HOLLAND

BY HENDRIK WILLEM VAN LOON

In an old book—now rarely read—there was a certain injunction about humility. Our ancestors were greatly impressed by this divine mandate. They used it as a basis for their educational policy. Meekness and self-effacement were the corner-stone of

that gloomy edifice where the schoolmaster held sway and the child shivered.

Alas — alas — that blessed day (blessed for the parent who enforced his human discipline with the declared will of God) has gone for ever. Football and the bicycle did it. The day of the Sabbath has become the day of joy. It disinfects the rest of the week and has made teacher and pupil solid and genuine friends. Incidentally it has demanded a new literature for the child who hitherto had been fed on the Victorian pap of little he- and she-angels carrying roast chickens to deserving but poor parishioners.

It seems incredible now that I am writing about it. But thirty years ago when I got my first books, my astonished eyes entered a kingdom of goodness which filled me with dread because I knew that I never would be worthy of admission. Those books of the late 'eighties are now museum pieces. Their authors are prehistoric relics destroyed by the modern flood of sunshine and fresh air. And my small nephews read books about boys and girls who are actually happy and do not fear that the joy of today must be necessarily followed by Spanish grippe, cholera or sudden death of the morrow.

Now that I have studied the history of Holland of the last three centuries, I fully understand why our literature was so bad. It was a direct result of the economic development of the early nineteenth century. In the year 1795 the old Dutch Republic had died from that disease which we now call Bolshevism. Everybody's hand was against the purse of everyone else. The result was national bankruptcy and a foreign receiver. The name of that receiver was Napoleon. When the Allies got through with the "Corsican" whose very image drove my grandfather to bed in fear and trembling, there was little left of that magnificent old commonwealth of ships and traders and rich colonies. The country was bankrupt. The people were ruined. Worst of all, their courage was gone. For twenty years they had lived under the domination of strange masters. They had been humiliated beyond the last agony of suffering. Their sons had been taken away to fight the battles of a foreign tyrant. There was nothing to hope for on this side of the frontier of life.

Voluntarily Holland retired from the business of living. In the houses that were built between 1800 and 1850 the living-room is invariably in the back, away from the noise of the street. There the family retired to contemplate past glories and prepare for that future happiness which was in store for those who had wandered the paths of rectitude.

The younger generation did not like this. It even dared to rebel. It was told to copy those parts of Holy Script where small children are summoned to walk in humility of spirit and meekness of soul. The older people knew better, so much better—until youth surrendered unconditionally and accepted its fate.

Around the Old and New Testament there grew a complete literature of "heartening" books, and small children spent endless Sunday afternoons perusing the wickedness of man and the fate that awaited small boys who did not obey their parents and teachers and who looked for happiness upon the streets of their dead and forgotten cities. Such relaxation as was offered from this stern diet came in the form of fables. La Fontaine had his counterpart in a kindly gentleman who lived within the smoke of the town of

Leyden and who was called van Alphen. Hieronymus van Alphen meant well. His heart flowed over with goodness and he loved children. He composed little rhymelets of extreme simplicity. Like the blushing daisy that is blown across the fields, his stammering sentences have found a foothold amid the more robust rocks of the Dutch language and have grown and flourished to this very day. Little boys and little girls in pantalets and carrying hoops visit their dead grandmother. They weep over the fate of the mosquito who has met an untimely fate in the luring rays of the candle. They invariably share their peaches and plums with poor children and when they start an argument, Father, the omniscient, hastily appears upon the scene and explains the solar system, the laws of gravity and the duties of Christian children, in three or four jingling lines. They are entirely impossible infants, but to the living generation they were as real as Nick Carter is to the small boy who sits outside my office.

Roughly-speaking, this age of virtue lasted until the old people who had lived through the Napoleonic era had found that heavenly rest which they had so assiduously contemplated. Their sons lost heart and resumed the business of living. Incidentally they were called upon to provide new books for their own families. It was a period of renewed national interest. The people discovered that they were still the second largest colonial power of this world. They found within themselves certain characteristics of thrift and industry and shrewdness which promised cheerful returns upon their commercial enterprise. They looked for something besides Judaic heroism and moral excellence to inspire their own offspring. They possessed a vast store of available material in the history of their own land. The eighty years' struggle for freedom reads like an epic of hopeless causes won against incredible odds.

Around these a series of children's books was written which portrayed ancestral courage and admonished all small Dutch boys to do the same thing. Soon however this diet, too, palled and then the publishers came to the rescue. It was during the wild old days "before copyright" and French, English, and German children's books were translated and published at a happy clip and without much regard for the author's royalties. Of this literature which filled the nights of our immediate fathers and mothers we of the younger generation found the ear-marked ruins in garrets and cellars. We entered a new paradise. Gabriel Ferry and Aimard and the older Fenimore Cooper made us familiar with the fiction-Indian, and when the ships bound for America slowly swung down the broad Meuse we envied the little cabin-boys grinning at us across the railing. They were going to the land of the Apache and the Comanche and the Paleface and we, poor infants, were obliged to rob grandfather's rooster before we could turn our front yard into the rolling plains of the Far West, decently populated with real Indians, tomahawks and feathers.

By this time the religious book was fast disappearing. Such volumes as still were printed were for the exclusive use of the "boys who went to church", for by this time irreligion had spread to such an extent through modern Dutch society that church-going people in the Netherlands were more or less of a curiosity.

Such at least was the situation in the late 'eighties when my own generation began to demand its share of

literary entertainment. I distinctly remember my first book. It was a school-prize for something or other and it was a translation of Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe", the book which every child everywhere has read. It was followed by a translation of "Uncle Tom's Cabin"—that mysterious work of art which together with "Charley's Aunt" has delighted the hearts of all the nations of this curious planet. Next came something very different—an edition (illustrated at that) of "The Three Musketeers". Instinctively we felt that we had entered dangerous territory and the book was read by secret candle-light. "The Three Musketeers" gave us a desire for more of the same sort and we soon discovered that our heroes continued their adventures in "Vingt ans après" and the "Le Vicomte de Bragelonne".

The great question was, "Where do we find Dutch translations"? After a short search we hit upon a Flemish translation. We could read the somewhat stilted language but—oh, misery—these sequels appeared in fifteen and twenty-two volumes respectively and each volume cost us ten cents—to be paid in cash and no credit given to small boys of ten. At this rate and with a weekly revenue of five cents it took most of us a year to find out what finally "happened to d'Artagnan". I have forgotten his ultimate fate but I am telling this to show the international taste of little boys who live in small countries where people go from one language into the other without any audible change of gear. The deeds of Porthos, Athos and Aramis were consumed at the same time that our parents encouraged us to read about "Eric" and the other paragons of English public school life. They too were duly translated and made us Dutch boys regret that the flatness of our country and the unwillingness of our North Sea tide made heroic rescues from drowning and starvation an impossibility, however much we might try.

Fortunately the ocean came to our rescue. Captain Marryat and Henley allowed us to share the strange voyages of their scapegrace midshipmen and we added the coasts of Africa, Australia, and Asia to our increasing knowledge of the earth's geography. That was between the 'eighties and the 'nineties, and with the exception of Jules Verne we were entirely under English domination. The Boer War made an end of this. Not for long, however. The heroism of the English at Mons was immediately revaluated into language understandable to boys, and once more English books greatly dominate the literature read by Dutch children.

As for German books, they never gained any popularity. Of course fairy-stories (for small boys and girls) were widely read. But the German juvenile author preached an obedience to established authority which was entirely foreign to the anarchistic instinct of the children of Holland. I distinctly remember the ill-hidden contempt we used to feel for our German cousins when, bespectacled and becapped, they came to play with us in the dunes and along the shores of Scheveningen and Katwyk. We felt the same sort of pity a lusty hound of roving disposition must feel for a pampered King Charles who comes when he is told to come and sits up and begs when he hears the command. German books no doubt were very well in their own way but the boys who live in a country where the sovereign is called "Madam" (in common with all other ladies) felt an instinctive horror for a land where small

infants grew pale when they saw the distant figure of "Seine Majestät".

All that is past history. The last ten years which have rejuvenated Holland—which have given the people a new desire to live and do and go forth and meet and conquer obstacles—have left their impress upon the children's books.

The windows of the home and the school have been opened wide and a fresh breeze has swept aside the old notions about the duty which children bore their parents and the obligations which turned them into small "slaveys" of their teachers. Furthermore, with all due respect for their neighbors, the people have understood that a Dutch child needs something different from an English or a French or a German boy. He must have his own books.

The youngest generation between five and eight was the first to benefit. Old folk-songs and old fairy-stories were translated into modern language and were profusely illustrated by the best modern artists. For once the need of the child was fully recognized, it was decided to give him the best that could be had. This is true of all modern Europe. Everywhere children's books are among the most expensive, the best bound and the best illustrated. Next the children's book was composed in such a way that, while respect and admiration for the work of a great ancestry was encouraged, there should be a complete avoidance of anything resembling jingoism or a belief in a divine superiority of the Dutch race. Love of home was a good thing, but it need not be accompanied by hate of the neighbor. In the third place, since the Dutch child is apt to go abroad at least for part of his life, he must be stimulated to take an interest in foreign lands and high mountains and vast oceans and the customs and habits of the antipodes. And as he cannot hope to achieve anything without a sound physical body, he ought to care for outdoor life and for sport.

The revolution in educational matters, in the attitude of father and son and mother and daughter, has been at once reflected in the literature which is being written for children. The good little angels that worried us ever since the beginning of the nineteenth century are gone to their paper reward. Their place has been taken by a healthy crowd of adventurous youngsters who accept little on the mere say-so of their elders and betters, and who are being licked into some shape by the advice of well-disposed teachers and an increasing literature of well-written and excellently illustrated books—which explain the world as a place of hard work and cheerful enjoyment, and never once mention the brimstone which filled so many pages of the heavy tomes that were bestowed upon the last generation.