

BAANTJER

DeKok
and Murder
on Blood
Mountain

Translated by H.G. Smittenaar

De Fontein

1

An icy polar wind came down from an overcast sky and raced along the frozen Amstel River. It chased unopposed through the bare branches of the trees and bushes. It even seemed to shrink the eternal green of the majestic conifers on either side of the gate.

Shivering, slightly hunched, Inspector DeKok walked along the wide entrance path to Sorrow Field Cemetery. The gravel crunched under his feet as his weight broke the small icy cocoons encasing the stones. He could no longer feel his ears and, with an impatient gesture, he pulled up the wide collar of his winter coat. He pushed his old, decrepit little hat farther down over his forehead. He wondered idly how anyone was able to dig a grave in this Siberian cold. The ground must be permafrost.

He turned his head slightly and looked at Vledder, his partner, friend, and assistant.

‘I think the frost is down deep in the ground.’

The younger inspector shrugged his shoulders as he pointed at the gravestones surrounding them.

‘You’re afraid they’re getting cold?’ It sounded callous and cynical.

DeKok gave him a chastening look.

‘That’s inappropriate,’ he reprimanded.

Vledder hugged himself in an effort to get a little warmer.

‘I don’t know about you,’ he said with nearly chattering teeth, ‘but if I were to die now, at this moment, I’d ask for a spot in Hell. As far as I know, it’s always warm there.’

The gray sleuth did not appreciate the profane joke. His puritan soul, formed by his Calvinistic upbringing, rebelled at the thought. Dying and the possibility of life after death were, he felt, mysteries that should not be the object of levity.

‘There will be groaning and weeping and the gnashing of teeth.’

‘Where?’

‘In Hell.’

With a grin, Vledder abandoned the subject.

‘Why are we actually here, in this icebox?’

‘To attend a funeral.’

‘Whose funeral?’

‘The deceased is a certain Henry Assumburg.’

‘Are we supposed to know him?’

DeKok looked serious.

‘Hendrik-Jan Assumburg, to use his full name, is a Dutch citizen who died in Belgium.’

‘How?’

‘He was murdered.’

The younger inspector was surprised.

‘Murdered?’ he repeated.

DeKok nodded.

‘They fished him out of the harbor, near one of their docks.’

‘Drowned?’

‘No, poisoned. The Belgian investigating judge ordered an autopsy. The coroner found no water in the lungs and concluded he was dead before he hit the water.’

Vledder shrugged his shoulders.

‘We have nothing to do with a murder in Belgium.’

DeKok shook his head.

‘We don’t. We’re here at the request of the Antwerp police.’

‘To do what?’

DeKok did not answer immediately. He looked at a group of people who leaned against the lee wall of the chapel, trying to escape the sharp, cold wind.

An ageing undertaker, dressed in morning clothes complete with tails and high hat, shivered as he presented the condolence register to the mourners. As he stepped out of the lee of the chapel, the wind tore the hat off his head and chased it across the frozen ground among the gravestones.

DeKok ran after the hat as somebody along the wall laughed. DeKok at top speed was a comical sight.

The hat caught in the fence around a white marble monument. DeKok grabbed the hat and ambled back. The undertaker walked toward him.

With a friendly smile, DeKok returned the man’s hat.

‘My name is DeKok,’ he said softly, ‘with a kay-oh-kay.’ He pointed at Vledder. ‘That is my colleague. We’re inspectors attached to Warmoes Street station.’

The undertaker looked puzzled.

‘Police?’

DeKok nodded.

‘I have a small, but confidential, request.’

‘And what might that be?’

‘Will you make sure,’ answered DeKok, almost whispering,

‘that all interested parties sign the condolence register? And ask if they will also print their names next to the signatures. The signatures are usually unreadable.’

The undertaker nodded his understanding.

‘And then you want the register?’

DeKok smiled.

‘Privately, you understand? I don’t want anybody else to know. I’ll borrow it for just a few hours... not longer. Then you’ll get it back undamaged and will be able to present it to the family.’

They walked back together.

‘There will be a small ceremony in the chapel. Will you attend?’

‘Certainly.’

A long, gleaming hearse approached across the gravel. The procession of cars stopped a little distance away. The doors of the chapel opened and the pallbearers lifted the flower-covered coffin from the hearse.

With his head bared, DeKok watched and silently prayed his ears would not freeze off in the bitter cold.

DeKok had always admired the efficient way in which services for the dead were conducted in Holland. The non-denominational chapel on the cemetery grounds had two large doors at either end. As one funeral party departed through a set of doors, the next funeral party would enter through the other doors. A brief service was held, and the cycle repeated itself. Few families elected to have funeral services in their own churches.

Following the procession of mourners, DeKok and Vledder entered the chapel and took their place at the back wall. As they leaned against the oaken wainscotting, they watched a

man in a dark suit walk to the dais and arrange some papers in front of him.

The man looked around the chapel, coughed discreetly, and then raised his arms in a theatrical gesture.

‘*May God*,’ he thundered, ‘*give you His blessings and peace. Amen.*’ He lowered his arms and continued in a more moderate tone of voice. ‘And Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.” Today we take leave of...’

DeKok allowed the preacher’s words to pass over him as he observed the backs of the gathering. Near the front was a young woman, veiled and dressed in black. He figured she was around thirty years of age. Next to her was a dignified man with just a hint of gray hair at the temples. From time to time he glanced sideways at the woman.

Suddenly DeKok’s attention reverted back to the speaker. The speaker was gesticulating energetically.

‘*De mortuis nil nisi bene*,’ he exclaimed with relish. ‘Of the dead... of the dead you will hear me speak no evil. We mortals have not the right to judge his deeds. If his life, by whatever measure, was wrongly lived, he will already have been judged by Him who is all knowing. We do not know, and will probably never learn these facts.’ The speaker fell silent for a moment and then leaned forward. After a long look at the audience, he bowed his head. ‘Let us pray for mercy for the killer.’

After a fiery prayer, heavy organ music descended on the mourners. The preacher left the dais. The professional pallbearers arranged themselves around the coffin and then carried the coffin outside.

Vledder and DeKok followed slowly at a distance. It was still bitterly cold, but the wind had died down a little. The temperature seemed just that much more bearable.

DeKok punched his hat more or less into its original shape and allowed the distance between them and the mourners to increase slightly.

Vledder matched his pace.

‘I still don’t know what we’re doing here.’

DeKok pointed in the direction of the coffin.

‘At the request of the Antwerp police, we are discreetly attending the funeral.’

The young inspector grinned.

‘You can hardly call the way you ran after the undertaker’s hat as “discreet attendance.”’

DeKok smiled sourly as he looked aside.

‘Don’t you think the preacher’s sermon was bit strange? I’ll have to digest his words some more, but it seems to me his intentions were to say something specific to one of the attendees.’

Vledder nodded.

‘Trying to say what and to whom?’

DeKok shrugged.

‘That’s hard to say. Either the man spoke about his own experiences, knew the murderer, or somebody whispered something in his ear.’ He nodded to himself.

‘It might not be a bad idea to ask the man some pointed questions.’

‘Why?’ Vledder asked, annoyed. ‘What business is it of ours? The request of the Antwerp police was to attend the funeral. So let’s leave well enough alone. It’s a Belgian murder. We certainly have enough on our plates at Warmoes Street.’

DeKok walked on, deep in thought.

‘It’s just too bad we know nothing at all about Henry Assumburg.’

‘Personally, I don’t *want* to know anything about him. Let’s keep it that way.’

DeKok ignored the remark.

“If his life was wrongly lived, by whatever measure, he will already have been judged by Him who is all knowing.” Those were the exact words of the preacher.’ DeKok pushed his lower lip out, which gave him a belligerent expression. He pointed at the coffin. ‘It seems that the man in the coffin did not exactly lead an exemplary life. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if his life choices lead us to the murderer’s motive, and –’

Vledder interrupted.

‘DeKok,’ he almost barked, ‘stop it. It is *not* our case. Leave it for our colleagues in Antwerp. They know what they’re doing, I’m sure.’ He gave his older colleague a sarcastic look. ‘Or do you think they’re waiting for help from DeKok... with a kay-oh-kay?’

The gray sleuth rubbed his chin. He understood Vledder better than anybody. The case of the ‘golf club’ murders had just been concluded, and they could still feel the exhaustion of nightly excursions in their bones.

The procession reached the gravesite. DeKok took off his hat and joined the circle. The preacher had reappeared and began to speak.

‘It has pleased almighty God,’ he orated, ‘to call our brother Hendrik-Jan Assumburg... with a firm belief in the resurrection, we now place his body in the grave... earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust...’

DeKok absorbed the words only vaguely. His focus was directed at the circle of mourners.

The young, veiled woman was beautiful, he noticed. The distinguished gentleman with the gray at the temples supported her. The way he did it irritated DeKok. It was too insistent, too demonstrative; it was not a sign of real compassion or grief. Besides, the young woman did not look as if she needed to be supported.

Letting his eyes move through the crowd, DeKok abruptly noticed a face in the outer circle across from him. It was a narrow, white face. For just a moment their eyes met in mutual recognition.

DeKok gasped with surprise. His legs seemed to be rooted to the ground, unable to move for a few minutes. Then, breaking free from his paralysis, he worked his way between the people behind him and circled toward the place where he had seen the face. He was too late. When he arrived at the spot, he saw a man about a hundred feet away, running toward the cemetery exit with his coat whipping in the wind.

Wildly, DeKok ran in pursuit. At first it seemed he was gaining slightly, but the distance between the two became greater. After a few hundred feet, DeKok gave in. Breathing heavily he sank down on a bench under a bald weeping willow. He undid the top button of his shirt, despite the chilled air.

Vledder arrived at a run, red in the face with exertion.

‘What... what,’ he stammered, ‘do you think you’re doing? It’s outrageous. You disrupted the ceremony.’

Slowly DeKok regained his breath.

‘I ran after a man.’

‘What sort of man?’

‘Ronald Kruisberg.’

Vledder looked a question.

‘No, I meant, is he a fugitive? Are we looking for him?’

DeKok shook his head.

‘He died... two years ago.’

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