

WHEN THE DIKES BROKE

ALTA HALVERSON SEYMOUR



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THE SEA COMES IN

Chapter 1

“IF YOU COULD HAVE ANY WISH you wanted in all the world—just one—what would it be?”

Lisa’s question broke suddenly into the comfortable silence that had fallen for a moment or two on the little group clustered around the winter fire that stormy Saturday evening. “You first, Dirk!” she said.

But Dirk shook his head, glancing out of the corner of his eye at his father, and Lisa exclaimed in surprise, “Haven’t you got a wish, Dirk?”

“Oh, I’ve got one all right—a big one,” he said, and hesitated. “Let someone else start.”

“Then you, Father,” said Lisa. “What would you wish?”

“Well, I don’t know—now that I have my new barn. Oh, yes, more acres, more cattle, an extra big onion crop, maybe a whole new polder rescued from the sea, a—”

“No fair! No fair! Just one wish!” cried Lisa.

“*Ja, Ja*, that’s only one wish,” he protested, laughing. “Just to have the best farm around Kuyfoort.”

“I seem to have about everything I’d wish for,” Mother said, her face serene in the glow of the fire, and Lisa gave a little sigh of content. There was something so solid and capable about Mother! Wherever she was, one felt safe. “My wish would be just that we could always be as well off and happy as we are tonight. And that’s a pretty big wish.”

“I think I’ll wish for a helicopter,” said Klaas, the elder brother, his eyes twinkling, though his voice sounded serious.

“Oh, Klaas, that isn’t a real wish,” Lisa objected. “You’re only teasing because you don’t want to tell us your real one,” she added shrewdly.

“It’s a good one,” said Klaas stoutly. “There’s only one helicopter in Holland. Two might come in handy one of these times. All right, then, but I’d like to see one, anyway,” he chuckled, yielding to the disappointment in her face. “Let’s say a new sailboat—a fine new one. Our old boat’s pretty banged up. You and Dirk could have that.”

Lisa couldn’t help laughing with the others at this generous offer. She was sure Klaas’s real wish was for brown-eyed, fun-loving Martje Stuyver, the elder sister of her best friend Paula. The trouble was, too many of the other farm and village boys had the same wish. And anyway, Martje was away visiting friends at St. Philipsland, where probably other lads were finding her as enchanting as Klaas did.

“Look at Rex,” she said, pointing to the shepherd dog, who had risen from his place near Dirk and was walking uneasily about. “He’s probably wishing the wind would die down.”

“Rex doesn’t like storms,” Klaas said. “Not that the rest of us do. Tell us your wish, Dirk.”

“Well—I’d like to go to the university and become an engineer,” said Dirk, and at the evident surprise of the group, he added defiantly, “the best engineer in the Netherlands!”

“For a boy of fourteen, that’s quite a wish,” said Uncle Pieter. He had brought his young wife, Anna, for a weekend visit to the farmhouse. This uncle, not so many years older than Klaas, was a great favorite with the young van Rossems, and Tante Anna, sweet and capable and cheerful, had won their hearts at once. “It’s a good wish, too. Holland needs plenty of engineers if we’re going to take more land from the sea.”

But Dirk’s father shook his head. “Holland needs farmers to take care of the polders we’ve already taken from the sea. And you are a farm boy, Dirk. Remember that.”

“Klaas is the farmer,” said Dirk. “I want to be an engineer, Father. Like Uncle Piet says, Holland needs engineers—good ones. It’s the engineers who build the dikes that push the sea back so we can have the new polders.” He knew, as all Dutch boys did, how much of the country’s rich farmland—the polders—had been rescued from the sea by the dikes—how the salt water had been pumped out and the land made fertile. This agelong battle with the sea had always fascinated him. He longed to have a share in it and couldn’t see why his father would object.

“And I wish for cotton for my lace caps if I’m to have plenty ready for the market day on our spring trip to Dordrecht,” said Grandmother placidly, intervening, as she

often did, with a change of subject, to prevent a struggle between this father and son who never seemed to understand each other very well.

“You didn’t make a wish, Lisa,” said Tante Anna, smiling at her. “A lively girl like my Lisa must have many, I know.”

“Oh, I do,” said Lisa. Her great wish was for a room of her own, however small, instead of her cupboard bed off Mother and Father’s room. And to be treated less like a child, now that she was thirteen. But these weren’t wishes one could say aloud in front of everybody. She had another wish, too, though she hesitated to mention it because she feared it would make Dirk double up with laughter and Klaas give her his teasing, big-brotherly look. But Uncle Piet, she thought, would understand, and she felt sure Tante Anna would.

“I wish for an adventure—a real adventure,” she said, with a slightly self-conscious air. “I’ve never had even a little one.”

As she had feared, the wish was greeted with hearty laughter, especially by her brothers. “You’re likely to have one—here on a Kuyfoort farm,” scoffed Dirk.

“Well, it needn’t be in Kuyfoort,” retorted Lisa with spirit. “After all, I’m mobile. I’m willing to go where the adventure is.” Then, to change the subject, she asked quickly, “What’s your wish, Uncle Pieter?”

“I have mine,” said her uncle, and took his wife’s hand. “Right here.”

“And I,” said sweet Tante Anna, pleased but a little embarrassed, “wish for a new good big dishpan.”

This very practical wish brought them all down to earth with laughter. Mother stood up, saying with a chuckle,

“While you’re about it, wish for one big enough to be used for a baby’s bathtub too. And now, how about a nightcap of hot chocolate and some of the *koekjes* I baked this morning? Come, Lisa.”

“Time for Rex to go to the barn, Dirk,” said his father.

Dirk stood up. It was plain to see that Rex didn’t want to leave. He stopped at the door, looking up pleadingly. “I’ll have to take him,” Dirk said. “Come on, old fellow.” But even when Dirk was back and Rex was safe in the barn, they could hear an occasional deep, protesting bark.

“How the wind blows tonight!” said Tante Anna uneasily. “Sounds as if it wants to tear the house up by the roots.”

“Don’t worry,” said Father. “It’s a solid brick house with good strong roots.”

“The waves were so high this afternoon! Seemed as if they wanted to dash right over the dike,” Tante Anna said.

“The dikes have stood against the waves for many long years,” her husband assured her, “and there’s a dike army of all the able-bodied men around to go into action with sandbags and all sorts of things if there’s any danger.”

“Sometimes in a bad storm a little sea water washes over the dikes, but it does no harm,” her brother-in-law said. “So good night, and sleep well.”

Dirk’s thoughts were going round and round over the evening’s talk of wishes as he snuggled down between the huge feather puffs in the tiny room that he shared with Klaas.

Klaas was wide awake too. “What a wind!” he said. “Sounds as if it wants to tear not only the house but the whole farm to pieces.” He was silent a moment and then asked, “Dirk, did you mean that about being an engineer?”

“Did I mean it? You bet!”

“Father won’t like it, Dirk. I don’t think he’ll help you.”

“I’ll have to do it myself, then, Klaas. This farm isn’t big enough for the three of us anyway; you know that.”

“But there’s talk of building a new dike farther out. That would mean new polders—new farmland. It’s been done before, you know. That’s what Father and the others around here are hoping for.”

“And that’s just what I want to help do, Klaas. It’s what I’m going to do.” There was a stubborn note in Dirk’s voice that his older brother had heard before.

“Well, then, I’ll try to help you if I can; but keep still about it for the time being. No need to split the family over it. I know Father wants you to study agriculture.”

“You study that, Klaas. That’s your thing.”

“Studying isn’t my thing,” said Klaas quietly. “I like to get right into the earth and dig—plant onions and potatoes and sugar beets—take care of the cattle—all that.” Klaas, at seventeen, was already a good farmer. “Well,” he added in the lighter tone more natural to him, “you can’t start being an engineer yet. Fourteen’s too young, and anyway, it’s too stormy to start walking to the university tonight. So better get some sleep.” He gave his brother a friendly clout, which Dirk returned heartily. There was a good-natured chuckle from each, and both boys settled down.

It seemed to Dirk he had scarcely been asleep, but suddenly he was wide awake, sitting up in bed, his heart pounding. The wind was stronger than ever now, screaming around the house, banging shutters, threatening to tear off the very roof. Over the wild shrieking of the wind came

the sound of church bells clanging in the night, of sirens wailing.

Dirk clutched his brother by the shoulder, but Klaas was almost too tense to notice it. Those sirens—that terrifying sound he had heard before as a very small boy! “Dirk, it’s the air raid sirens. Could it be—surely it couldn’t be a war!”

“Klaas! What’s that sloshing and splashing? That water—sounds as if it’s right inside the house!” Dirk jumped out of bed and gave a gasp of terror. “Klaas, the water’s up to my knees.”

Klaas was out of bed in one leap. “Grab your clothes, Dirk, and rush upstairs. We’ve got to wake everybody.”

Dirk reached for the switch, but there was no light. Both boys seized clothing they had put ready for the morning and made their way as fast as they could through the surging waters to the narrow stairway.

Even as they climbed, the waters rose too, but halfway up Dirk gave a tremendous sigh of relief and said, “It’s dry here.”

“And I think I hear Father up,” said Klaas.

As they reached the top step, Father came out into the hall, a night lamp in one hand, the other jerking a suspender into place. “Here you are—safe! Oh, thank God!” he exclaimed. “I hear water down there.”

“It’s halfway up the stairs,” Klaas said.

“Can it be the dike gave way? Mother’s awake. Help me wake the others. We must get out to higher land if we can, up by the church and schoolhouse.”

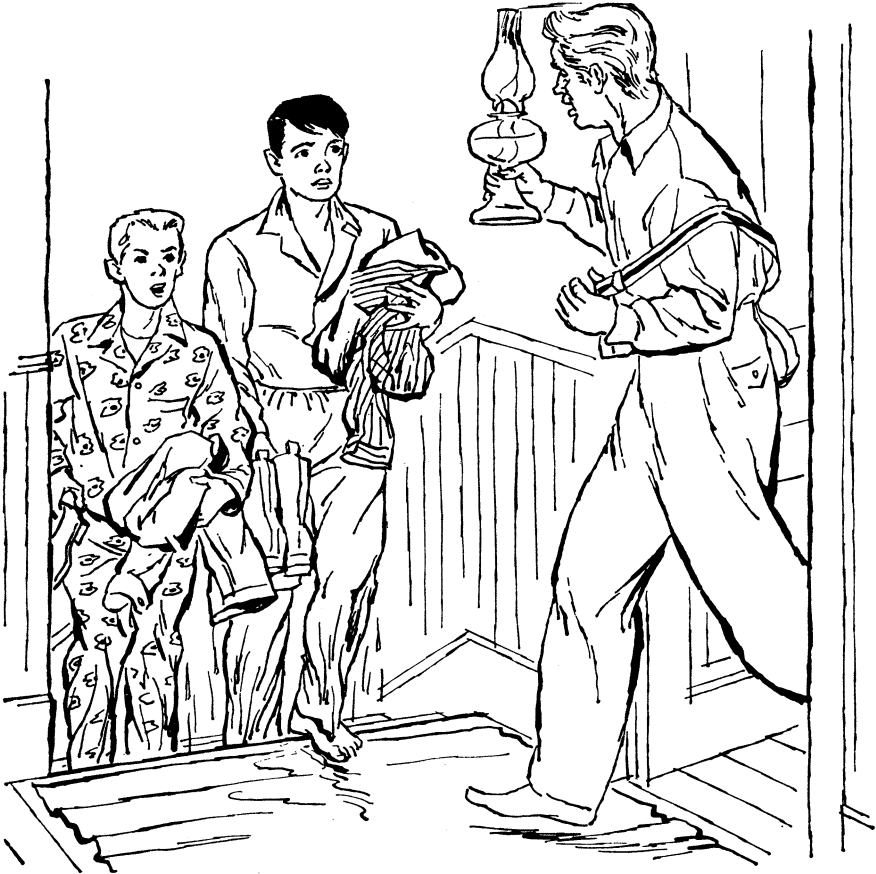
The sirens and jangling bells had already awakened everyone, and now they were all crowding into the little hall, clothing hastily jerked on, faces white. Someone outside

shouted above the noise of flood and bells and sirens, "Dike gave way! Dike gave way! Get to your attics."

"I'm not going to huddle in any attic," burst out Klaas. "Someone needs to be out there helping."

His father and brother and Uncle Pieter plainly felt the same way, for they all moved quickly toward the stairway. "You womenfolk go to the attic," directed Father. "We'll get the boat and rescue you through the window."

But even as he spoke, water had reached the top of the stair and was swirling over the hall floor. Through the open



bedroom doors, the faint light of the lamp showed outlines of furniture overturned, straw mats floating. "We'll all go to the attic—quick!" said Father.

It was cold in the attic, the wind still shrieked, and the rain pounded on the roof; but they were safe and dry for the moment at least.

"It's lucky I always keep a lantern up here for when I come up for supplies," said Mother. "I think we should light it and hang it in the window. Rescue boats will be getting out, and maybe they will see it."

Lisa, whose heart had been pounding so hard she was afraid everyone could hear it, suddenly felt calmer. That was the way it was with Mother—even up here in the cold attic, with water raging nearly to the roof, she could make you feel safe.

Vrouw van Rossem found the lantern and lighted it, and looked about at her family. She could see well enough that her young sister-in-law was terrified almost out of her wits and that the men and boys were all but ready to jump out of the window and swim to where they could get help for their womenfolk and others who needed to be rescued; and her good common sense told her that this was the time one member of the family at least must keep an even keel.

So she cast about for anything to say, and as the lantern light fell on strings of onions, bags of potatoes, and a basket or two of apples, she said, "You see we have some supplies, at any rate."

Uncle Pieter looked anxiously at his young wife, and she tried hard to smile at him, but her eyes kept going to the window. Rescue boats must surely soon be out.

“If we had something white to hang out,” said Grandmother, “they’d be sure to see that and know it was a signal for help.”

Klaas and Dirk dashed downstairs, made their way through the rising waters to the upturned beds, and struggled back with soaked sheets and a blanket or two. A sheet was quickly hung at the window, and the boys stood there looking out. Over the swirling waters toward the village, they could see lanterns flickering, and now their father stood beside them. “Our new barn,” he said, jerking his head toward it. “See it—it’s ruined. And the cattle—all gone, I suppose.”

“And Rex?” asked Dirk. “Can he get out, do you think?”

Father shook his head. “We can only hope so.”

“Thank goodness the sheep are in the old barn up on the old dike,” said his wife at his shoulder. “They should be safe, for a time, at least.” Well within the new dikes were the old inner dikes, and a third line of still older earthen dikes surrounded some of the polders. On one of them the old barn stood.

Klaas didn’t speak. A cold, gray dawn was beginning to break, and now he could see the prow of their own little upended boat poking above the angry waves that dashed against the beech tree at the edge of the canal, where it had been tied.

He reached in his pocket. Yes, his knife was there. If he could swim to the tree and cut that line, he believed he could right the boat and bring it under the window. Then, with the help of the sheets he and Dirk had brought, the family could make a rope and slide down into the boat, one by one, and he could get them to safety where that row of lanterns was,

over by the schoolhouse. He and Father, Uncle Pieter and Dirk, could then help the dike army or aid with rescues—do something. He couldn't bear this inaction a moment longer.

Klaas usually took time to think things through, but now he saw his way in a flash. Better not talk about it. Someone might stop him. Better just do it. Without a word he kicked off his shoes and in another moment had dived out of the window and was fighting his way through the angry waters toward the submerged boat.

There was a rush to the window as Klaas leaped out. "Oh, Klaas! Klaas!" cried his mother. Then she doubled her hand and put it tightly against her mouth, hoping that in the storm and wind he had not heard her anguished call. Surely she could not let her seventeen-year-old son show more courage than she did; but, oh, through those terrible waters, could he ever reach that boat?