
Pro Rege

Volume 7
Number 2 *Special Arts Issue*

Article 12

December 1978

Mocker

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Recommended Citation

Schaap, James C. (1978) "Mocker," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 7: No. 2, 15 - 26.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol7/iss2/12

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The Mocker

To be perfectly honest, Egbert Kok didn't like the idea at all. Even though he was the appointed spokesman, he had no more desire to speak to Aartje Korsman than he had to clean out his hog yard. And while he recognized that the full authority of the church—and the authority of the village—was now vested in him, it didn't help to firm his resolve. His bony fingers shook so badly that he could barely form a fist to knock on her door. And when he did knock, finally, his knuckles hurt so much he had to shake out the sting. With a wiry smile, Aartje let him right in, and set him down on a wicker chair in her front room. But he was most uncomfortable.

"And your nephew, Dirck?" he asked meekly. Aartje's dog flashed pointed incisors his way.

"Ja, fine, Egbert." She sat straight and proud in the high-backed rocker near the stove. A roll of wrinkly flesh curled over the starched collar of her dress and formed a base for her spherical head, giving her the appearance of a sculpture. Kok thought she resembled the Dominee's bust of Kuyper, the one that stood on his desk. But beneath those shoulders was a huge body, covered by a black dress as big as a Civil War tent. Only the two points of the pressback were visible, she filled her favorite chair so completely.

"He is a tall boy already," Kok continued, peeking up over the top of his rimless spectacles, blinking timidly.

"Ja, he grows fast now." She rocked very slowly, trying to calm her leering dog.

"And your daughter's family, in Platte?"

"Ja, I see them not so often anymore, but she has four little ones already." Her Dutch face was broadened by cheeks as round and red as apples.

"Four?" he acted surprised.

"Ja, little Eduard come last summer. I took the train to see him."

"The Lord blesses her and her husband, surely."

"All healthy, Egbert."

Kok pursed his lips and nodded a slow assent. His fingers combed through his early beard. A prickly silence grew between them like a summer thistle.

He moved his lean backside across the wicker seat, and the chair squeaked. "Ja, Aartje, we must be careful, eh? *Je moet nooit over kinderen praten totdat je je eige schape op't droge hebt.*"

"Ja, it is hard to raise the children today," she said, muffling a little amusement.

Egbert thought he had found the opening, so he chugged along. "Ja, that is true. In our day things were not like this. The children, they understood what was right, what was wrong. And the church was strong then, Aartje, when you and I were children." He readjusted himself again as he spoke, preparing himself for the attack; one of his sharp elbows dropped awkwardly off the arm of the chair. But he continued, gesturing like the Dominee with his left hand, always shifting about on the chair.

"But today is different. Today the children want this, want that—they want to forget the Law, the Commandments." He raised both hands, palms uplifted, as if awaiting a blessing. "They don't even want to go to church always on Sunday!"

"I tell my daughter this, too." She continued her even rocking. "In the old days there was more respect, ja? The children never questioned my Frederic."

"Ah, your husband, Aartje, that was a good man."

"His soul is with the Lord, I am certain."

Kok stopped momentarily. He pulled his ragged beard to a point. He knew he had missed his first opportunity.

"Ja, ja, ja," he blurted out as an obligatory afterthought, "Frederic was a good man. The promises of our Lord are coming to him for sure." He kept moving, inspecting his knuckles. "Did you ever think, Aartje, about what he must see now? All the glory of heaven—all the questions we must wrestle with here below answered clearly for him. It must be glorious, ja?"

She stopped for a moment; her left hand moved over the fern table to the left of her chair and rested on the big *Staten Bijbel* that lay there. "Someday I will see him again."

"Surely, surely."

Then there was silence, profound silence—only the clunky ticking of the big wall clock she had brought from Holland.

And so it continued—Aartje Korsman moving slowly, the big chair rocking back and forth, back and forth beneath her, groaning musically, and Egbert Kok, blinking constantly, the wicker chair crackling like an open fire as he tried in vain to make himself comfortable. The dog grumbled now and then to further punctuate the silence.

It was Kok, finally, who spoke again under the compulsion of duty.

"There is good weather this summer."

"Ja."

"The farm is green and full of life. We have good water, and the sun shines warm on the corn."

"Ja." She nodded. No hint of a smile appeared between her bulky jowls.

"We will have a good harvest, too, the Lord willing. He has blessed us here in Dakota, ja?"

"Ja, He has, Egbert."

Kok took his hat off the table where he had set it when he entered, and flattened the brim between his thumb and forefinger, his eyes following the motions of his hands. Aartje Korsman kept rocking.

Then she stopped, rapped her cane lightly on the floor, and looked at her guest.

"What brings you here, Egbert?" She looked directly at the little man, her eyes consuming whatever courage he thought he had gathered.

He coughed twice, three times.

"Wablief?"

"I say, why do you come this night to my house?"

"Oh, why do I come here?" He looked back, his face tightened by a hollow smile.

"Ja?"

"Well, . . ." he coughed again, covering his mouth with his hand, "I must come here to . . ."

"Ja, speak up . . ."

"I must come here . . . ah, from the church, Vrouw Korsman." His pleasantries died quickly. He tried to muster a Jeremiah by sitting straight in the chair and staring back at his hostess. She started rocking slightly faster.

"But, *mijn man*, I come to church every Sunday."

"Ja, Aartje," he raised his left hand and pointed a bony index finger in the air, "we know that you come faithfully to the church. That we are happy for." He slid himself around once again, and leaned forward, pushing his glasses up from the tip of his nose. "But we are not so happy about this business, Aartje."

"My business? What is wrong here?"

"It is the liquor, woman." He sat back then, silent.

"The liquor?" She sat forward, and the chair creaked to a sudden halt.

"Ja, the liquor. It is a mocker; it leads our people to hell, woman!" His timidity faded as his mission began to materialize, which, in turn, strengthened his passion. But Aartje was no milksop.

"No one, Egbert Kok, no one drinks too much in my place! If you know one man, you tell me, and he will not return. No fathers spend their nights in my place. No wives ever come here to pull out their drunken husbands. Never!" Her cane thumped the wooden floor at every word.

"Ja, Aartje, we know . . ."

"If you know, then why do you come here?"

"We must purge our town of evil, woman, we must . . ."

"You call me 'evil woman,' Egbert?" The cane banged the floor again. Kok felt the vibrations under his feet.

"You know that I come to the church—every Lord's Day. I read my Bible every day, Kok, every day. You will not call me 'evil woman.'"

"It is not *you*, Vrouw Korsman," he said, pointing a trembling finger again, "not you, but your liquor. It is of the devil! It makes men sick and foolish. It keeps them from their families, their farms, their duties to God and their fellow man."

"Not in my place, you *heilig boontje*! Not in my place!"

"Woman, keep a civil tongue."

"No one gets drunk in my place. I will not allow it. And, what about your own farm, Egbert Kok? It could stand a little cleaning up, ja? You spend too much time yourself on the street—yah-tah-tah, yah-tah-tah—all day about the last days and crazy things!"

"Those things are not crazy, and my farm is no concern of yours." His skinny face scrunched up like a prune.

"Do not the Scriptures say that a little wine is good for the stomach? eh?" She dared him to contradict her.

"Aartje, even the devil can use the Scriptures . . ."

"So, you *fijne*, now you say I am the devil . . ."

"Listen," he stood suddenly, trying to assume command. The rocking chair whimpered as she quickened her pace. "I do not call you Satan, Aartje Korsman. I know you, I know your family, your husband. I am not foolish. I do not even like to be here. But I must say what I must say, and you must listen to the admonition of the Scriptures and of the church!"

He straightened his top coat, tugged at his tie, and sat back on the wicker chair as if he had forgotten what came next. She continued, rocking quickly and steadily, saying nothing, her lips pinched tight, her eyes smoldering with fury.

"Our young men become drunk often." He tried to start slowly and steadily now, his chin raised, his gray kinky beard pointing at the woman. If he had not been thinking so rapidly, he might have passed as a professor of theology. "Some say that the boys even take our young women and drink—in the country, ja? And at night, in their wagons . . . why, the Lord Himself only knows what sins have already been committed because of the *zondige* liquor." Egbert gestured with both hands again. He was thoroughly aroused, his eyes blinking as if he were in a duststorm.

"Why, the young boys swear and fight, they say, right in the taverns! Then, when they are blinded by drink, they fall asleep in their wagons, and their horses carry them home, poor creatures of God. And it is the liquor to blame, Aartje, the liquor!" He threw his hat to the floor in a grand gesture of frustrated indignation.

The rocker was moving so quickly that it inched ever closer to Egbert Kok. Aartje's legs were spread wide beneath the full skirt, and her thick wrists pressed the arms of the chair. Her knuckles turned white, and her shoulders shook.

They stared at each other for what seemed weeks. Then Kok forged onward.

"Aartje Korsman, the good Christian people of this town send me here to tell you—either pay the new tax or we close the business. This we tell all the other tavern owners, too." He sat erect once more.

"The tax, the tax, the tax," she said. "It is not fair! That you know. My place is not saloon; you and the Christian people know that! Let the saloons pay the new tax," her huge arms flailed the air, "—run *them* from the town! But not me. I run a good business."

"I say what I must," Egbert squeaked.

"Then, I say what I must . . . you *huichelaar*. No one will stop my business. You and your 'good Christian people' can all go to the devil!" The dog leaped up, bristling and growling.

"Vrouw Korsman, I . . ."

"You hear what I say, Egbert Kok, you hear my answer. You come in here, to *my* house, about *my* business, wiggling and grunting like a dog in heat, telling me, a good Christian widow, that I am the devil . . . you Pharisee, now I tell you . . ." Her cane cracked against the floor, and she stood, her hulking frame looming over Egbert Kok like a thunderous hailstorm.

"I tell you what, you get out my house . . . now! You get, this moment, or the Lord Himself restrain me, I will crack your empty head with this stick!" It was already raised like a cobra.

"Aartje, I have the church . . ." he tried to screech over the barking dog.

"You take the church, the good people, the town, you get out, *now!*" She took one step, another . . .

Egbert stooped to retrieve his hat from the floor, then ran like a frightened squirrel out the front door, screaming out fragments of Bible verses in a jumble of Dutch and English, Aartje's dog yelping at his heels.

"She is a stubborn woman, Johan," Egbert reported to Dominee Vander Byl and Constable Brink the next morning. They had gathered in the Dominee's study to hear Kok's report.

"She won't pay, Egbert?"

"No, she won't pay, Dominee. She threatened to crack my head with her stick."

"Ach, what now!" Brink's frustration was apparent; he leaned forward on the chair, his elbows resting on his knees.

"We must be fair here, ja? Vrouw Korsman must be handled like the other owners. It is just." The Dominee sat in a captain's chair at the head of the rectangular oak table, his lips puckering almost involuntarily.

"But, Dominee, she speaks the truth," Kok continued. "The stories we hear, the complaints, they come from the other taverns. She is right. None drink too much there. And there are no vile pictures on her walls.

"But when we tax the others for alcohol, we must tax her. She, too, sells whiskey, Egbert. It is the law."

Egbert Kok looked down at the table and traced its grain with his finger. He had walked back home the night before—almost three miles to the farm. It had been quiet in the country, and after the first half hour, after the trembling had disappeared and his humiliation had passed, the whole situation came back to him again. By the time he had reached the farm, he was prepared to tell his wife that the men were wrong and Aartje was in the right.

"But I must close her down, Dominee?" Constable Brink was tired of the whole affair.

"Ja, she must be closed." The Dominee's lips pursed.

"And then?"

"What do you mean, 'and then'?"

"Well, Dominee, what if she still don't pay her tax? She is bullheaded, you know."

The Dominee sat motionless. He inhaled and exhaled as if to cleanse his lungs.

"Well, then, we must arrest her!" It was obviously the only decision.

"Arrest Aartje Korsman?" croaked the Constable, sliding up to the table.

"Arrest her?" echoed Egbert Kok.

"Ja, arrest her!" The Dominee nodded.

"Put her in jail?"

"Ja, Constable. You must lock her in the jail."

"Oh, Dominee," he whined, "the people will not like this. They know Aartje is a good woman. Ach, they will think me a beast. She is a widow, you know, with only one daughter, in Platte. And I must put her in jail?" He seemed ready to cry. "Oh, Dominee . . ."

"Ja, Brink . . ."

"But, Dominee," Kok rose to the Constable's defense, "what will the

people say? They know she works like a man, she is kind and shows charity to strangers. My wife tells me Vrouw Korsman has given many free meals to the poor Americans, even to some of our own. What will the people say?"

The Dominee never blinked.

"It is just. We have already closed two saloons; another will close this month. We are doing the Lord's work, purging the village of the devil's charms. If Aartje's tavern is closed, we will be rid of the evil of liquor, the town will be clean, and the Lord will be pleased!" He brought his fist down lightly on the table and broke into a triumphant smile.

"Oh, Dominee, how can I arrest a widow-lady? How can I put a good woman in my jail? Why, my wife cleans it, and she yet thinks it is *vies*."

"It must be done, Brink. It must be done."

The Dominee's righteous chin jutted proudly.

Brink stared at the floor, rubbing his forehead.

Kok blinked as if wounded, then rose and stumbled out the door.

Constable Brink took his work very seriously, and that was not always easy. The next morning, when he and a quickly recruited deputy took the wagon to Aartje Korsman's Inn, he couldn't decide whether to laugh at the decisions made for him, or cry at his peculiar fate, so he just winced painfully all morning long.

"But why the wagon, Constable?" the deputy asked, trying to pin on his badge as they bumped along the dirt path.

"The ways of the Lord are sometimes strange," Brink replied without turning to his comrade.

Deputy Verhage looked puzzled. "What has the Lord to do with this?"

"The Dominee says we do the Lord's work, Jan." Brink held the reins loosely as the horse plodded along. "He says we must purify the village, get rid of the whiskey."

"The Lord?"

"No, the Dominee."

"But why arrest Aartje Korsman? And why *me* here? And why the buggy? I still do not understand."

"She will not pay the tax; she refuses. Last night she threatened Elder Kok with her cane. We must arrest her this morning if she still refuses to pay."

"Ah, Brink . . . I don't know why you need me then. I have work to do." He spat tobacco juice into the dust of the street.

"Aartje Korsman is a big woman, ja?"

Jan Verhage broke into a fit of laughter; the seat of the buggy jiggled with his guffaws. "She is a big woman, man? What do you say? She will fight with two men? Ha! Come now, Johan, you have more sense than that."

Brink was silent and serious.

When he stopped chuckling, Verhage inhaled deeply, and leaned back, shaking his head.

"*Verdorie*, Brink, what will the people say about us? Two big men wrestle a woman to the ground and take her to the jail? And this woman—Aartje Korsman?"

The horse's hoofs clopped along the dry road bed.

"Ach . . . ach, *gekheid!* Why could you not ask someone else for this

business? The people will laugh about this for weeks!”

“Ja, Verhage, that is true,” Brink mumbled, resigned to his fate.

There was little movement in town that morning. The Constable had planned the arrest early so they would make no spectacle. When they turned the corner to Korsman’s Inn, both were relieved to see nothing moving on the street.

“Ach, Brink though . . . now I know about the wagon.” His laugh was sharpened by the sudden realization. “We will carry her to jail like an old cow! Throw her in the back here, eh? Ach, *dat gaat te ver.*”

Brink pulled on the reins gently, stopping the horse before the Inn. Verhage jumped first from the rig.

“I don’t like it, Johan. It is foolish and stupid,” he said, spitting out the remnants of the chew.

Brink descended after him and walked to the door of the apartment, badgered all the way by his reluctant deputy.

“But what will people say,” Verhage whispered, drawing near the door. “She is a good woman, you know that. And her husband—well-respected, God rest his soul. Now you tie her like a criminal and haul her off like crow-bait. *Ben je gek?*” He kept haggling the Constable, like a sparrow teasing a hawk.

Johan Brink stopped as he reached the door. He turned like an angry father. “Verhage, *hou je mond!*” This is no good for me either. I do not like it, you hear? But the law—it is the law, ja? All businesses that serve liquor must pay the tax. Aartje Korsman’s Inn serves liquor. Aartje Korsman must pay the tax, ja? It is fair, it is just. If she won’t pay, her business must close and she goes to jail. It is that simple, ja? It is the law.”

He turned sharply and knocked—once, twice, three times. A dog barked within. But there was no reply.

“She may be working at the Inn?” he asked the Deputy.

“No, Catharine Heebink is there now. She opens in the morning.”

“You know?” he shot back.

“Ja, Brink . . . I, ah . . . I know . . . ja, that is what people say, eh?”

“Verhage! You go in her place, too?”

The Deputy looked at his boots, removed his hat, smoothed back his hair, and put the hat back on his head. “Ja, I was there . . . what? Once, twice, not often,” he looked away, “not often, no.”

“Ach, Jan . . . I think, ‘Jan Verhage, no, he would not enter the tavern, no’—so I ask you this morning. Now what must I do?” He raised his left hand to his head and scratched his temple. “Well, here we are. We must do what we must. It would be more stupid to leave now.”

He rapped again, but still there was no answer.

Verhage pulled at Brink’s coat. “She is gone, eh? We come back later.”

“No, she is here, I think, but she will not come to the door.”

Once more he rapped. Bang, bang, bang—with the heel of his fist—bang, bang, bang. Still there was no reply.

“How do you know, Brink? She is not an evil woman; she would not hide. Let’s go!”

“Her dog is not barking, you *stommeling*. She must be in.”

Brink was not to be defeated. He opened the door to the apartment, turned to his deputy, and waved him in. Then he walked through the open doorway. There sat Aartje Korsman, rocking steadily, holding the ugly,

snarling dog in her lap. Brink was dumbstruck; Verhage peeked from behind his shoulder like a guilty child. They stood cramped in the open doorway.

"Close the door, *je bent niet in de kerk geboren.*"

Brink stepped into the house and pulled his deputy with him. He removed his hat and shut the door.

"Take off your hat, you *lompe boer*," he commanded Verhage slapping him across the chest with the back of his hand.

"Mrs. Korsman . . ."

"I know why you come," she said. "You must collect the tax, I know."

"Mrs. Korsman, we come—"

"Am I not right?"

"Mrs. Korsman—"

"Well, I will not pay. It is unjust, Johan Brink. You know that. My place is no saloon. Ja, you, Jan Verhage, you know. You drink yourself, here."

Verhage looked down.

"Mrs. Korsman, we come here as representatives of the law—"

"The law!! You mean the tax is a fair law—*verrek!!*"

"Mrs. Korsman, we must do what we must. Now, will you pay your tax?" Brink straightened himself, desperately summoning all the authority he could muster.

"Brink, be you deaf?" She rocked slowly; her dog kept growling.

"Mrs. Korsman, you must pay your tax . . . or suffer the penalty."

"The penalty? What is this—'penalty'?"

"You must go to jail, and we must close your business."

She pulled her dog more tightly into her arms to quiet him.

She squinted at him. "To jail?"

"Yes, Aartje, it is the law."

The dog laid his heavy head on her forearm, and rumbled as she scratched around his ear.

"And how long?"

"Thirty days."

"Thirty days?"

"Ja, thirty days."

She rocked slowly now, looking down at her dog. She leaned over and brushed her cheek across its head.

"Then I must."

"Aartje? You will pay?"

"If it is the law, it is the law. I will go to the jail, for I will not pay the tax."

"Ach, Mrs. Korsman—" the deputy interrupted.

"Be quiet, Verhage," Brink snapped. "Let me speak. Now, Mrs. Korsman, we don't want to put you in jail—"

"And I don't want to go."

"But we must be just. The Dominee says we have already thrown two saloons out, and now we must be just with you."

"Dominee Vander Byl says so?"

"Ja, Dominee Vander Byl says so."

"Dominee Vander Byl is right then; I will pay my fine by going to jail. He is the Dominee."

Verhage pulled at the constable's jacket again. "Brink, this is . . ."

"Jan, be still!"

Aartje Korsman was obviously stunned by what would happen, but she was firm. She sat very still on her rocker; her dog licked her hand.

"But Johan, I cannot go without my dog."

"Ach, Aartje, we cannot take care of a dog in the jail."

"I cannot go without him. Who will care for him?"

"No. We will not have such an animal."

"Please, Johan?"

"We cannot have the dog."

"Very well then, you must carry me to jail."

"Oh, Aartje, you . . ."

"The dog must go too."

"But you must live with it. What will we do if the dog must . . ." he searched for the proper words.

"Why, you must let him out."

"Let him out? We cannot open your door . . ."

"You *idiot!* You think I will escape? Ach, Johan Brink, you are dumb." No one spoke for a moment. "Well," she said, leaning back in her rocker, "I will sit here and you can tie me . . ."

"Ja, ja, ja," he consented, "the dog comes, too."

"And my Bible, Constable?"

"And your Bible."

"Must I go now?"

"Ja, Aartje, we go now."

"Then I must get things ready. Catharine will take care of this place."

She put the dog on the floor, rose slowly from the chair, and plodded out of the room, her massive body swaying like a huge black bell.

"We will wait."

"Thank the Lord, she will not fight, Brink. What would we do?"

Brink was equally relieved. He laughed for the first time that morning. "Ja, that would not be easy."

"But what about the dog. What if he . . . messes the floor? Ha! Brink, will you clean it?" Verhage slapped the Constable's shoulder playfully.

"Ach, the dog is trained, ja? Don't be so foolish."

When she returned, her hair was pulled neatly into a bun at the back of her head and her woolen shawl draped loosely about her shoulders. She had washed, and she looked ready for church.

"Brink," she spoke from the hallway to her kitchen, "what will I sleep on?"

"Why, on the bed."

"What bed?"

"The bed in the jail."

"You have a good bed?"

"Well, they, it is not—"

"You have a big bed?"

"Ah, it is—"

"Very well then, my bed goes too."

"Aartje, please!"

"I will not sleep on wood, Johan. Here, you and Verhage take the bed."

"Aartje. . ."

"Brink," Verhage grimaced as he whispered, "she will not fit."

"Ja, ja, ja, we take the bed, Aartje."

Not long after, Constable Birnk and special Deputy Jan Verhage sat meekly on the seat of the buggy, their eyes focused straight down the road as if they expected imminent danger. Behind them in the buggy, Aartje Korsman sat like a queen on her own huge brass bed. The dog looked scared even though it sat in her lap, and her right hand kept her Bible from bouncing off the rig.

By the time they arrived at the jail, they had developed into something like a parade. Many villagers noted their passage. Little children ran along behind, laughing and joking.

"Every night the people complain to me, Dominee. She is a woman, a widow. And we keep her in the jail like a thief or murderer. Women call me "rotzak"; men laugh at me when I walk on the street. They yell, 'Brink, hoe gaat het met je, dikzak?'"

Constable Brink looked beaten as he slouched in his chair. Egbert Kok just shook his head, blinking often, the tip of his beard curling out from his chest as he stared at the floor.

"They are not happy the saloons are gone, then?" the Dominee asked.

"Ach, ja, of course. But Aartje is no saloon-keeper. They know that. She never had tables, or gaming, and no filthy pictures. This they know!"

The Dominee puffed away on his cigar, sending billowing clouds into the motionless air of the study.

"She has been there how long?"

"Fifteen days."

"Then she has only fifteen left to go, Constable?" He poked a finger into his right ear and shook it as if to bring his ear to life.

"Dominee, you do not understand . . ."

Kok tried to help. "He is right. We must do something. Even my wife will not speak to me." Kok didn't dare look the preacher in the eye, but he knew what he must say. "There are but a few who feel that we do things right. Most think we are just stubborn."

"But our stubbornness is for the cause of justice. That is not wrong, Elder Kok. You know that. We cannot serve two masters here, ja?"

The men were silent.

"Tell me, Constable, what does the woman do all day long?"

"She reads, Dominee."

"Reads? Reads what?"

"The Scriptures."

"The Scriptures?"

"Ja, the Scriptures."

"Well, . . ." He sat back slowly and inhaled the cigar. Little specks of ash floated down like snowflakes and landed softly on the lapels of his black suit.

"Maybe we should do something for this widow?" The smoke leaked out slowly as he spoke.

"Ja, Dominee."

"Well, what can be done?"

Brink sat speechless. Egbert Kok slumped in his chair and rubbed his blinking eyes. The pale blue smoke lay thick as a quilt in the air.

It was Dominee Vander Byl himself who walked to Brink's jail the next

morning to call on the recalcitrant innkeeper. Kok and Brink agreed that if anyone was to convince Aartje Korsman of the wickedness of her ways, it could only be the servant of the Lord himself.

Vander Byl shut the door behind him and looked up at Brink who was sitting in his chair behind the desk, sorting through a gallery of "Wanted" posters. The Constable rose without speaking and nodded to the Dominee, asking him to follow. They walked down the short hallway to the only prison cell in town. Brink pointed to the door, and unlocked the cell.

"Dominee Vander Byl to see you, Aartje." He didn't bother looking in at his prisoner; he simply announced her guest.

"Ja, Aartje, how goes it?" the Dominee wasted no time. As he stepped into the room, he confronted Aartje, sitting on her bed, the big Bible opened on her lap. Her toothy dog sat at her side looking up at him, panting slowly.

The Dominee jumped forward when the door slammed shut behind him.

"I am fine, Dominee." She looked up gently, a thin smile parting her lips.

"You have no sickness?"

"No, I am fine."

"The food, it is good?"

"Ja, Vrouw Brink makes good meals for me. I think I will get fat here."

"That is good." He did not laugh.

Aartje Korsman didn't move from her position on the bed. She rolled her eyes back to the Scriptures and pretended to be reading.

"It is warm enough, too, for you here?"

"Ja, it is warm."

The Dominee nodded. He shifted his weight from foot to foot and held his hat in his right hand.

"You read the Scriptures, Aartje?"

"Ja, Dominee."

"That is good."

She nodded without raising her head.

"What do you read?"

"I have read the Gospels now, and some of the letters of the Apostles."

"Good. Good. You have much time to study the Word now. Not all of us have that blessing. Perhaps we should sit here too, eh?" He realized too late his joke was in bad taste, and he tried to cover his indiscretion with a cough.

She made no reply.

"Your dog is here, and this is your bed, too. The dog keeps you good company."

"Ja, he has been with me since Frederic passed on."

"Do you have visitors?"

"Ja, Dominee. Many of my friends visit and talk."

"Good. You have many friends. Some visit you, but there are others in the village that love you, too." He was getting more serious now, preparing the way for the offer. "The people are very sorry that you must be in jail, and all because of that vile liquor."

She looked down still, moving her head back and forth as if she were reading. Then she removed her glasses, wiped them on her dress, and sighed deeply. The Dominee understood.

"Aartje Korsman, you know I am your friend. Your husband was my friend, too. You are a good woman. You do many things for other people—as the Lord Himself has commanded us. It is as a friend that I come, ja? I must tell you that I advise you to give in. The laws have changed, and you cannot hold out against the law. If you promise me that you will quit selling liquor, then I will call Constable Brink and we will go home at once. We will not close the Inn, but you must not sell liquor. You can go back to work today. Will you promise?"

He heard only a few snuffles and a light cough. She raised her left hand and rubbed her eyes, then rested her forehead in her hand. Three wet spots had formed on the pages of the old Dutch Bible. Her dog raised his head to his mistress.

"I will promise, Dominee."

Dominee Vander Byl stood immediately and moved to Aartje's side, cautious of the dog, but willing to thank the woman with a touch on the shoulder.

"Aartje, it is good. It is good. Ja, it is good." He reached down, but pulled back when the dog snarled. "I will call the Constable now." He yelled down the short corridor, and Brink responded as if he had overheard the entire conversation.

"Brink, Aartje will be going home now. She will sell no more whiskey."

Brink smiled for the first time in fifteen days, then slipped the skeleton key into the door and opened it in one motion.

"She may go now, Dominee?"

"Ja, she may. Aartje, you may go."

"But what of my bed, and my Bible? My dog?"

Dominee Vander Byl pursed his lips, looked toward Brink, "Why, Constable Brink will help you."

Aartje Korsman looked up as if seeing a vision; a haunting smile spread slowly across her face when she caught Brink in her stare. "It would be good," she said with deep sublimation, "to go back again once altogether."

Brink's smile dropped like a sledge. "But, Aartje, surely . . ."

"Ja, Constable, why not like I was taken here."

Brink choked. "Dominee," he turned, "you will not make me."

"But Brink, we must do all to help the repentant."

"But Dominee . . ."

"Brink, you must help her now in any way she desires."

Brink looked back at Aartje. She sat comfortably. The dog seemed to purr.

"It is the middle of the morning, Aartje. Many people are doing business now." She knew he was pleading.

"But it was such a good ride, Brink, so comfortable on the bed."

Dominee Vander Byl nodded graciously.

Brink leaned up against the iron bars.

The dog closed his eyes, and slept comfortably.

This story is one of a collection of fifteen by the author, soon to be published by the Dordt College Press under the title of *"Sign of a Promise" and Other Stories*.