Perhaps it could help me against my unknown disease, for it had no touch of "scientific interference." The barber connected the cord that hung from the ceiling and also supplied the current for the clippers. It was an apparatus no longer than some little instrument, with a large, black rubber knob which was rotated by electricity. The barber rubbed my neck with this, over what he called "the big nerve." The rubber ball kneaded the back of my buzzing head like a dull, furious thumb and thundered weak and hard, cold and hot at the same time. The vibrations which he shot through my whole body were of that sort of pain from which one may expect exaltation afterwards. Thus I put up with that unusual sensation; the barber giggled amicably in the mirror, and when he unplugged the cord again and, after a last brushing, took away the white barber's apron and made a little bow, I certainly felt that I had been fixed up: even the awkward tingling in me seemed to have disappeared. It quickly returned, now stronger, then was drowned again and, as if deafened by the events of the whole further festive commencement afternoon, influenced me by intervals, like the barber with his electrical apparatus. The visitors, the students, the hot light, the music—it was all so buzzing and throbbing, it all roared so much, that my nervousness, already greater than ever, was whipped up or overwhelmed by it. So the afternoon even now spins in my memory from darkness into bright light and then again into darkness, like a gigantic farandole under floodlights. The school is a large, modern building with many broad windows through which the sunlight falls in shrill patches, while by contrast, but only in some corridors, it seems darker. In the evening, in the tea room, there were floodlights. It was then that everything became for me a deadly difficult snarl. Moreover, it was no weekday, I did not have to think about my work, I might for once give up some time to the tangle; in fact, I couldn't do anything else. Snarl, tangle, yet something else, perhaps the most, has always shone through and at the same time obscured my ill-fated existence: now a golden and then an ashen haze, a sort of mist, not over everything but *through* everything, a fog which does not so much surround as it irretrievably permeates everything. When I left the barber and walked out of the fresh, somber station, "it" hung over the great round plaza where the streetcars, coming from all directions,

describe a wide, graceful circle before going out in those various directions again. It hung there like a blinding reflection of the sun, flashing from the steel of the streetcar tracks, into which bled the peonies of the public gardens. I must have walked there and leaped aboard a streetcar like a kid, but it seemed to me I walked with an intoxicated head and a staggering soul, groping. Is it possible that certain souls are not well anchored to their bodies, that they flap in them, and sometimes almost thump? And is it impossible that astrologers and fortune tellers and other scholars of the black arts perhaps have something similar and even that a certain bond exists between the soul and a heavenly body? The sun, at noon on the earth, has often been one red torture to me; I walked desperately, like a stranger lost in a far and hostile region, with a drunken curse at the sun, and sick with the desire for another land, for the land of my soul's home, which I have sometimes thought to be the evening star. The streetcar sliced through narrow streets full of shadows and with the soul brightness of night. The mist still hung there also, a separate light silver fog, in the dark doorways of cool cafes. Sometimes a woman's painted head forked out into the black glare of the plate-glass windows, a face white as the moon, with blue eyelids and a mouth red as peonies. But the street car whizzed wildly on. How ridiculous seemed those hazy houses, apparently on the corner of some sweet night-planet! And, when I stepped on the blazing steps of the school, how silly seemed the flashing fire which shot out under my ice covered sports shoes from the white stones of that beloved hall of youth and innocence! A flood of visitors caught me up and carried me with them to the great lower room where the ceremony took place. That hall was already full, and yet new people continually entered it, people in authority, relatives, and curiosity seekers, all looking cheerful and dressed in their Sunday clothes, some a little old-fashioned and bourgeois, others new this summer. A boy scout, no bigger than my little finger, led me through a hedge of potted plants to the row where there was a chair for me. I laughed confusedly and excused myself, for all the chairs up to mine were already occupied, and I had to make everyone else stand up. They did not get any time to sit down again: the National Anthem re sounded, played in a rather jerky fashion from a phonograph record. It was odd: at the same moment all the people stood up and the members of the orchestra, though unseen and absent, sat down. It was now quiet inside the room, except for the blaring music, but at the two great folding doors into the hall it remained noisy. I had a place in the second row. Before me, to one side, stood Judge Brantink, his shoes neat, his head leaning even a trace backward. I could even see his immaculate face, which stared at a point on the wall high above us. The noble posture par excellence when the National Anthem was played. I tried to improve my stance somewhat by bringing my feet closer together, as quietly as possible, but I did not dare to rumple the rug. I am, as I said, very large, and if you're large you always make someone standing behind you angry; in any case, you feel terribly conspicuous and you wish you were only chest high. And this was certainly not the moment to attract attention to my sports suit, which I had bought, it is true, especially for this occasion, with the hope of making myself appear a little younger. But perhaps I ought to have chosen black because of my position. There! The phonograph record came to an end. The needle still skated for a few revolutions in a scratching groove; then another little boy scout shot forward and shut the machine off. We sat down. I ventured just a glance to each side. I thought I had seen the faces of several ladies and gentlemen previously. I seldom forget faces, and names stay with me a long time too; but all too quickly after being introduced, or after I have stopped seeing them every day, the names and faces come unstuck in my memory and take up places hopelessly remote from each other. For this reason I have never been able to tell the twins Fien and Griet Van Wierden apart, although I could still write down by heart the cunning little differences between those two sisters, who really looked amazingly alike. Therefore I usually meet people with "Sir" or "Madam"; if it sounds somewhat stuff, it is at any rate less offensive than a mumbled name. And to those who greet me very heartily, I throw out a happy and surprised "Hi!"—or "Hi, Buddy," if it is a man—after which I quickly ask how things are with them, and "at home," and "with their work." But that does not always bring clarification, and more than once, after conversing with someone during a whole streetcar ride, I

have left him without ever having known whom I had met. I think now that perhaps this could also have been a reason why I had so little benefit in my professional career from connections. And yet that confusion of mine about names certainly does not come from any lack of interest in people. I have always been fond of people; I have found all of them, without exception, immediately interesting; even for the least of them I have always cared admiringly. What they all generated in me was always the same, miraculous and above or beneath all individual differences. I could not say that to them; they probably would not have believed that anyone so amorously sought in them their common humanity and for that reason forgot their names, because it is just of their personal uniqueness that most people speak. Yet if God exists, surely He can be nothing else than blissful universality, the dissolution of all those uniquenesses, the loss of the “something” that, more or less consciously, burdens everyone. But I now bear it resignedly, Lord, I bear it quietly, in order to try to expiate the crime I have committed. My daily work used to cost me so much exertion; how should I then hope to come up to Your commandments now with a smaller effort? The alderman who meanwhile had climbed to the podium was also talking about work and strife, but in a somewhat different sense. All aldermen are politicians, and the alderman cannot decently make an exception for Education, Art, and Science. I have heard him a few times, and every time his first sentence was like the toot of the trumpet with which an exalted struggle is begun.