

CHAPTER II

1907-1910



While he was at school he had always gone to bed at nine o'clock, but now he told his mother, 'The work is getting harder, and I must stay up a bit longer.' Professor Ritchie, head of the Department of Classics, came to Rheede Street and urged Mrs. Hofmeyr to put the boy into long trousers, but she replied, 'I'm keeping him simple as a child; just take no notice of him.' There was one matter on which the College authorities stood firm. They would not allow him to take the B.A. in less than three years. He had to choose between the B.A. in Languages and the B.A. in Science, and he chose the first.

He did not plunge into the community life of the College. At his age it was hardly possible. It was probably in his second year that he joined the Debating Society and the Students' Christian Association. The older students were busy with their own affairs, and he was not observed as a person, though of course everyone knew of him as a phenomenon. References to ghasing were frequent in the College Magazine; 'but,' said his mother, 'while his fellow-students were thinking of young ladies, he was playing marbles.' He attended the welcome to new students, which was more or less obligatory, but he did not stay to the end. Some wag terrified him by telling him that he would have to speak on behalf of the newcomers, and he stole away into the night. He apologised for this some years later, when he himself was making the speech of welcome.

At home a pattern of life was being set which was to last throughout his life. He would go out to his work, and when he came home she would be waiting for him. He would call 'Ma, Ma' at the door, and she would answer him. Something would be ready for him to eat, and while he ate it they would discuss the affairs of the day. If he went out at night by himself, it would always be for some good and proper cause, a meeting, or a special lecture, and when he came in she would be waiting for him to make him a cup of cocoa.

If it was good to go out in the morning, it was just as good to come home, to the security of her companionship and the pleasure of her conversation, with its pungent judgments on the looseness and carelessness of men and women. It was a comforting routine, safe, orderly, punctual, and righteous; it fully satisfied both mother and son. She had no need to watch over his work; at the age of twelve he watched over it himself. But she watched jealously over his health, his sleep, and his food. Perhaps it was at this time that she devised the breakfast that he ate without variation all his life whenever he was at home. It consisted of fruit, porridge, and a plate of three slices of bread on which had been poured gravy made from a pound of beef, with an egg, fried on both sides, on top of the bread. So fortified, he went off to his lectures.

His first year was brilliant. He took second place and Governor's Prize in the Intermediate Examination of the University of the Cape of Good Hope. ① In his second year he won the medals in all five of his classes, in Latin and Classical Philology, Greek, English, Philosophy, and Dutch. ~~The College Magazine of 1908 wrote~~

~~In the College Prize List for the year now ending the name of J. H. Hofmeyr stands pre-eminent. "Hennie" won the medal in each of his five Junior B.A. classes. Brave! and he isn't much older.~~

~~He was in fact fourteen years of age. The Quad Notes of the same issue wrote~~

~~Our young Henny has been bedecking his noble chest with bronze medals...when he's finished flooring the Examiners, he will present a unique spectacle. May his shadow never grow less!~~

Perhaps he had outgrown his taste for condensed milk, for now his mother gave him one malktert for each of his medals, though not all together. Never in his life, she said, did he want big things. A malktert is a piece of pastry of the size and shape of a plate, and carries a rich custard made of eggs, and spiced. The boy was fond of this delicacy, and the story was told of a friend of the family, a Mrs. van Eysen, who also made one for him, and asked him, Hennie, how does it compare with your mother's? He replied to her, Yours is much bigger than my mother's.

It was during this year of 1908 that Alfred Hoernlé arrived at the College as Professor of Philosophy, at the age of 27. He was a remarkable man, cheerful, sociable, humorous, and yet outspoken. He had one of the clearest of minds, succinct in statement, powerful in argument. It was impossible to know him without admiring his unswerving loyalty to the greater moral principles, and the courage with which he expressed his views on social questions, in an English with a marked and attractive German accent.

The Young Hofmeyr conceived a great admiration for this vigorous teacher. The boy was however attracted by the man rather than by his subject, for although he was an excellent student, he was not much interested in philosophy. His views of life, morality, duty, destiny, he had learned from his mother and the Baptist Church, and they satisfied him. Hoernlé, on the other hand, while a respecter of religion, had no orthodoxy and belonged to no church. Yet

① The University of the Cape of Good Hope was purely an examining university.

even then, as throughout his life, he was to be esteemed by men and women of no religion and all religions, as a champion of the right, especially in the new field of race relations. Another student who admired Hoernlé was Winifred Tucker, who later married him, and made with him notable contributions in this field. She and her husband were to play their part in Hofmeyr's life, but in 1908 she knew the boy only by his tremendous reputation, for she left the College the year before he arrived.

Yet another two persons in Cape Town who were also to play their parts in Hofmeyr's life, and in this same field of race relations were J.D. Rheinallt Jones and his wife Edith. They first met the young student because of their common interest in the work of the Students' Christian Association, and both predicted a brilliant future for him.

The young Hofmeyr was distinguishing himself in the debating forum as well as in the lecture room. At the age of fourteen, still in short trousers, he strongly opposed Women's Suffrage. His speech was written out in his terrible handwriting, and after the debate he sent it to Onze Jan.

~~Den Ellen Heer J.H. Hofmeyr,
Avondrust,
Stephen Straat.~~

The College Magazine for September, in its column Said in the Quad, said of young Hofmeyr that

his remarks on the Women's Suffrage motion were more appropriate to people on the wrong side of thirty.

□ What did Hofmeyr say? He said,

Man can never be so hard, so cruel, as the hardest woman can be. Women without men's rule are apt to become more callous, more cruel, than if always under supervision of a male.

He also described the nature of the suffragette.

My definition of a suffragette is one who is discontented with women's duties imposed on her and takes up those of another sphere.

But although he denied women the vote, he brought them some consolation. He declared that he was convinced

Van on

that women have more power ^{through} ~~some~~ men connected ~~in~~ with them than they would have by means of themselves alone...do you think you could refuse her sweet addresses or her winning ways, or perhaps her imperious commands?

In a later debate on the same subject he made use of the 'native question' to strengthen his case on women's suffrage, using arguments that later in life he would think to be shocking. He said,

Van der

'No one can doubt that there is impending a struggle, or at least a keen rivalry, between the white and black races of South Africa. To face this position it is necessary that the whites should present a united front, that there should be no falterers, no disunion in our ranks as we meet the common foe.'

~~The College Magazine for 1908 not only referred to Hofmeyr's debating speeches, calling them the wisdom that floweth forth from the mouths of babes; it referred also to his personal appearance, though obscurely. It wrote, in its notes Said in the Quad~~

That HOFFIE's appearance reminds one of an advertisement for a certain cure for rheumatism.

In November the same column noticed him again, in another obscure paragraph which may have referred to food, of which he was known to be fond. The columnist wrote

That DEEY, HOFFIE, etc., are still hoping for their bazaar as promised in the last issue by the Hostelitesses.

It is clear that he was regarded as a child. Of friends at the College. he had almost none. An exception was Peter Clouts, an old scholar of Saga, who came up in 1908, but though he was a year behind Hofmeyr, he still looked upon him as a child. Hofmeyr's closest friend was still at Saga, Theo Haarhoff, another brilliant pupil who was to come first in the Colony in the Matriculation of 1909. Haarhoff was always in and out of the house in Rhee de Street. The two boys had much in common. They were equally at home in English or Dutch, they had both been brought up frugally and simply in a strict and religious homes, they were both outstanding scholars in Latin and Greek, and they both had a deep love for the English game of cricket, though neither was a good performer. Both were the obedient and gentle sons of loving mothers, who though proud of their children's brilliance, would rather have seen them good than

dispute his debating prowess

S.A.C.S.

clever.

Mrs. Hofmeyr approved of the Haarhoff boy as a friend for her son. He was industrious, with none of the carelessness of the rising generation, and he submitted himself to her authority. If they made some plan, they would wait for her approval. She might say, in her brief incisive way, 'Yes,' or she might, thrusting forward her lower lip a little, say equally briefly, 'No.' If they continued to look at her questioningly, or if she sensed their disappointment, she would say, her voice rising, sometimes a little, sometimes more, 'of course not, of course not, how could such a thing be?' And one could see at once, of course not, of course not, such a thing could not be.

For all that, the young Haarhoff rebelled against it; inwardly, because who rebelled against her openly? It could have been done of course; but if it had been done, the person who did it would from that moment have ceased to be. If it had been done, it must be done by one who would not care whether he ceased to be or not. Therefore he did not rebel, ~~not being such a one, not wishing to lose his friend.~~

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yet
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The two boys had the same politics too, very much the same as those of Onze Jan. They were both Dutch-speaking, or to use the new word, they were Afrikaners, [^] They used English as if it were their own tongue, and ~~no one could have told that they were not English-born.~~ They both looked forward to a Union of South Africa embracing the Cape Colony, the Transvaal, the Orange Free State, and Natal, a State with an independent government, entrenching equal rights for English- and Afrikaans-speaking people, and for their languages. Although they were both so proficient in English, and had been at an English-language school, and although one was already at an English-language college and the other soon would be, yet they wanted the full recognition of the second language, whether it be Nederlands or Afrikaans. They were both proud of Onze Jan, who in March 1905, delivered at Stellenbosch that remarkable speech 'Is het ons Ernst?', which means, 'Are we in earnest about it?' It was a fighting speech, and Onze Jan told Afrikaners that they should cherish what was their own, their language, their customs, their religion.

cap
But these three, the old man and the two boys, were Nationalists of a gentle kind. There was another and much fiercer Nationalism, which was the creation of what Smuts had called 'The Century of Wrong'. This Nationalism had been humiliated in the Anglo-Boer War, robbed of its two Republics, brought back under the Union Jack.

* cap
It was true that in 1906 the British Prime Minister Campbell-Bannerman had restored self-government to the defeated Republics.

and that the defeated leader of the Transvaal, Louis Botha, had become its first Prime Minister. It was true that there was in some measure a healing of wounds. But to the Nationalists that was justice, not generosity. One did not have to kiss the enemy's hand because he took his foot off your neck. Botha invited the Afrikaner to 'forgive and forget', and the Nationalists replied, 'forgive but never forget.' For to forget would be to be swallowed up with language and custom and future and selfhood. The restoration of self-government and of the franchise had one magnificent implication, that when all Afrikaners became Nationalists, they would rule again, not only the two republics, but the whole of South Africa.

To do this they must separate themselves, keep themselves apart. Therefore with implacable will they addressed themselves to their task, establishing their cultural societies, their economic Bonds, their separate schools, their own youth organisations. God had a purpose for them in Africa, else why had He put them there? In such a programme, Botha with his determination to reconcile Boer and Briton, Smuts with his eyes on the world, Onze Jan with his moderation, had no place. And the young Hofmeyr and the young Haerhoff, with their English education and their gentle natures, merely flirted with so fierce a lover.

Afrikaner Nationalism was hardly an actor on the stage of that time. The Nationalist Convention was meeting, first in Durban, then Cape Town, and finally in May, 1909, at Bloemfontein, to draw up the Constitution of the new Union of South Africa. 'Conciliation' and 'reconciliation' were the words in the air. Wedding bells were ringing, and Englishmen and Afrikaners drank one another's healths. Afrikaner Nationalism was like a disapproving relative at the feast, dark and angry, contemptuous of the fine speeches and the fine clothes, uncomfortable to see, therefore not seen.

One of the problems of the Convention was the Cape franchise, which was open to any white man, coloured man, black man, who could qualify for it. On the contrary in the ex-Republics, and enshrined in the constitution of one of them, the inflexible rule was 'no equality in Church or State'. Onze Jan was one of those at the Convention who maintained that there could be no Union unless the Cape Colony retained its own franchise. He was not the only Afrikaner to maintain this, for he was supported by the great majority of the members of his Bond.

The Cape Franchise and the equality of the English and Dutch, were especially entrenched in two clauses in the Constitution, which clauses could not be altered except by a two-thirds majority of the two Houses of the Union Parliament in joint session. The Draft Constitution was presented to the British Parliament by a

delegation of which Onze Jan was one. Deborah and her son went down to the docks to see him off, and he gave the boy his blessing and said to him, Send for my eiderdown tomorrow, it is now yours. The young Hofmeyr used it all his life, though it was once recovered. His mother used to say, half in jest and half in rue, That's where the politics came out from.

On October 13 1909, Onze Jan returned to England after taking the cure at Bad-Nauheim, and three days later he was dead, at the age of 64. His death was a grief to many, to none more than to the mother and son in Ryeede Street. A statue was erected to him in the Church Square, ~~Plain~~, not far from Parliament. On its plinth were the famous words, Is het ons Ernst? But he never foresaw how earnest they would be.

Two months after Onze Jan's death, the young Hofmeyr scored another great triumph. At the age of fifteen he graduated B.A. with First-Class Honours, taking first place in the examination and the University Gold Medal for Literature. For this achievement, and for all his achievements, he was awarded the coveted Rhodes Scholarship of £300 per annum for three years.

It was now wisely decided to halt the boy in his headlong course. Although he won the Scholarship at the end of 1909, it was decided that he would not go to Oxford till 1912, when he would be eighteen years of age. In fact he did not go until 1913. He was also made the honorary holder of two other valuable scholarships, the Porter of one hundred and fifty pounds per annum, and the Jamison of four hundred pounds for four years. The actual holder of the Jamison was Oliver Schreiner. He was three years older than ~~Hans~~ Hofmeyr, and was one of the best-liked and most influential of the students. There is little doubt but that he could have had the Rhodes Scholarship for the asking, but his father, W.P. Schreiner, ex-Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, had, like Onze Jan, been alienated from Rhodes by the scandal of the Jameson Raid, and would not allow his son to enter for a scholarship given by such a man. ~~There was an understanding in the family that no Schreiner took such a gift from such a man.~~

Cecil Rhodes in his Will defined the qualifications for the type of student he wanted to win his scholarships:

□ (Literary and scholastic attainments; qualities of manhood, truthfulness, courage, devotion to duty; sympathy for and protection of the weak, kindness, unselfishness and fellowship; exhibition of moral force of character and of instincts to lead and to take an interest in his fellows; physical vigour, as shown by fondness for, and success in, manly outdoor activities.)

② Presented by Mrs. Jamison, not Dr. Jameson.

The Committee must have deliberated long before it awarded the Scholarship to a fifteen-year-old boy. Of his literary and scholastic attainments there could be no doubt, but he was too young in the university community for him to have displayed all these noble qualities. As for physical vigour, he was not lacking in it, he could walk with the best, and was a dogged but not spectacular runner. He was fond of manly outdoor activities, but hardly successful in them.

Had he not won the Rhodes he could still have gone overseas. Sir Abe Bailey, the South African millionaire, wanted to send him, and Onze Jan himself had wanted to help in the same way. But the boy's mother was unwilling. She wanted him to be free, to have no chain on his leg, nor did she wish him to be beholden to any. She used to say that Dr. Parkin, the Chairman of the Scholarship Committee, had pleaded with her to let the boy go, and had reassured her that she could first keep him in South Africa as long as she wished. Had she at last realised that the boy had paid too heavy a price for his fantastic career? At any rate she told Parkin that she did not want him to go to Oxford till he was eighteen. Eventually she agreed that he should accept the Rhodes, although from his kindred, his childhood days, he had wanted to go to Cambridge, which, he claimed, was better in certain subjects. ³ Meanwhile he would take a second B.A. in 1910, in the Sciences, and his M.A. in the Classics in 1911.

So again the white light of publicity beat upon him, and this time more brightly than before. DE GOEDE HOOP published a full-page photograph of him, in a Norfolk suit with long-shirt trousers, and a cat on his shoulder. He himself must have been given an access of self-confidence by so much recognition. In far-away Japan the OSAKA MANUCHI SHIMBUN had a paragraph about him, entitled 'A Rare Genius'. He must - there is no possibility he could not - have given thought to that word leadership which was so much spoken about in connection with the Scholarship. It meant two things for him - responsibility and recognition. His willingness to accept the first he would have acknowledged openly; it was part of his deep religion. But his pleasure in the second he concealed, remaining as modest as before.

He was now an important figure in the Students' Christian Association and in the Debating Society. He wrote out his more important speeches in full, and there is in existence a copy of the speech he made in the Inter-College debate against Stellenbosch, in which he used a small number of shorthand symbols. He was still doing this as late as 1939, but the proportion of symbols had not increased. It was strange that he never applied himself to the

³ Prof. Arnold, quoting Mrs. Hofmeyr in his Hildegardswald by Jarrovingden

⁴ In the issue of April, 1907.

Vom S. A. Akademie der Wissenschaften
in Kuno, 1949.

subject, which he would doubtless have mastered in a short space of time.

Assumed
wicket

His passion for cricket was as strong as ever. One of his friends, Mandelbrote, later to become a professor at the University which grew out of the South African College, remembers him patiently standing at the Third Eleven nets, hoping that he would be asked to bowl. There was never a sign that he was embarrassed by his lack of skill, and this was remarkable in a boy who excelled in most things that he attempted. Often when he was ~~out~~ after scoring nothing ~~in~~ or very little, there would be a burst of ironic clapping, and this would provoke him to a kind of snort. But it would not deter him from playing again. In fielding he chose, with his thick spectacles and bad sight, the most dangerous of all positions, that ~~of keeping the wicket~~, where he displayed courage, vigour, and a lack of coordination. If he was not batting or fielding he liked nothing better than to score. The very purity of his passion wore down all opposition, and of all those who were to develop a deep affection for him, none were so faithful as his friends of the cricket field.

Although a graduate student, he was still wearing short trousers. Whether he ever raised the question with his mother, no one is likely to know. He was extremely untidy in his dress, even grubby. He wore his hair very short, and made little attempt to part it. Whether this carelessness about his appearance was a genuine indifference, or in some way affected, would be hard to establish, but some of it was undoubtedly due to a kind of ignorance or innocence, and a lack of sensitiveness to the opinions of his fellows and the requirements of society.

He did as well in Science as he had done in Arts. A young lady who had been the unchallenged leader in Mathematics found the prize taken away from her in her first year, and by an Arts student. There was much speculation as to the exact nature of his immense gifts. Some thought he had the perfectly absorbent mind, the superlative memory, and that undoubtedly was one of the chief elements of his genius. But mathematics requires some greater gift than memory. Although he excelled in languages, he had no great literary gift. In this same year 1910 he read aloud to the Debating Society the essay which he had written after he and his mother had visited the Victoria Falls, some two years earlier. He wrote of the Devil's Cataract:

Full on

□ — It is perhaps here especially that one gets the sense of the mightiness of the Falls, and one's own nothingness. Here especially does the brain of the River, brainfervored in its centre, seem to have become disordered as the waters dash audaciously down in mad effervescence into the chasm beneath. One suits

one's breath to the fall of the water, one seems to follow, as it were, one mass down into the canyon. One seems to enter into the life of this water, to be carried down into it, to feel the mighty current snuffing out the light of man. Here too it is possible to descend some few yards towards the bottom of the gorge, to have the experience of putting one's hand in the very Falls themselves, of being christened in the most wonderful of the world's wonders.)

But it was moonlight on the Falls that left an indelible streak flickering ever through his recollection. The young writer asked the question:

Sulloway □ But what of the gossamer Main Falls, of the majestic Leaping Water in all its immensity? Glorious as they are in the bright rays of a tropical sun, what are they when fondled in the loving caresses of the silver misty moonlight?

The College Magazine of 1910, in its third number, had something to say about Hofmeyr's essay in its Debating Society Notes. They reported:

Sulloway □ The third essay was by a student, Mr. J.H. Hofmeyr. His subject "A Visit to the Victoria Falls" was a fine one, but he scarcely did justice to it. His descriptive and narrative power was excellent, but the whole was marred by an over-gorgeous and turgid style which rendered the essay ludicrous and absurd. We are confident that the writer will outgrow these signs of immaturity and use his admirable command of language for better purposes.)

It was a sharp lesson for the young writer. After that his style became more simple and direct. In the thousands of papers that he left behind, the essay was not included. It was his mother who treasured it.

The Debating Society Notes mentioned one other matter about which unfortunately nothing is known. They reported:

A most instructive debate took place concerning the advisability of putting an age limit for the Matriculation.)

The College Societies were not well supported. In the fourth number the Editor of the Magazine complained that only thirty or so students attended the debates, and even fewer the meetings of the Engineering Society. Worst of all, less than a dozen attended the meetings of that much abused and neglected Society, the Students' Christian Association.

The Christian Association held ^{byteen} seven meetings in the last quarter, with an average attendance of 14. Professor Ritchie was the Honorary President, but the driving power was Oswin Bull. He had come from England in 1907 to become a Travelling Secretary of the Association, and became a close friend of mother and son. The most spectacular member of the Association was Cecil Steyn, commonly called 'Pisang'. ⁵ He was spectacular because he was one of the heroes of the College. He had played for the College Rugby Fifteen while still a boy at SACS, and now, while at College, had won his Cap for the Western Province of the Cape Colony, which in those days was year after year the champion ^{team} Fifteen in South African Rugby Football.

Young Hofmeyr was not a Rugby player. He had now reached his full height of 5 feet 7 inches, and his body was strong and stocky, but his sight made football impossible. ⁵ Without his thick glasses he was almost blind, and he almost never took them off, one of the exceptions being when he went to bed. He went so far as to organise with his friend Peter Clouts a meeting in the Engineering Laboratory in favour of starting the gentler game of Association Football at the College. It was a game he could have played with glasses. It was a bold move in a College which worshipped Rugby and Rugby players, and regarded Association Football, or Soccer as it was called, as a game to be played by the socially and physically inferior. The move came to nothing, and the College Magazine was contemptuous of the whole proposal. It announced a Grand Pageant in which Mr. P. Clouts was to be Champion of the Oppressed,

^{ikal.}
'who moves at a meeting that a soccer club be formed with an amendment that the Ambulance Class be retained for special duty at matches, in case of shocks from over-exertion, or in event of the knees giving away.'

^{ikal.}
⑤ The word means banana, and is now spelt pisang. How Cecil Steyn acquired such a name, I could not discover.

⑥ ^{ft. in.} His passport gives his height as 5'7". It is my own belief that he was not more than 5'6".
^{ft. in.}



This was nonsense and beneath contempt, said Hofmeyr to Clouts; if people wanted soccer, they should be able to have it.

There were no political societies for the College Magazine to report upon in those days. It can safely be assumed that the great majority of the staff and students of the College stood behind General Louis Botha, the first Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa, which came into being on May 31, 1910. It was very natural that the young Hofmeyr should do so. His naturally peaceable nature, his intimate knowledge of English-speaking people and their ways, his upbringing and his schooling, ~~his deep acceptance of the commandment love one another~~, made him a Botha man.

Van de Sandt

The Magazine noted with pride that Sir Henry de Villiers had been made a Baron, that Sir William Solomon had been appointed to the Bench of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court of South Africa, and that Mr. Justice Wessels had become Sir Johannes Wessels. Another old boy, A. Centlivres, was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford; he was to become Chief Justice of the Union of South Africa, and in 1952 was to rule that the Nationalist Government's Act to remove the coloured voters to a separate roll was invalid. On the Bench with him was to sit Oliver Schreiner, who in these days of 1910 was one of the outstanding students of the College.

It was indeed a College to be proud of.