

Will-o'-the-Wisp

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p 11-14

I

A dreary November evening with a soaking drizzle that scoured even the braves from the streets, and it was too far to trudge through that icy curtain of rain to the bar I always drank at. So it would be the first time in a long, long while, for the years fly quickly, that I would go straight home. My unexpected arrival would be taken for a step along the road to repentance, and I could hear my wife saying that the beginning is always difficult, but better late than never. But first I'd have to get a paper to sit by the fire with, because if I didn't read my silence would cast a gloom over the rest of the family. I know well enough that there's nothing worse than having someone around who sits staring in front of him as if he was alone, and never tells a joke or slaps someone on the shoulder to cheer him up when things are tough, and never bothers to ask how you are getting on or whether you are happy.

I went into the little shop where I had been a customer for years and heard the old hag behind the counter say for the ten thousandth time what she thought of the weather. Yes, I admitted, it was raining. Drizzle, she specified. I agreed that it was a drizzle. Not for all the money in the world would I dare to contradict that human stalagmite that I'd watched slowly forming through the decades.

'Look,' she said, 'three blackies,' and with her long snaggly tooth that somehow never fell out she pointed towards the street.

Sure enough, as I came outside and pulled up my collar to make a dash for the tram, I found myself face to face with three dark-skinned men. They'd be sailors from some Indiaman. We see a lot of them here. Eyes like gazelles, long, jet-black hair, wearing thin cotton suits that made me shiver, and tight-fitting black jackets as if they were dressed up for something special. One of them had on a sort of fez. He was a little taller than the other two, and he seemed to be the leader. To tell the truth I wasn't interested in them. We're used to these picturesque wanderers here, and besides, I was going home, though there was nothing I wanted to go home to.

'Sir,' the tall one said with a trusting, hopeful look and an inviting smile. He pushed a piece of cardboard into my hand, and pointing with his fine, cigarillo finger he asked, 'Where?'

In a case like that the only thing to do if you don't want to get involved is to say politely, 'I'm very sorry,' give a hint of a smile, and keep walking as if you are in a hurry, for the true gentleman must, above all, understand the art of keeping the rabble tactfully but firmly at a distance. I've known all that for a long time, but I guess I'm too old now to fit in with these new hard-boiled ways, because there I was meekly taking that piece of cardboard the way the dumbest sucker would have done. The blackies stood next to me waiting.

When I looked closer I saw it was the back of a cigarette packet with something written on it in pencil in a scribble I couldn't read. I tried again under the light from the shop window, and finally I managed to decipher it: Maria Van Dam, Kloosterstraat 15.

My newswife, not wanting to miss anything, came shuffling to the door and placed her domain at my disposal. 'Come inside, Mijnheer Verbruggen, you'll be able to see better. What do they want?'

For thirty years she has mixed me up with someone else, and it isn't worth the trouble now to tell her my name is Laarmans. When the day comes that I won't be buying a paper any more, then as far as I'm concerned she might as well shed a tear or two for Verbruggen.

'Where is it, sir?' the soft voice asked a second time.

The devil, it wasn't all that easy. How could I make it clear to my dark-skinned brother exactly where Kloosterstraat was? Draw a map maybe, but then our geometric lines probably wouldn't mean anything to them. So I tried to explain in words the best way I could.

'This way. The third on the right, the second on the left, the first on the right... and then a street...' How in the name of God could you say in English that the next street didn't go either left or right. And not only that, it was a dark, narrow lane that twisted in and out. 'Then not right and not left,' I went on, 'it...' and I started gesturing so energetically that people passing by ignored the rain and formed a circle round us to watch the performance. I tried to make it short. I didn't fancy standing here like a sort of master of ceremonies, with my newswife hugging my back, longer than I could help.

'Look,' I said. I bent over and made a waving movement with my arm, and the spectators looked down at the ground as if I had thrown something away that might be worth picking up. 'You understand?' I asked him. Because if he didn't understand it wasn't my fault.

'Yes, thank you, sir,' my noble savage assured me, bowing graciously while his two companions studied my face to gauge how much they could trust me. One of them said something in a strange-sounding tongue. The tall one answered him, and I could see that the impression was favourable, so favourable that he felt round in his jacket and then offered me a packet of cigarettes, the same sort as the calling card announcing Maria. All that was lacking was a tip.

'For you, sir,' he said.

I vehemently declined the gift, but all the same I felt flattered to think that they had chosen me out of so many others to help them incarnate their dream.

'Hey, if you don't want it, give it to me then,' said a butcher's boy.

I don't know where he came from, but all of a sudden a hulking brute with a broken nose and a greasy cap shoved himself between us and without so much as by-your-leave grabbed my dark friend's arm and pulled him a few steps in a direction that certainly didn't lead to the promised land of Kloosterstraat. A water-front tough, and the look of him was enough to make even the big-mouthed butcher's boy step aside. A fine specimen of the white-skinned herrenvolk that we are.

Ali Khan, as I had privately baptized my friend from across the sea, politely freed his arm from that uncouth grip and looked at me, puzzled, with his two companions turned their flickering gaze in his direction. There was no getting out of it. I had to face up to this big oaf or my blackies were sunk.

'Don't you know the city very well, mate? Kloosterstraat isn't that way, is it?' I asked as gently as possible, so as not to ruffle him.

'Who are you calling mate?' he growled. 'Kloosterstraat, Kloosterstraat? And that bit of cardboard they're flashing on everyone and no one can read it. It's only a take. Do you think they can go running round in this weather in those clothes? I'm going to take them to the Jolly Joker in Zakstraat. Girls, cheap, with big tits like that.' He put his hairy fists up to his chest and splayed out his fingers like claws to give an idea of the size.

'Come on,' he said in a rasping voice, 'it's time to go.' And leaning forward he added to me that these customers were his and no one else's.

What should I do? Back out and abandon them, or stick by them nobly in their hour of need? Anyway it wasn't the delights of Zakstraat they were yearning for but Maria Van Dam, that was plain enough. If I suggested that Zakstraat was a place to keep well away from, as likely as not I would end up in a fight that gorilla. The best thing was to let them make the choice themselves.

'Listen,' I said, 'there,' and I pointed to the north, 'are the love and the money girls, and there,' and I pointed in the direction of the promised land, 'is the girl with the name on the cigarette packet.'

'No, not the love and money girls as you call them sir, but this one,' Ali said decidedly in his meticulous English, waving his cardboard talisman like a banner.

'Then you have to go that way,' I said. 'The third on the right, the second on the left, the first on the right, then... zigzag. And you're there.'

'Thank you, sir,' he answered. He made an almost lady-like bow, and the three of them set off, one behind the other, through the soaking drizzle to the third on the right, the broken-nosed ponce cursing them loudly, while I went to catch the tram that would take me back to the bosom of my family. I had, I felt, handled the situation very well, and I was particularly pleased with the tactful ending. Usually it's not so easy to wriggle out of these sticky involvements. Now I could go home with my newspaper and make a start along the path to virtue.

II

It must have been written in the stars, because my tram stood waiting a long time. I don't know what came over me, but I felt somehow uneasy, as if I had something on my conscience. I was standing in the back comparting staring vacantly at the rain, which had slackened off a little, when I caught sight of my three blackies just as they came out of Jonkheer's the baker, each of them gnawing eagerly at a roll while they glanced round to get their bearings. They seemed to be hesitating between Reyndersstraat, which was the first lap on the good road, and the Oude Koornmarkt, which was the maw of a labyrinth of back streets where they would wander hopelessly up and down until they had to go back to their ship at the break of dawn and turn to for another day's toil. No, they'd never find Kloosterstraat. And even if they did find it, how could they pick out number fifteen, because our figures must be like hieroglyphics to them.

Suddenly I had a vision of myself trudging through the heart of Bombay, forlorn and weary. It is night, and a chilly mist soaks through my thin cotton jacket. I am going from one street to the other, through slums and past bazaars, searching for Fathma who sits waiting for me by the light of a red lamp in a house that is somewhere at the end of a trek along the thirty-seventh street on the right, the fifteenth on the left, the ninth on the right, the seventh of the left, and then a winding alley that I'll never find. I am holding in my hand a pathetic piece of cardboard that no one will look at in that crowd of thousands that streams past like a living Ganges without even giving me a glance. I started out bright-eyed and with a heart full of hope, and now I'm standing on the same corner for the third or fourth time. It is an endless, futile circle with no way out, and I know now that I'll never find Fathma, that I'll never hold her in my arms and press her close. By the first light of the new day she'll put out her lamp and throw herself on her couch sobbing because the faithless white man hasn't kept his promise.

I had to admit to myself that I hadn't done much to help those three fellows, and that my sign language must have looked silly, especially the zigzag, because it was hardly likely they had understood what I meant. Then this Maria Van Dam, this name they bore like some proud motto on their cardboard scutcheon, who was she? She would be the sort of wench who would belong in this area. I couldn't imagine that three coolies would be looking for a countess round the docks at night. But in a district like this you come across fine looking girls who don't suffer from inhibitions. Besides, Maria is a name I like more than any other. That wasn't important, though. It was these three wandering pilgrims who had to see her, not me.

Without reflecting any more I jumped off the tram and went over to my three blackies. They recognized me and greeted me with smiles as broad as daybreak.

'A strange city,' Ali said, 'all the streets look the same.' But I held up my hand reassuringly and announced that I would guide them to the girl on the cigarette packet. I stepped out resolutely towards the third on the right, Ali walking next to me and his two dark, silent companions following behind.

So there I was walking along with three strangers who were different in every way from the people I was doomed to live out my days with – three strangers who had another colour of skin, who walked differently and laughed and greeted differently, and maybe loved differently and hated differently, strangers who had never heard of the foremost pillars of our state and cared naught for

our princes and prelates, so they would most likely be men after my own heart. Now that these three had happened to cross my path I should try to make the most of the chance while I could, for our encounter would only be a brief and passing interlude.

I had to find something to start the conversation, so I asked Ali if he had met Maria. After all, I didn't know how he'd got hold of that homemade visiting-card, and I wanted to be sure that she was real flesh and blood and not just a fancy.

Yes, he had met her.

Was she a nice girl?

'Very nice,' Ali assured me with conviction.

Young? It would be a let-down if she turned out to be some old crone.

Ali confirmed in a rather guarded tone that she was young.

'About fifteen or so?' I asked. Our ideas of old and young might be worlds apart, but I didn't imagine that these blackies would take our moral strictures very seriously. I wouldn't have bothered if I'd thought they did. I'm not the sort to take a lot of trouble for people with all the prudish taboos of our Western lexicon.

'Oh, no,' he said, laughing and waving a gesture of denial. He turned his head and said something in his own tongue that made his two companions laugh like children.

'Fourteen, then?'

This time he raised his brown index finger to reprimand me, and he confided that she must be about twenty.

'Well, so much the better,' I said paternally, though I was disappointed.

'Better for the white man's law,' Ali pointed out.

So there was no prudery. It was only out of necessity that he was bowing to the Cerberus that keeps our flock in line.

We had reached the second on the left, and the goal would soon be in sight. If only the rain would stop, everything would be fine, for after all we were on our way to a wedding. I was thinking that we actually ought to have a bouquet so that we wouldn't arrive empty-handed, but at that time of the year there isn't much besides chrysanthemums, and I wasn't sure whether that would strike the right note since it has become the fashion to use them to give tone to funerals. For years there had been a florist's shop across the street next to the butcher's, and I guessed it couldn't do any harm to have a look. The window was full of ornamental plants, but finally I saw at the back a basket filled with some kind of flowers I didn't know the name of. At least their fiery red colour certainly matched the mood of my companions. But then there was no knowing whether a bouquet would impress Maria Van Dam, and in any case I hadn't the slightest idea if Indian etiquette called for saying it with flowers. Flowers or no flowers. It was a delicate problem.

‘Some flowers for the girl?’ I asked Ali. After all it was their affair, and it was only just that they should have the last word.

Ali consulted his companions and said that it would be all right.

All right! That wasn’t any sort of answer at all. It didn’t matter a damn to me whether they had flowers or not, it wasn’t my party. So I asked him if they really thought it was a good idea.

‘In every country the stranger must do whatever is the custom,’ he insisted, and would I buy the flowers for them because they got mixed up with our money and they’d been gypped a couple of times already.

The bouquet looked fine, and it was small enough that it wouldn’t attract too much attention from an awkward landlady or anyone else they might have to get past to see Maria. Ali immediately asked me how much it cost, and he wouldn’t move a step until I accepted the money from him. Then he took the flowers and we were able to go on.

I inquired if they had known Maria very long.

No, only since this morning. She had come on board to mend the bags, and they had given her a scarf, a pot of ginger, and six packets of cigarettes. After she had accepted all these tokens of esteem they had made an appointment for the evening, and when the first packet of cigarettes was empty she had written her name and address on the back. So it wasn’t just a casual pick-up. It sounded fairly genuine.

But which of them was in love with Maria, I asked him. Was it he himself or one of his two friends.

‘All three of us,’ he affirmed.

I looked at him sharply, not sure whether he was joking or not, but his face was a picture of earnestness and truthfulness. I couldn’t restrain my crude Western inquisitiveness. Was he sure she had really invited them all, I asked. If she had, she was, for a girl of only twenty, unusually enterprising.

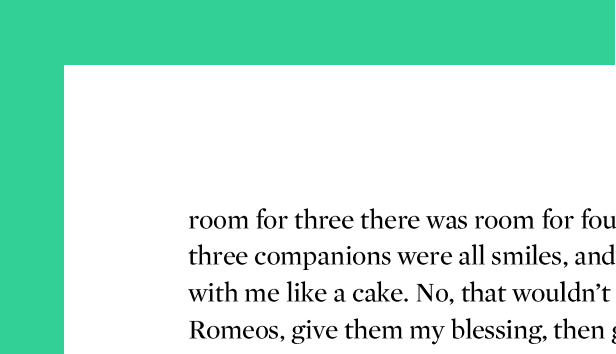
‘Oh, yes,’ he assured me, ‘all three.’ She had accepted a gift from each of them, and she hadn’t shown any preference for the one or the other, so they took it for granted that she could cope with the lot of them.

That seemed to open up possibilities. It was a promising beginning, anyway. ‘Do you think she’ll be there waiting for you?’

‘Of course,’ Ali said. ‘She wouldn’t have taken the presents if she wasn’t going to be there, would she, sir?’

His optimism was so infectious that I began to be convinced of Maria’s noble altruism myself. ‘This is the street,’ I told him, ‘and number fifteen is over there. She won’t have to wait much longer!’ We crossed over to inspect the trysting place.

Now I could say good-bye and leave them to it. I had fulfilled my Christian duty and they wouldn’t be needing any help or guidance from me for the apotheosis. Yet why not stay? Where there was



room for three there was room for four. But I resolutely thrust aside this unseemly thought. My three companions were all smiles, and I had the impression that they wouldn't mind sharing Maria with me like a cake. No, that wouldn't be right. I'd just wait to watch the welcoming of my three Romeos, give them my blessing, then go off home with my paper and my aching feet and the consolation of knowing my mission had been crowned with success.