Thirteen

GROOTZEEKOEGAT has known countless visitors in its long and varied history. One can speculate at length about various historical figures (such as Sir Harry Smith) who *might* have enjoyed its hospitality, but such speculations are rather pointless. A few visitors moved through the preceding pages and here I wish to present a few more. I choose these particular personalities for their entertainment value only, and by no means even attempt *bona fide* portraits of them. In a way I have placed them in a kind of kaleidoscope, a kaleidoscope to which I occasionally give a little twist and turn.

Many have said that I have a soothing and calming effect on people, and equally many say that as soon as I join any company something fantastic always happens. People who are normally docile and reserved start behaving like lunatics, become wildly amorous in public, drop things, develop hysterics and in general behave in rather extraordinary ways. Once a girl went up in a sheet of flame; somebody had dropped a lighted match, by accident, on her dress. Everybody in my company is supposed to drink and smoke to excess and to display sides of their characters hitherto unknown to their most intimate friends. It is not for me to dispute this. I am always rather quiet and reasonably well-behaved in company, so the whole thing is rather difficult to understand. However, even animals react in an unusual way; not so long ago the very sweet-tempered and lethargic dalmatian of certain hosts of mine, bit me viciously in the face. We all condition the behaviour of other people towards us, or they condition our behaviour towards them, so I'll say no more on the subject. But the foregoing might explain peculiarities in some of the visitors described.

I can't remember when I first met Nerine Desmond, but it possibly happened when, at the age of seventeen, I became a member of the K Club. The club was devoted to the arts and fostered the very rare meeting of local artists for the purpose of

lectures, informal exhibitions and recitals. This was in Cape Town. Whenever the speaker or soloist did not turn up, a small Dutchman gave a lecture on building model ships... I think it once happened three times in succession. I am not interested in the making of model ships and I doubt very much if anybody else was.

At those meetings, I, as a starry-eyed youth embracing the Arts with fervour, had the opportunity of meeting most Cape artists. Nerine Desmond was one of many—a small and breathless woman looking unbelievably young for her age. We remained acquaintances until we became friends through her marriage to an erstwhile friend of mine. They were a charming couple and well-suited, both blond and both painters, but the marriage did not last very long.

Right from the start Nerine was always kind and hospitable to me in antithesis to so many Cape artists who reared like cobras whenever I entered a room. She invited me to many of her delightful dinner and cocktail parties, and I'll always be devoted to her not only for her kindness to me, but also her spirited defence of me and belief in me.

I tried to reciprocate her hospitality by inviting her to most of my studio parties and eventually to Grootzeekoegat. My glimpses of her through the past ten years are still very clear. She came to one of my legendary 1945 costume parties, in my old Long Street studio, as a tattooed lady and collided with the painter Freida Lock with whom she has had a feud for as long as most people can remember. I am also very fond of the fabulous Freida whose house at that time, 71 Bree Street (now demolished) was one of the most incredible institutions of its kind ever seen. That night she was in a bustle and full skirt with a parasol—the lot—and mistakenly thought that Nerine was not in a costume and was annoyed by it. I remember Nerine in her lovely old haunted cottage, "Old Thatch", which she sold eventually to go and live in Hout Bay. I remember her surrounded by scores of Siamese cats. One night she was seen sitting in bed, a huge sun straw-hat on her head, a Siamese female on her lap—the cat was giving birth and took her time about it. Her eyes sagging with weariness and sleepiness, the tiny woman under the big straw hat (which she wore to shade her eyes from the electric light) mothered her steadily increasing brood. I remember Nerine in her old Loop Street studio—another fine old building that is now demolished

and where so many artists lived in the past. Thinking back on our meetings, I sense again that wonderful feel of time and place when the area from Long Street to Buitengracht was still the artist's quarter, alive with young ideas, wild ambitions and the gamut of the emotions.

People have often departed from Grootzeekoegat in rather unorthodox ways—last minute crises over flooded rivers, engine-trouble, lack of petrol, etc.—but Nerine was one of those whose arrival was out of the ordinary. She managed to cover the six hundred miles to Molteno, but seven miles out of the village her battery fell out and split in half. Thus stranded, she, her son David, and her spaniel Blue Boy, proceeded to walk the remaining ten miles to the Gat. Naturally nothing remotely resembling a vehicle passed. I had been expecting them and made frequent trips outside to see if they were not arriving. Imagine my surprise to see them at the gate without a car or luggage. It was astonishing how fresh they looked after such an unexpected hike over ten miles. Fortunately the day was sunny and pleasant although in the middle of winter.

Once safely installed under my roof and after I had collected their luggage and had arranged the fixing up of her car, Nerine became her old self and a delightful guest. She painted most of every day and took long walks with her child and dog. On these walks she found an incredible number of flint-implements and told me that the farm is simply paved with them. At night we talked in front of the fire, drew and discussed many things. Like most artists, her interests are wide, her life-story fascinating, her anecdotes most entertaining. She enriched my house by making two delightful decorative paintings on the panels of the diningroom-glassdoors and with a lovely watercolour of the house from outside.

Nerine usually makes me feel like a big, hulking brute of a man. She achieves this by no particular word or gesture, but primarily, I suppose, by her smallness and by that disarming air of helplessness which most women artists know so well to employ. Women artists are almost without exception very practical, level-headed and hard fighters. They have to be. Few mere males can resist the helpless-in-the-face-of-this-cruel-world act, the poor-little-me and only-a-poor-weak-woman tactics. It soothes their male egos to feel superior, protective, wise and practical and before they think about it, they rush around to do all kinds of

chores for the poor-little-woman who gushes with delight at such magnanimity, her tongue very much in her cheek. I do not wish to say that Nerine employs any of these tactics, and if she did I would think no less of her. To be a professional artist as well as a mother, standing alone, is the most unenviable position in the world. In her case she is a fighter, and she is tough; she is also a good artist and one of our best decorative painters. But by some uncanny means she still makes me feel a big MAN, and I get a feeling of guilt in living in a man's world where she has to employ every ruse known to woman in order to exist at all. Maybe that is the way it is, or, maybe, it is after all a woman's world in which the male is the plaything, the arrogant puppet . . . Whatever the case may be, I take my hat off to Nerine Desmond for these reasons: she is a good artist, a good friend and a delightful visitor.

In 1951, at the opening of my (almost) annual exhibition in Cape Town, I was coping with the big crowd and was inviting some of them to have a drink with me afterwards. Standing with a friend of mine, Hilda Kriseman, stood a boy with bright, almost orange, hair—like a flame. It was such a violent and extraordinary colour that I had noticed him almost at once in the throng, even without my glasses which I am too vain to wear. She introduced him to me as Roland Starke and assuming him to be a friend of hers, I invited them both to join me later. Hilda showed surprise and I only learnt afterwards that she had just met him at the lift.

The boy was sufficiently interesting to make me more tolerant than I would have been ordinarily. He chewed his nails viciously, laughed in nervous spasms and managed to resemble Aubrey Beardsley in an uncanny way. He was passionately interested in everything, was rude to strangers, intolerable to waiters, and sat with his nose in the air as if he smelt something, his luminous green eyes growing bigger and bigger. Languidly he would trail a blue scarf or produce a long cigarette-holder, smoking like Gloria Swanson, and making me shudder. At parties he stood on chairs, drinking neat gin and giggling insanely. He was doing architecture, but was at the crossroads whether to become a painter or writer.

I left Cape Town for Grootzeekoegat, but that did not mean the end of the pursuit. Sheaves of letters began to arrive, and I must say they were most entertaining and often vastly amusing. They were full of gossip and weird questions such as whether

Strandlopers played musical instruments! Then suddenly Roland appeared at the farm—he had hitch-hiked six hundred miles to spend three days with me; it was April, and for the rest of that year he was in hospital.

Those three days I'll never forget. I no longer burned with resentment on just looking at him, but found him amusing although he exhausted me by his intensity, by his persistent demand of my attention and by his chaotic nervous state. He was determined that I should find him interesting and consequently posed all the time. He lay on a divan, propped up in cushions, smoking from a long white holder, his eyes smouldering. Whenever he moved, which was rare, he tottered feebly as if the effort was killing him. Glaring at him once, I snorted: "Nobody would believe that you are a perfectly healthy South African boy!" He said nothing, just sniffed, and pretended to be Mrs. Patrick Campbell or Tallulah Bankhead—depending on his mood.

He proceeded to make drawings of interiors of the house, and I was amazed by his ability. I thought back on some of his letters and I had to come to the conclusion that the boy was brilliant, and that he might startle everybody oneday. Today I know that he is brilliant; I have accepted him in my close circle of friends and I will help him all I can to live up to his promise—in any case, he has enough dogged determination and the most unscrupulous ambition to get him anywhere.

The day of his departure a guest arrived who I had never seen before, but who had written to me—Reg Reeve. Reg was shy and nervous to arrive in such a way and he was terrified by Roland who glared at him virulently. At table Roland was quiet, but occasionally groaned: "Oh *God*!" I took no notice.

Reg and I took him into town and I dropped him on the Steynsburg road, feeling the usual pang at 'deserting' somebody in such a way, but he had to thumb a lift back and there was nothing I could do about it. Later I heard that he sat in the boiling sun for hours before a car took him to the middle of nowhere. Hours later (it was dark then) a car brought him back to Molteno. In the hotel bar he fainted. Early the next morning he was given a lift to Port Elizabeth and thus got home. His adventure hastened his illness of which he nearly died. In his long hospital months he wrote frequently and I began to wait impatiently for his enchanting letters.

My neighbour, Oom John Grové, became very ill and lingered for weeks and months on the brink of death. During that time he had a European man as foreman who had the run of the farm during the months of Oom John's absence. This man (I'll call him Piet), I never saw during the first weeks and for me he attained an element of mystery. This mystery only increased after I got to know him.

Piet's first visit happened one sunny afternoon in winter when I was sitting on the window-sill in the sunroom. He was of stocky build, fair, going a bit bald, painfully neat and spoke surprisingly good Afrikaans. I bade him welcome, sat back and studied him. He sat down carefully on the edge of one of the big stinkwood chairs, placed his hat on the floor beside him and stared vacantly out of the window while he told me that he had oiled the windmill. Although busy, I was glad to have a break and I am always interested in a new face. I talked animatedly, but was disconcerted to find that Piet hardly listened to what I said. He began a long conversation about his gun. I think he talked about his gun for over an hour—quite an achievement, I think, for anybody and any gun. I made some coffee, and then he talked about his revolver until he left. I saw him off and returned to my seat feeling most peculiar. During the two hours Piet had not asked a single question, had not looked at anything around him, displayed not the slightest interest in me or mine, ignored everything I said and talked solely and incessantly about guns. I sat dazed and bewildered for a while and then returned to my work.

Soon afterwards Piet paid a second visit, the second of a long, painful series. He had been a male nurse in an insane asylum, or so he said. "I have my certificate," he repeated over and over again. At least asylums are interesting places and I tried to draw him out, but not a word. He had bought a new bicycle and that was all he talked about, particularly painting the rear mudguard white... He was tired of farming for Oom John and wanted to go away—back to nursing. He applied to every hospital in the country, or so it seemed to me, but not one of them wanted him. I was already suspicious. The following confirmed my suspicions:

Sitting in the sunroom one afternoon we had one of our odd conversations, both talking about totally different things, or Piet reverting back to something in the conversation said half an hour previously. The conversation also was, as usual, about his posses-

sions. This time it was watches. "Do you like my wristwatch? It is a good one, but I don't like to wear it. The work is too rough. But I have this . . ." and he produced an ordinary pocket watch from his jacket-pocket. "Its very good too. You must just see how nicely it shines . . . Wait, I'll polish it quickly . . ." And then the man of almost forty polished the watch with a spotless handkerchief, held it up by the chain and gave it a little turn. "Look! See how it glitters. Doesn't it shine nicely . . ."

It was pathetic to see the way he tried to explain away the fact that none of the hospitals wanted him. He had worked in an asylum, but as a nurse or a patient? I have few doubts. He had a horror of dirt, particularly on his hands, and whenever he handled any slightly messy job, he walked with his hands away from his body, his face twisted as if in pain. Naturally this enraged Oom John to such an extent that he almost had to return to hospital. Piet sat for hours in the dark, never looked at a woman or anybody for that matter, and moved apologetically to his very neat room where each of his jackets was provided with a set of fountain-pen and pencil to match, and his dressing-table was laden with Ponds cold cream.

One evening he appeared unexpectedly. I was annoyed at the interruption and resigned myself to another wasted succession of hours. This has to stop, I resolved, I must get to the bottom of this man. I began to question him. When he interrupted to say something about his rifle, bicycle or watch, I cut him short and insisted on an answer. "What did you do in Pretoria?" He worked in the hospital. "What did you do in your free time?" Sometimes he went out, to the cinema. "With friends?" No, alone. "Did you have friends?" No, he had no friends. "But you must have known *somebody*?" No, he knew nobody . . . This sort of conversation went on for hours, and at the end of it I was no wiser than before, only sad and disconcerted. All he really wanted to talk about that night was his resentment against his employer and his imminent departure. "I have some money saved up. I'll be trouble to nobody. I'll get a taxi to take me away . . ." He seemed obsessed to leave by taxi, a peculiar expression of pride and yet almost that of masochism. And leave by taxi he did. Nobody has ever heard another word of him.

While in Cape Town for an exhibition early in 1952, Nerine Desmond invited me out to Hout Bay one evening. The outing

was organised by acquaintances, all connected with the theatre world. About four of us met at the Bakoven bus stop in town, queued patiently, watched a rather vicious fight between some young soldiers and a gang of Coloureds, and then rushed to the top of the bus, followed by a boyish soldier streaming blood. The bus tore out of town, skirting the sunset-lit ocean, Clifton, Camps Bay and eventually Bakoven. There Nerine was waiting in her old convertible. We packed in and she drove through the breath-taking scenery in the darkening twilight, the sea and wind roaring about us.

At her charming whitewashed cottage we sat on a small stoep in lamplight, sipping drinks, nibbling at some savouries and discussed the rather futile question of living abroad or at home. The air was warm and drowsy and heavy with the scent of flowers. I was tanned dark brown, a bit weary and felt older than I actually was. Nerine's animals were making lunges at the food about us and I fed peanuts to a rather charming cat. Suddenly a bang on the front door shattered the drowsy peace of the moth-filled night air.

"That must be Carla," said Nerine and wafted into the dark house. There was a slight lull, my companions wondering whether to continue the argument whether South Africans are intellectually backward or not, but then Nerine appeared with a vision that shook me out of my comatose state.

"Meet Carla," she said and I stared hard. Standing in the lamplight was a boyish figure dressed entirely in black velvet, a very French poodle at her side, a revolver in her hand.

"Where can I put my gun?" asked Carla huskily and swept us with strange Italian eyes, outlined with black like the portrait of Queen Nefertiti. Her hair stood straight up and stayed up with scientific ingenuity. She was dressed in a smart jacket and curious breeches that became tights over the knee, black sandals that laced up with wide black ribbon right up to her calves . . . I caught a whiff of her perfume—pre-war Schiaparelli's "Shocking". Nerine nervously indicated a place for the revolver, and Carla collapsed in a chair beside me, flinging out her legs and emptying my brandy with one gulp.

That was my first meeting with Countess Carla di Vigliano. I have seen quite a few visions in my life, but rarely anything equal to her. I had heard a lot about her, also that she had shot at the famous Elizabeth Schwarzkopf one night, but fortunately

the bullet passed through the singer's hair. The event sealed a great friendship.

When I had to leave, Carla suddenly had to go to a party and offered to drive me to Wynberg. In her car I nervously noted the speedometer needle hovering over seventy as we sped over Constantia Nek. Her poodle, the famous Barri, breathed moistly in my neck.

"Are you *the* Johannes Meintjes?" she asked after a while.

"I suppose so."

"You are quite famous, not so?"

"Well . . ." It was rather embarrassing.

"I believe you live in an old house in the country?"

"I do."

"Tell me about it."

So I talked about Grootzeekoegat. I had been away from it for nearly two months and I needed hardly any encouragement to talk about the place. Once started, I couldn't stop. It made me choke to think of that house, all closed up in the morning sunlight . . .

At the speed she was driving at we were at my destination very quickly and we parted. Some weeks later, just after the close of my exhibition, I spent an afternoon with Nerine. Also present was an old friend, Dr. M. P. O. Burgers, one of the important figures in South African broadcasting, author and art-enthusiast, as well as his wife who delights in dresses covered in sequins in broad daylight. Nerine asked me to stay when the Burgers took their leave. She told me that Carla was giving a small cocktail party and had insisted that she should take me to it. Where Dr. Burgers had reclined on the grass some half-crowns glittered and we joyfully pounced on them as Nerine had hardly any petrol in her car and I was as broke as she was. So off we went and walked into a stuffy little room overflowing with hot people as well as Barri, the poodle. Carla was *soignée* in her black and talked in her halting fashion, resembling a boy out of Greek mythology. Near my elbow stood a large photograph of the author, Madeleine Masson, looking intense and slightly like Lady Mary Montagu. I had hardly noticed it, when Madeleine Masson herself swept in in a haze of expensive perfume, a flash of Cartier jewellery, smart black dress and red nails two inches long. She flung herself on a divan in a Recamier-position, cut Nerine dead and nodded to me. I was later informed that she had just survived a motor-accident and an all-female teaparty. No wonder that she

boomed something about Bushman Art in my direction. I advised her to consult Dorothea Bleek—in her lifetime the greatest authority on the subject, but Mme. Masson had never heard of her. Then she turned to me again and told me that she had liked my book on Thibault and that I must now make a study of Anreith. As my book was on Anreith and not Thibault, I was at a loss what to say, but then she left for another reception.

Nerine and I left, and an hour later Carla joined us. Nerine, who had been expecting me for lunch had kept a delicious little bird for me, and while Carla joined me in eating it, Carla said:

"Now tell me more about your home."

So I started and talked. Later, when Carla drove me home, I was still talking about Grootzeekoegat.

"We are coming to stay with you—Madeleine and I," Carla said quietly.

"Yes . . . Yes . . ." I said vaguely. "You are very welcome . . ." I did not think that her enthusiasm would survive till daylight. She dropped me at my sister's house and we swore eternal devotion (I was a bit tight) and again she told me to expect them.

I had been at the Gat for some weeks when I received a telegram: "Expect us next week—Carla and Madeleine." I had to sit down and gasped rather faintly, "No! No, it is not possible . . ." My apprehension was solely due to the fact that my very masculine house was by no means fit, to my mind, for receiving such exotic ladies. Everything seemed so utterly inadequate and primitive . . . I was consoled that they would never *really* come. The days passed, a week, ten days and already I had almost forgotten about the telegram. Sitting in my studio one day I heard a car stop. Rather apprehensively I walked outside and there sat Madeleine Masson, Carla di Vigliano, Barri the poodle and a *European* maid! I had been so convinced that they wouldn't come that their room wasn't even fixed up. Bewildered and a bit frantic I rushed around with linen and various essentials, while mountains of luggage were moved into the room—mostly by the little maid who was dressed in riding breeches. The cats fled in terror of the dog, and I had the ordeal to explain a *European* servant to my servants. To my surprise, Magriet understood at once, and some days later I heard her grumbling that the girl dirtied everything and left it for *them* to wash up.

That first evening I had a violent headache and felt like retiring with a carton of aspirin and a crate of brandy. Carla and

Madeleine made themselves at home with surprising ease, spread photographs etc. on tables, and used the third bed as a couch for the dog. In front of Madeleine's bed was a small Icon, some photographs and a rosary; in front of Carla's a large photograph of Elizabeth Schwartzkopf looking very determined. They dressed for supper, Carla taking hours, and Madeleine lovely in black, which enhanced her copper-coloured hair and flaming nails.

The elements came to my aid. The weather was perfect, the days windless and hot, the evenings just cool enough to justify a fire. The first evening Carla produced her own bottle of brandy and, to my surprise, retired to bed with the remains. She seemed to have an inexhaustible supply. They also had large quantities of food in the bedroom, and occasionally extra dishes would appear on the table . . .

At night in front of the fire Madeleine talked, and she is certainly one of the most entertaining conversationalists I have ever met. Her stories, particularly about certain events in her life, were enchanting and often told with wit and brilliance. Carla rarely spoke, but exuded a disarming friendliness in her jeans or black velvet and managed to look ravishing all the time. Apart from eccentricities over food, both were delightful people and, in the quiet moments, very entertaining guests. I encouraged Madeleine to tell stories and listened spellbound. How much of what she told me is true, I don't know and I don't care; I enjoyed it.

Sitting on the stone staircase the day after their arrival, I admired her ring—a number of biggish diamonds set in gold. "Cartier," she said casually. "Alfonso gave me the stones." Soon I was not surprised by anything. Gide? Oh, she knew him intimately and started to tell of some of their get-togethers. Eliot? One of her greatest friends. Any name at all that could occur to me, she knew or had known personally. From all the crowned heads of Europe to everybody who paints, writes or does anything at all, she knew as either acquaintances or friends, and called them by their first names or nicknames. She had even been to the fabulous Venice Party. I suppose she must have enjoyed my wide-eyed enchantment and amazement at talking to somebody who knows all the Great. I was genuinely fascinated, and I have always believed that good story-tellers fabricate a little.

Madeleine has the knack of most female writers or painters (or does it apply to the male species as well)—you find you do

things for them before you know where you are. Not only did I give her my Almanac de Gotha of 1811, but I translated endless articles for her—all absolutely essential for her new book. The translating took almost an entire week, and without them I don't know how she could have written the book at all.

The dog, Barri, was clipped during the time and wore exotic jersies. I had had no idea that it was such a task to clip a poodle and admired Carla's devotion to her tiring task, in the same way as I admired Madeleine for being a tiger for work. The Natives had never seen an animal like Barri before and thought it was a kind of sheep. They were terrified of the gentle creature. Barri was a most cultured animal and could bark in English, French and Italian. For some obscure reason she was not allowed to have puppies, and I believe she suffered from mysterious canine diseases. She had rather lovely eyes, like those of a wounded doe, or as Carla would put it, "like a little gazelle." I practised my rusty French on her. She later wrote her *Memoirs,* edited by Madeleine.

When a friend of mine arrived unexpectedly from Port Elizabeth while my guests were having their afternoon siesta, I almost pulled him by the hair into my bedroom. "You don't what has *happened.* You don't know who is *here.* Shut up! Listen!" And I told the startled Derek Lyons of what had happened to me. He was suitably worked up by the time we went to the library for drinks. In due course Madeleine appeared, looking gorgeous (they had heard the car) and hours later Carla appeared, also dressed to kill. It was Madeleine's birthday and I had placed nasturtiums around her plate. At dinner she put the flowers in her hair and later over coffee in front of the fire, she elegantly plucked one from her coiffure, and *ate* it. I watched Derek's popping eyes with suppressed hysteria. Madeleine ate all the flowers, talked of famous people and places and then we played canasta.

The days passed very pleasantly. I made drawings of them and Madeleine wrote a very nice article about me and Grootzeekoegat which eventually appeared in the *Cape Times.* The maid was a problem, but I solved it by allowing her to eat at table, at the bottom end, and by giving her a bed in the sunroom. She developed an increasing interest in me and leered horribly at me through the candelabra. After their departure, I believe, she went into a decline. I became very fond of the fiery Carla, of

both of them, but understandably it was a strain to cope with such startling personalities in a rather primitive environment with such a dearth of amenities taken for granted in city-life. The day of their departure, the cats and I stood in a row on the stoep and watched the car disappear in a cloud of glittering dust.

Derek Lyons is the only person I have ever known who can create the most impossible situations at a moment's notice. He does it quite unconciously and without any premeditation. Things just happen, and often he is more surprised by the havoc he has wrought than anybody else. For that reason his friends have christened him Baron Situation. Naturally my friendship, or rather acquaintance with him, started in the proper Lyons manner.

Some years ago a few young people connected with the theatre started a kind of "club" in Cape Town, called "The Gilded Cage"—a kind of counterpart to the notorious "Rudolph's Cellar" which used to exist in Johannesburg. Actually, "The Gilded Cage" was not a club at all. Three enterprising young people, on the verge of starvation, hired a room, provided music and everybody was welcome. There was a collection box into which you pushed something if you had any money on you; you took your own liquor, and the rest was gratis. By the rest I mean sordid atmosphere, nothing to sit on, lots of filth, music and the opportunity to meet extraordinary and fascinating people. The police found the whole thing rather difficult to understand as it looked astonishingly like a brothel, but wasn't, or wasn't supposed to be one. What made it more disconcerting was that the most elegant people of the city were to be seen there. As I know practically everybody who wields pen, brush or chisel, or is connected wth the stage, in South Africa, I knew the boys and girls who ran that rather curious establishment and often went there.

One night, after eleven, I went there in search of my friend Jobie Stewart who had said that he might be there waiting for me. Jobie, however, could not make it, and for a moment I wondered whether to hang on a bit or to go home. The place was deserted. Standing near me was a shortish young man with a clean-cut face, glasses and an agreeable smile. He introduced himself to me as Derek Lyons. He then rather accusingly said that he had met me about two nights previously and that I had given him an assumed name! That had been a lost night, and I

tried to make up for it by inviting him to a party I was giving on the coming Sunday night. He meditated for a while, and then told me that he was leaving Cape Town, was also giving a party and as we were probably inviting the same people, couldn't we combine the two parties. We could share the liquor-expenses. It seemed a good suggestion, but I demanded the right to veto his list of guests as there are some people that I cannot receive. He was agreeable and I struck some names off his list. (The list eventually did the round of Cape Town and my enemies doubled overnight.) So all was arranged.

Came the night of the party, no sign of Derek Lyons, no liquor from him, nothing. My friends arrived, as well as a horde of strangers all asking for Derek Lyons. I was becoming frantic as there is nothing more disastrous than to give a party without sufficient liquor. Fortunately friends who lived close-by went to fetch whatever they had available. At about eleven Derek walked in quietly. I collared him at once. He said he hadn't invited anybody, and above all he did not have a drop left; he was cleaned out the previous Saturday night. "Well, how do you explain at least twenty-five people here who all swear that you invited them?" It then dawned on him that he was rather tight the previous night and probably invited them then. I was so angry I could hardly speak, but calmed down sufficiently to say: "Anyway, then, forget about it and have a drink." He looked so miserable about it all that I was mollified. The party fortunately ended as an enormous success.

I did not see Derek again for a full year and had no desire to see him. I told his story to various people, and Derek became more and more miserable whenever he heard a fresh version of the situation he had landed me in. Back in Cape Town after a year, he almost crawled in to the opening of my exhibition and was quite overcome when I greeted him warmly, all forgotten. I saw him the next day and the day after that, and soon we were the best of friends. I discovered an ideal companion in him, although quite unpredictable, and loved to mooch about the city with him. Shortly before my departure, he left for Port Elizabeth where he was to manage a branch for a well-known firm.

Back at Grootzeekoegat my life returned to its usual pattern. A drilling machine was busy with a borehole for water and kicked up a terrible racket (once again a dry hole), and the rain came down in sheets. It was dusk and I lighted the fire, sat down with

a book and lit a cigarette. Suddenly I heard a patter of feet in the hall, a strangled scream—and there stood Derek Lyons, covered in mud from head to foot. "My car is stuck in the river!" he wailed. I welcomed him with delight, but he was too worried to know what was going on. "I've walked *five miles*!" I gave him my brandy. "Now look," I said calmly, "there is a bridge, and the river is only a mile away." He blew up. "Don't be *insane*; there is no bridge and it *is* five miles away!" Then it dawned on me that he must have used an old track last used in my grandfather's day! Trust Derek of course to ask instructions from the village idiot. There was no time to waste. I got my car out of the garage. Roelf and Kleinbooi piled in with a spade, and as we went off, my lights went out. Anyway it was still just light enough to see the road, so I told Derek to hold tight and charged through the sheets of water covering the road. Some way on the old road, the mud was so deep that I had to stop and we walked the remaining two miles to the river. The rain was coming down and we were soaked to the skin. Derek's big new Ford stood half-way up the drift; it had slipped back every time he tried to get up the bank. After struggling for about an hour I got his car out and then the nightmare drive through virgin, sodden veld started until we reached my car. Then I had to drive in his taillights. It worked out allright until he went round the bend at the back of my house and I was left to flounder in pitch darkness. I went over a pile of stones and bashed in various things underneath. The car still moved but made odd shrill screaming sounds. It cost me a large amount of money to get it right again. Anyway, the cars put away, washed and with dry clothes, we gradually regained sanity in front of the fire and talked far into the night. That was the first of many unexpected visits, all with their little situations.

When he came up for a long weekend with three friends, we arranged an exhibition of my work in Port Elizabeth. I had never shown there before and it was to be in the nature of an experiment. Little did any of us dream that I would start a controversy in the press which was to last almost a fortnight. Derek was so excitable over that long weekend, chewing his nails and talking at the top of his voice, that I was almost tempted to follow an example of some of his other friends. They put sleeping tablets in his drinks to quieten him down!

When the time for the exhibition was on hand, Derek arrived

at the Gat to pack me and the pictures in his car in order to take us down. The journey was like a nightmare. It rained all the way, and if I am a bad driver, Derek is the world's worst. Above all he is accident-prone. Frequently I had to tell him that he was on the wrong side of the road. Fortunately he sang songs in his very pleasing tenor and thus soothed my frayed nerves. In Port Elizabeth we had rooms straight out of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, somewhere in Donkin Street, and they provided the background for some of Derek's super situations, the most trying of which was when he produced two very drunk boxers, the one who was promptly sick over my best suit. And there was the night we landed up in the weird little house of two elderly prostitutes called Maisie and Daisey. They wore long drop earrings, and there was a young man that kept falling off his chair. I dragged Derek away, and told him: "This must cease!" But the next day he caused a disturbance in the Snake Park. He usually pacified me by singing Beatrice Lillie's hilarious little song: "I heard my goldfish yodelling, a strange *lugubrious* sound . . ."

A week after my return home he came to say goodbye. He was leaving his job and returning to Cape Town. Since then I have missed his sudden, chaotic little visits to the Gat acutely.

During the past three or more years I have met quite a number of fairly young medical doctors from overseas, particularly England or Scotland, who have settled in some of our remoter villages. Several of them have been to Grootzeekoegat. As doctors they are kept fairly busy, but their wives have to suffer from acute boredom in predominantly Afrikaans environments. There is a limit to golf and tennis, bridge and teaparties; a limit to the number of times that one can look at the same faces. So what else is to be done? Ladies, especially the wives of esteemed village doctors, cannot take to drink or sex, black magic or split personalities to amuse themselves, so it is even difficult to speculate what they *can* do, particularly when they have no interest in cooking or the house beautiful.

The Belfords are a case in point. We met at one of Molteno's rare cocktail parties, and the next Sunday they came out for the afternoon. At midnight, Kit (Mrs. Belford) was still talking. Small, dark and vivacious, she was bursting to talk, to let her hair down, to say all the things she never dared say, and in my house she suddenly had her opportunity. And did she talk! I filled her gin

glass with a reflex action, her husband pottered about, her children lay asleep in the car, but Kit's eyes flashed as if she was just beginning.

Many Sunday afternoons and evenings were spent thus, and I enjoyed their company. Kit could say things that even startled me, and her husband was most agreeable in his quiet, friendly way. Their children, a boy and a girl, were wise and reserved, drank gallons of water and asked intelligent questions. No doubt Kit was inclined to talk a bit too much, and often too outrageously, but had I been in her position, I would have been demented. Molteno certainly has a very active social life, but what kind of social life for a vivacious woman from overseas; a woman who had been in the army, in Cairo and Alexandria and all over the place. I can picture her wearing her small hat for bridge parties (it has to be a small one, I believe, for such functions) talking in tight little circles about the things women are mistakenly supposed to delight in talking about. It is enough to make others here, or further afield—as in Rhodesia—drink gin with jerky movements and to climb the nearest baobab tree.

It was not surprising that Kit should decide to give a costume party, but in Molteno! She pleaded with me to come and to bring my houseparty with me. It was some time before Xmas and I usually have a stag houseparty over that period. I promised and wondered how on earth she would induce some of the staid residents and hearty farmers ever to don costume. But they did. Among my guests was one of my favourite people, John Rothman. He had only arrived that morning and I debated for some while how to induce him to agree to go to a costume party in Molteno. To anybody who had just arrived from Johannesburg, it was naturally the most monstrous suggestion. John, however, always the perfect guest, gave in. To make him do so I had taken him for a walk through the forest and gradually cast my net until he was too entangled to say no. So we went, hardly in costume by city standards, but in jeans, flowered shirts etc., which would pass for costume in Molteno any day. We drank rather liberally before we left and arrived very late, but hilarious. As I had feared the party was an absolute flop. Men and women sat around self-consciously, feeling ridiculous and bored. Poor Kit was walking up and down in the garden on the lookout for us. She was dressed as a Ronald Searle "St. Trinian's" schoolgirl. She shrieked with joy when we piled out of John's huge Lincoln which spilled

four shillings worth of hydraulic fluid every time you opened a window. "Here we go," I said to John. "Let's *make* this party." He nodded, the light of battle in his eyes. We did not only make the party a success, we made it a riot. We hadn't been there for five minutes when everybody went mad. A highly respectable woman walked around with a water pistol and drenched everybody from the bank manager to the district surgeon. Two women in paper dresses started a fight and ripped every bit of paper off each other; they had to go home in blankets. Six hefty farmers, all rugby giants, did a kind of pancake dance dressed as chorus girls—John leading, of course—to the tune of "If I knew you were coming I'd have baked a cake . . ." Well, enough said. Our hostess said her farewells, at three in the morning, standing on her head! They returned to England at the end of 1952.

John Rothman has appeared in these pages several times, particularly in the second part of this book. He now claims the title of Senior Visitor, and I think he has every right to it. John would cross the Namib Desert to spend two days at Grootzeekoegat. His sense of humour, his boundless generosity, his enthusiasm and his aid in a thousand matters have made him a member of my "frontier family".

Kit Belford of the previous section, as I have said, is a champion talker. But John is one too. On several occasions I had them both together in the house, both talking like jets. As John would say: "You know, at times I had the odd sensation that I could *hear* myself talking across the room." It says a lot for him that he can hold his own in the most sophisticated conversation and at the same time can talk to the most down-to-earth farmer. Often I listened with amazement to him chatting away about sheep and wool, erosion and cultivation, and about the many things that interest the farmer's mind; no wonder that they adored him.

I first met John Rothman at a rather strange party in Johannesburg. It was at the beginning of 1949, just prior to my moving back to Grootzeekoegat. I was staying with a friend and he took me to that Sunday-night party which was, I believe, a weekly one given by an eminent architect.

At the party I felt lost and bewildered. I had not been in Johannesburg since 1945, and knew nobody. Suddenly a tall young man came up to me and told me to sit down and talk to

him. He introduced himself, and the name struck me as very familiar.

"Do you come from Bredasdorp?"

"Why, yes!" He was amazed. "How do you know?" I knew because one of my greatest friends at the University of Cape Town also came from Bredasdorp and had often spoken of his boyhood friend, John Rothman. Immediately we had a great deal in common, knew many of the same people and places and became friends in practically no time at all. John seemed to be delighted and devoted the whole evening to me. He told me the case-histories of all those present and with such wicked humour that I found myself enjoying the party far more than I would have done otherwise.

The next morning he phoned me and asked me to lunch. The lunch stretched over dinner. We never seemed to pause in our conversation. I told him all about my plans of moving to a homestead on an old family farm, described the place and asked him to come and visit me there. We conversed incessantly about Cape-Dutch architecture, old Cape silver, furniture, food and so forth, and in that sphere discovered sufficient real interest to keep us talking for days. I don't think he has ever really forgiven me that my family arrived at the Cape about twenty or thirty years before his did! I was pleased to find that his Tant Mimie is the distinguished Afrikaans author, M. E. Rothmann, Ph.D., D.Litt. —one of South Africa's greatest prose-writers. Although I liked him very much, I did not know that John would become one of my closest friends.

John, at that time, shared a house with a well-known business-man. Shortly after my departure, they gave a smart dinner-party, and for the occasion John had slaved in the kitchen to have everything in really tiptop condition. The *pièce de resistance* in the reception room was a round table with damask table-cloth falling to the floor. On it stood salmon in aspic in silver salvers, silver candelabra and, at a given moment, various bottles of whisky and imported brandy. The guests were seething about, and there was a particularly animated discussion between a well-known architect and a group of friends. The architect who stutters rather, at a given moment to emphasise a point, sat on the edge of the resplendent table. And then the entire table collapsed! The crash was considerable, and a deathly silence followed. Pale, but undaunted, John pressed a bell and an immaculate servant

appeared. "Please remove this," he said, and then turned to the person next to him and continued talking as if nothing had happened. Naturally all this was too much for many of those present, and some of them fled outside where they had hysterics behind the rose-bushes. The stuttering architect, I believe, couldn't speak for three days.

Every one of John's visits to Grootzeekoegat meant hilarity in some form or another, and thus far he has carried every house-party over Christmas. Many people who never used to like him, rediscovered him at the Gat and became his devoted friends. It is not possible to describe some of his incredibly funny performances at the Gat, as one needs a clear conception of the place, the time and the situation to appreciate them properly. A joke he likes to tell against himself is the following: One night at table at a fashionable dinnerparty somebody remarked;

"I see Johannes Meintjes has written a new book."

"Yes," said a bright young man. "Its all about old Cape façades—and it is dedicated to John Rothmann!"

Some people are born guests; others are born hosts. After careful consideration I've decided that I am a guest always. I have no interest in preparing food myself, although I have great appreciation for a good meal, and I lack that ability to potter about happily seeing to domestic things. Many of my friends are excellent cooks and enjoy arranging meals, flowers and little entertainments for their guests. When I see them busily at work in their own flats and houses, I develop a feeling of guilt and a feeling of hopeless inadequacy as host. Never could I whip up a cake for tea—I don't like cake, anyway—or an exotic sweet—I am not fond of sweets either—and must come to the conclusion that you can really only do these things if you delight in them yourself. Also, I am often so interested in my guests as people, that I find it difficult to tear myself away from them.

Being a host at Grootzeekoegat, or a guest for that matter, is very much different from being the same thing elsewhere. You are totally and absolutely cut off from the outside world. You are brought into the closest contact with personalities, and that contact lasts almost all your waking hours. Visitors have to cope with my personality all the time, and I with theirs. We cannot escape one another, and the result is that one must draw on oneself and one's past in order to entertain and to amuse. This

is not as difficult or as tedious as it might sound, on the contrary, it is vastly entertaining, and particularly so when people are widely experienced and well-read. In a way this reverts back to the pioneering days when people had to be equally self-reliant, and conversation had not become a lost art.

At Grootzeekoegat people discuss the most intimate details of their lives naturally and sincerely. There is no reason or desire to assert, justify, to impress or to be terrified in case one's exposed little ego might be bruised. This also applies to the mind—to intellectual experiences, things read and seen, trends of thought, general problems. And once a person has thus been uncorked, emotionally and mentally, it is astonishing out of what a rich fabric even the most ordinary person is shaped, how much he or she can teach and entertain you. In cities we are in too feverish a rush to be able to sit down calmly in order to swap experiences. In any case, we are too much on the defensive, afraid to be misinterpreted, laughed at, of appearing naive, of being critically examined. So one rather gossips lightly, clutching firmly to one's own protective shroud, or rushes out to the nearest party, cinema or theatre where the precious ego can be carefully hidden from any possible exposure. In a way this is a form of common sense, a necessary form of self-protection in an environment where people rarely pause to think about others or themselves. But at Grootzeekoegat the shrouds fall away, they have to, and it happens spontaneously.

I find that I, as host, expose myself almost completely, and my visitor can either like me or dislike me more as a result of it. He or she does the same and feels the same. Yet, somehow the element of liking or disliking does not enter into it; it becomes one of understanding and sympathy, acceptance and affection. To me it is interesting that I've gained more real friends since I have been at the Gat than at any other time of my life.

When I look back on my long list of visitors in the brief period of four years, I am astounded by the variety, the complexity and the colourfulness of the human personality. It is a small indication of the same qualities in the vast number of people who came to Grootzeekoegat in the past century. They will remain anonymous for ever, but by selecting and describing some visitors in these pages, I hope I have indicated the wealth of personalities, not only of my time, but of the past, and of course, those of the future, on and on for as long as this place exists.

The story of Grootzeekoegat can never be completely told. There is much to be discovered about its past, and its future consists of so many unwritten books. I have been but one of many residents, and here I have described my small contribution born of respect and love, rewarded by great happiness. Writing this, I am sitting in the library surrounded by motionless tongues of flame from the candles. It is a warm night and a huge African moon hangs over the mountain. Frogs are creating an ecstatic bell-like vibration in the quiet air, and moths with gorgeous wings are hitting the gauze in front of the window with sharp explosive sounds. Occasionally the old woodwork creaks and the candle-flames swirl in a sudden movement of air.

This is the time for work or dreams, or dreams only. One is not oppressed by the ticking of one's wristwatch, or one's breathing, or the quiet that presses in on one's ears until it feels like distant surf—no, one is not isolated, not a clock ticking in an empty house. On the contrary, you are surrounded by many objects, all with their stories and associations, by the realms of the mind and by the people absorbed into yourself and into the walls about you.

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