SOUTH AFRICAN HERITAGE

CHAPTER I.

ANOTHER DREAM COMES TRUE

"So soon the child a youth; the youth a man;
Eager to run the race his father ran."
— Rogers.

On a blustery August day in 1943, a white-haired man, with an incredibly fresh young face, sat waiting in his study — waiting for news of the birth of his first child. Would it be a son? Could it be possible that yet another of his dreams, perhaps the dearest of all, was about to come true.

At this time Dr. H. J. van der Bijl was already in his fifties, yet his fresh-complexioned, good-looking face and erect carriage, with the still clear cut lines of youth, belied the years. His whole appearance was one of health and vigour.

As he waited, he tried to plan for the future and resolved to give this coming child everything in the world. He would smooth the path of this new little soul and help him to mould a fine, sturdy character. Later, he would take him fishing, teach him to swim — visions of a small boy plodding by his side across a sun-washed beach made him smile. He saw himself
buying electric trains, tricycles and footballs. What fun they would have.

Soon his well-trained mind, so used to planning and scheming ahead, refused to dwell on the future, and, instead, turned back to thoughts of his own childhood and the story he had often been told of the night of his own birth. There had been a raging storm which, after days of soaking rains, had caused one of the walls of the little Pretoria house where his parents lived, to collapse and amid the ensuing confusion, rolling thunder and vivid flashes of lightning, he had come into the world. With due apologies to Shakespeare, it might well have been said of that night that "the Heavens themselves blazed forth the birth of greatness." He was the fifth child of his parents, who little dreamed that stormy night that the baby son who had arrived amid such confusion, would one day do so much to change the face of South Africa. To them he was just another baby, another little boy to be clothed, fed and educated.

Thinking back to his mother gave him comfort—she had had eight children and lived to rear them all. The waiting is over at last. All is well, and yet another dream is added to the list of dreams that came true and there is another little Hendrik Johannes van der Bijl in the world. A very small one, but ridiculously like his father. The same square hands, the same long upper lip and humorous
SKETCHING IS EASY WHEN DAD LENDS A HAND.
mouth, even the same well-shaped head. Only the eyes are his mother’s.

Will this little fellow ever realize his inheritance and appreciate the saga of effort, the intricate planning and the burden of work which his father — this simple, unpretentious man — has borne in order to get South Africa started on her industrial career. How proud this little chap should one day be when he realizes the debt that he and all South Africans owe to his father. That will be many years from now — in the interval he will just be “Dad,” a good chap who is always providing new and interesting playthings and who is always ready for a romp.

In the years that followed two little sisters were to join the family circle — happy little play-fellows making life for young Hendrik very entrancing, but causing such noise and confusion that Hendrik senior begins to wonder if it would not be as well to have the walls of his study made sound-proof, for he is still working and planning and the noise of three healthy children is hardly conducive to the concentration he has been wont to apply to his work.

The little Pretoria house where the collapsing wall and mud-soaked floors had caused such confusion on the night of his birth, the 23rd November, 1887, is still standing in Visagie Street, almost buried now in the growth of the surrounding town. This small white-gabled house with its mud floors was only a temporary home, and some few months after Hendrik’s
birth the van der Bijl family moved to a larger house also in Visagie Street. Later Hendrik’s father, Pieter Gerhard van der Bijl, built for his family a home in Sunnyside, at that time an outlying suburb of Pretoria, which he named “Constantia Villa.” To-day the miles of open veld which once surrounded “Constantia Villa” are closely built up and the house itself, like so many of the large roomy old houses built by our early pioneers, has been turned into a boarding house.

In those early days Pretoria was in the grip of a housing shortage (what familiar words these are to-day) and it was to “Constantia Villa” that the late General Hertzog, a close friend of the van der Bijl family and, at that time, a rising young barrister, brought his bride, and the couple lived at “Constantia Villa” until they were able to obtain a home of their own.

At the time of Hendrik’s birth, South Africa was in a turmoil. The two Republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal were all but bankrupt. The prosperous days of the Cape were almost over — the opening of the Suez Canal having short-circuited the Cape’s usefulness. The discovery of diamonds and gold was already changing the face of the land and the year of his birth, 1887, saw the gold rush to Johannesburg and the proclamation of the Witwatersrand Goldfields. President Kruger had just entered his third term of office and feelings were still running high between the English and the Boers. The annexation of the Transvaal by
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the British ten years earlier, their subsequent defeat at Majuba, followed by the return of the Republic to the Boers four years later, had caused a good deal of bitterness and ill-feeling on both sides. The shadow of Cecil John Rhodes was beginning to spread throughout South Africa and the seeds had already been sown for the historic battle between the old Voortrekker leader, President Kruger, and the "Colossus" Rhodes: that bitter battle which was to culminate in the Boer War and leave scars of hatred down to the present day.

To most South Africans the early history of this vast and fabulous land must seem a sorry tale fraught as it is with misery, mistakes, misunderstanding and hatred. Perhaps it is still too young a land to get a fair perspective and hundreds of years hence the story of the bungling, racial hatred and abuse of our great gifts, may read differently and our early squabbles, which have received so much publicity, may appear unimportant and trivial in the general scheme.

This is a land made up essentially of individualists, too near their origin to take kindly to discipline or regimentation, with strong emotions, nursing hatred and resenting any restriction of their personal liberties. The early settlers were almost entirely men and women of exceptionally strong character, rebels against tyranny, adventurers and explorers, ready to sacrifice everything they had for the sake of freedom and fortune. Freedom to live, love, worship and
fight as they chose. Fortune to give them power
and ease. Their way of life was hard; building
up a new existence under difficult and sometimes
terrifying conditions and then, when oppression
and interference still followed, they would start
out yet again trekking into the interior of an
unknown savage land, sacrificing their lives and
facing violent and cruel deaths, all in the name
of freedom. No wonder the descendants of
these people are difficult to handle.

The parents of our Hendrik Johannes van
der Bijl were no exception. They too were
typical South Africans, fine sturdy, independent
characters. His father, Pieter Gerhard, was the
seventh generation of the van der Bijl family to
be born in South Africa, the first of the line,
Gerrit van der Bijl, having landed at the Cape
from Holland in 1664.

The young Pieter Gerhard showed his inde-
dependent spirit at a very early age. His parents
owned a farm called "Schoongezicht" at Stel-
lenbosch, where they carried on the extensive
cultivation of grape vines. Young Pieter at the
age of 15 was assigned the task of supervising and
assisting the coloured workers in the fields. This
certainly did not appeal to the ambitious lad, so
one day he decided to set out and seek his own
fortune and, with the princely sum of 15/- in
his pocket, left home and went to Paarl. His
father, expecting the speedy return of a weary
and contrite son, decided to allow time and
disillusionment to teach this independent boy a
good lesson. Much to the family's surprise,
P. G. VAN DER BIJL AND HIS FOUR SONS.
Hendrik on the extreme right.
however, young Pieter, instead of the expected humble return to the fold, immediately began to prosper. He possessed a very good business head and a tremendous capacity for work — characteristics which were to appear again to a marked degree in his son Hendrik. Starting in a small way he began transport riding between Paarl and Kimberley and soon accumulated sufficient capital to purchase an hotel in Boshof. Here later he met and married Hester Groenewald, after whose father, Hendrik Johannes Groenewald, our Hendrik Johannes was named.

In Boshof, Pieter Gerhard and his Hester lived very happily together building up their hotel business and raising a family, and it was in Boshof that four of their eight children were born.

Some months before Hendrik's birth, Pieter and his wife decided to sell the hotel and seek their fortunes in Pretoria. Undaunted, they set off in their bullock wagons with their four small children — the youngest little girl not yet two years old. The journey was hard and the going rough, but the two young people had plenty of courage and eventually arrived in Pretoria at the end of July, 1887, just four months before Hendrik's birth.

With one of these same bullock wagons which had brought them safely to the dusty, straggling little capital of the Transvaal Republic, P.G. could have made, almost overnight, the fortune he had set out to seek. In those days wagons and spans of oxen were literally more
precious than gold, and far harder to come by, and soon after their arrival in Pretoria one desperate settler offered P.G. a farm in exchange for one wagon and a span of oxen. P.G. went off to investigate the bargain but decided that the land offered was quite useless for farming so refused the offer. The farm was Maraisburg, where only a year later gold was discovered!

In Pretoria, Pieter Gerhard soon began to prosper. He built up a successful business as a produce merchant, invested in property and, as the years went by, became well established in the fast-growing town, becoming a deacon and elder of the Church and a tower of strength on the church council, where his business ability and talent for finance were a great asset. Many a chat and argument P.G. had with old President Kruger, and among his many friends were such well known South Africans as Louis Botha, Jan Smuts and Barry Hertzog.

Hendrik, never a sturdy child, all but died when he was about two years old. The family caught an infection then known as black measles. First the mother fell ill, then Hendrik and his sister Hester, two years his senior. The babies were so ill that the harassed doctor decided they were beyond his help and concentrated on saving the mother’s life. But the future was not to be cheated, and much to the astonishment of every- body the two wasted little bodies continued to cling to life until gradually the fever passed and strength slowly returned.

At a very early age, Hendrik proved to be a
very serious little fellow and liked to spend long hours by himself working out his childish problems. He wanted to know everything and would fly into a tantrum if disturbed by the other children until they early learned to leave their small brother, Hendrik, well alone if he were absorbed in his own little problems. He had inherited in full measure the independent spirit of his ancestors and early asserted his right to his own opinions. At six years of age he was sent off to school with the other children, duly scrubbed and polished for the occasion, but returned home full of indignation, asserting that he would not go back to school to be taught by "girls." He was a boy and wanted to go to a real boys' school and be taught properly by men.

Hendrik's mother and father must have wondered then, as they were to wonder many times as the years went by, what would become of this funny, determined and, to their way of thinking, far too serious little fellow. He was so different from his brothers and sisters and so very persistent. However, on this occasion, they complied with the child's wishes and sent him to another school. This was the Model School which some years later was to be used as a camp for prisoners of war during the Boer War. It was here that Winston Churchill was taken when he was captured and from this same school house that he made his escape.