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**The Laughing Cavalier: The
Story of the Ancestor
of the Scarlet Pimpernel**



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AN APOLOGY

Does it need one?

If so it must also come from those members of the Blakeney family in whose veins runs the blood of that Sir Percy Blakeney who is known to history as the Scarlet Pimpernel – for they in a manner are responsible for the telling of this veracious chronicle.

For the past eight years now – ever since the true story of The Scarlet Pimpernel was put on record by the present author – these gentle, kind, inquisitive friends have asked me to trace their descent back to an ancestor more remote than was Sir Percy, to one in fact who by his life and by his deeds stands forth from out the distant past as a conclusive proof that the laws which govern the principles of heredity are as unalterable as those that rule the destinies of the universe. They have pointed out to me that since Sir Percy Blakeney's was an exceptional personality, possessing exceptional characteristics which his friends pronounced sublime and his detractors arrogant – he must have had an ancestor in the dim long ago who was, like him, exceptional, like him possessed of qualities which call forth the devotion of friends and the rancour of enemies. Nay, more! there must have existed at one time or another a man who possessed that same sunny disposition, that same irresistible laughter, that same careless insouciance and adventurous spirit which were subsequently transmitted to his descendants, of whom the Scarlet Pimpernel himself was the most distinguished individual.

All these were unanswerable arguments, and with the request that accompanied them I had long intended to comply. Time has been my only enemy in thwarting my intentions until now – time and the multiplicity of material and documents to be gone through ere vague knowledge could be turned into certitude.

Now at last I am in a position to present not only to the Blakeney themselves, but to all those who look on the Scarlet Pimpernel as their hero and their friend – the true history of one of his most noted forebears.

Strangely enough his history has never been written before. And yet countless millions must during the past three centuries have stood before his picture; we of the present generation, who are the proud possessors of that picture now, have looked on him many a time, always with sheer, pure joy in our hearts, our lips smiling, our eyes sparkling in response to his; almost forgetting the genius of the artist who portrayed him in the very realism of the personality which literally seems to breathe and palpitate and certainly to laugh to us out of the canvas.

Those twinkling eyes! how well we know them! that laugh! we can almost hear it; as for the swagger, the devil-may-care arrogance, do we not condone it, seeing that it has its mainspring behind a fine straight brow whose noble, sweeping lines betray an undercurrent of dignity and of thought.

And yet no biographer has – so far as is known to the author of this veracious chronicle – ever attempted to tell us anything of this man's life, no one has attempted hitherto to lift the veil of anonymity which only thinly hides the identity of the Laughing Cavalier.

But here in Haarlem – in the sleepy, yet thriving little town where he lived, the hard-frozen ground in winter seems at times to send forth a memory-echo of his firm footstep, of the jingling of his spurs, and the clang of his sword, and the old gate of the Spaarne through which he passed

so often is still haunted with the sound of his merry laughter, and his pleasant voice seems still to rouse the ancient walls from their sleep.

Here too – hearing these memory-echoes whenever the shadows of evening draw in on the quaint old city – I had a dream. I saw him just as he lived, three hundred years ago. He had stepped out of the canvas in London, had crossed the sea and was walking the streets of Haarlem just as he had done then, filling them with his swagger, with his engaging personality, above all with his laughter. And sitting beside me in the old tavern of the "Lame Cow," in that self-same tap-room where he was wont to make merry, he told me the history of his life.

Since then kind friends at Haarlem have placed documents in my hands which confirmed the story told me by the Laughing Cavalier. To them do I tender my heartfelt and grateful thanks. But it is to the man himself – to the memory of him which is so alive here in Haarlem – that I am indebted for the true history of his life, and therefore I feel that but little apology is needed for placing the true facts before all those who have known him hitherto only by his picture, who have loved him only for what they guessed.

The monograph which I now present with but few additions of minor details, goes to prove what I myself had known long ago, namely, that the Laughing Cavalier who sat to Frans Hals for his portrait in 1624 was the direct ancestor of Sir Percy Blakeney, known to history as the Scarlet Pimpernel.

EMMUSKA ORCZY.
Haarlem, 1913.

THE PROLOGUE

HAARLEM – MARCH 29TH, 1623

The day had been spring-like – even hot; a very unusual occurrence in Holland at this time of year.

Gilda Beresteyn had retired early to her room. She had dismissed Maria, whose chatterings grated upon her nerves, with the promise that she would call her later. Maria had arranged a tray of dainties on the table, a jug of milk, some fresh white bread and a little roast meat on a plate, for Gilda had eaten very little supper and it might happen that she would feel hungry later on.

It would have been useless to argue with the old woman about this matter. She considered Gilda's health to be under her own special charge, ever since good Mevrouw Beresteyn had placed her baby girl in Maria's strong, devoted arms ere she closed her eyes in the last long sleep.

Gilda Beresteyn, glad to be alone, threw open the casement of the window and peered out into the night.

The shadow of the terrible tragedy – the concluding acts of which were being enacted day by day in the Gevangen Poort of 'S Graven Hage – had even touched the distant city of Haarlem with its gloom. The eldest son of John of Barneveld was awaiting final trial and inevitable condemnation, his brother Stoutenburg was a fugitive, and their accomplices Korenwinder, van Dyk, the redoubtable Slatius and others, were giving away under torture the details of the aborted conspiracy against the life of Maurice of Nassau, Stadtholder of Holland, Gelderland, Utrecht and Overijssel, Captain and Admiral-General of the State, Prince of Orange, and virtual ruler of Protestant and republican Netherlands.

Traitors all of them – would-be assassins – the Stadtholder whom they had planned to murder was showing them no mercy. As he had sent John of Barneveld to the scaffold to assuage his own thirst for supreme power and satisfy his own ambitions, so he was ready to send John of Barneveld's sons to death and John of Barneveld's widow to sorrow and loneliness.

The sons of John of Barneveld had planned to avenge their father's death by the committal of a cruel and dastardly murder: fate and the treachery of mercenary accomplices had intervened, and now Groeneveld was on the eve of condemnation, and Stoutenburg was a wanderer on the face of the earth with a price put upon his head.

Gilda Beresteyn could not endure the thought of it all. All the memories of her childhood were linked with the Barnevelds. Stoutenburg had been her brother Nicolaes' most intimate friend, and had been the first man to whisper words of love in her ears, ere his boundless ambition and his unscrupulous egoism drove him into another more profitable marriage.

Gilda's face flamed up with shame even now at recollection of his treachery, and the deep humiliation which she had felt when she saw the first budding blossom of her girlish love so carelessly tossed aside by the man whom she had trusted.

A sense of oppression weighed her spirits down to-night. It almost seemed as if the tragedy which had encompassed the entire Barneveld family was even now hovering over the peaceful house of Mynheer Beresteyn, deputy burgomaster and chief civic magistrate of the town of Haarlem. The air itself felt heavy as if with the weight of impending doom.

The little city lay quiet and at peace; a soft breeze from the south lightly fanned the girl's cheeks. She leaned her elbows on the window-sill and rested her chin in her hands. The moon was not up and yet it was not dark; a mysterious light still lingered on the horizon far away where earth and sea met in a haze of purple and indigo.

From the little garden down below there rose the subtle fragrance of early spring – of wet earth and budding trees, and the dim veiled distance was full of strange sweet sounds, the call of night-birds, the shriek of sea-gulls astray from their usual haunts.

Gilda looked out and listened – unable to understand this vague sense of oppression and of foreboding: when she put her finger up to her eyes, she found them wet with tears.

Memories rose from out the past, sad phantoms that hovered in the scent of the spring. Gilda had never wholly forgotten the man who had once filled her heart with his personality, much less could she chase away his image from her mind now that a future of misery and disgrace was all that was left to him.

She did not know what had become of him, and dared not ask for news. Mynheer Beresteyn, loyal to the House of Nassau and to its prince, had cast out of his heart the sons of John of Barneveld whom he had once loved. Assassins and traitors, he would with his own lips have condemned them to the block, or denounced them to the vengeance of the Stadtholder for their treachery against him.

The feeling of uncertainty as to Stoutenburg's fate softened Gilda's heart toward him. She knew that he had become a wanderer on the face of the earth, Cain-like, homeless, friendless, practically kinless; she pitied him far more than she did Grøneveld or the others who were looking death quite closely in the face.

She was infinitely sorry for him, for him and for his wife, for whose sake he had been false to his first love. The gentle murmur of the breeze, the distant call of the water-fowl, seemed to bring back to Gilda's ears those whisperings of ardent passion which had come from Stoutenburg's lips years ago. She had listened to them with joy then, with glowing eyes cast down and cheeks that flamed up at his words.

And as she listened to these dream-sounds others more concrete mingled with the mystic ones far away: the sound of stealthy footsteps upon the flagged path of the garden, and of a human being breathing and panting somewhere close by, still hidden by the gathering shadows of the night.

She held her breath to listen – not at all frightened, for the sound of those footsteps, the presence of that human creature close by, were in tune with her mood of expectancy of something that was foredoomed to come.

Suddenly the breeze brought to her ear the murmur of her name, whispered as if in an agony of pleading:

"Gilda!"

She leaned right out of the window. Her eyes, better accustomed to the dim evening light, perceived a human figure that crouched against the yew hedge, in the fantastic shadow cast by the quaintly shaped peacock at the corner close to the house.

"Gilda!" came the murmur again, more insistent this time.

"Who goes there?" she called in response: and it was an undefinable instinct stronger than her will that caused her to drop her own voice also to a whisper.

"A fugitive hunted to his death," came the response scarce louder than the breeze. "Give me shelter, Gilda – human bloodhounds are on my track."

Gilda's heart seemed to stop its beating; the human figure out there in the shadows had crept stealthily nearer. The window out of which she leaned was only a few feet from the ground; she stretched out her hand into the night.

"There is a projection in the wall just there," she whispered hurriedly, "and the ivy stems will help you... Come!"

The fugitive grasped the hand that was stretched out to him in pitying helpfulness. With the aid of the projection in the wall and of the stems of the century-old ivy, he soon cleared the distance which separated him from the window-sill. The next moment he had jumped into the room.

Gilda in this impulsive act of mercy had not paused to consider either the risks or the cost. She had recognised the voice of the man whom she had once loved, that voice called to her out of the

depths of boundless misery; it was the call of a man at bay, a human quarry hunted and exhausted, with the hunters close upon his heels. She could not have resisted that call even if she had allowed her reason to fight her instinct then.

But now that he stood before her in rough fisherman's clothes, stained and torn, his face covered with blood and grime, his eyes red and swollen, the breath coming in quick, short gasps through his blue, cracked lips, the first sense of fear at what she had done seized hold of her heart.

At first he took no notice of her, but threw himself into the nearest chair and passed his hands across his face and brow.

"My God," he murmured, "I thought they would have me to-night."

She stood in the middle of the room, feeling helpless and bewildered; she was full of pity for the man, for there is nothing more unutterably pathetic than the hunted human creature in its final stage of apathetic exhaustion, but she was just beginning to co-ordinate her thoughts and they for the moment were being invaded by fear.

She felt more than she saw, that presently he turned his hollow, purple-rimmed eyes upon her, and that in them there was a glow half of passionate will-power and half of anxious, agonizing doubt.

"Of what are you afraid, Gilda?" he asked suddenly, "surely not of me?"

"Not of you, my lord," she replied quietly, "only for you."

"I am a miserable outlaw now, Gilda," he rejoined bitterly, "four thousand golden guilders await any lout who chooses to sell me for a competence."

"I know that, my lord ... and marvel why you are here? I heard that you were safe – in Belgium."

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"I was safe there," he said, "but I could not rest. I came back a few days ago, thinking I could help my brother to escape. Bah!" he added roughly, "he is a snivelling coward..."

"Hush! for pity's sake," she exclaimed, "some one will hear you."

"Close that window and lock the door," he murmured hoarsely. "I am spent – and could not resist a child if it chose to drag me at this moment to the Stadtholder's spies."

Gilda obeyed him mechanically. First she closed the window; then she went to the door listening against the panel with all her senses on the alert. At the further end of the passage was the living-room where her father must still be sitting after his supper, poring over a book on horticulture, or mayhap attending to his tulip bulbs. If he knew that the would-be murderer of the Stadtholder, the prime mover and instigator of the dastardly plot was here in his house, in his daughter's chamber ... Gilda shuddered, half-fainting with terror, and her trembling fingers fumbled with the lock.

"Is Nicolaes home?" asked Stoutenburg, suddenly.

"Not just now," she replied, "but he, too, will be home anon... My father is at home..."

"Ah!.. Nicolaes is my friend ... I counted on seeing him here ... he would help me I know ... but your father, Gilda, would drag me to the gallows with his own hand if he knew that I am here."

"You must not count on Nicolaes either, my lord," she pleaded, "nor must you stay here a moment longer ... I heard my father's step in the passage already. He is sure to come and bid me good-night before he goes to bed..."

"I am spent, Gilda," he murmured, and indeed his breath came in such feeble gasps that he could scarce speak. "I have not touched food for two days. I landed at Scheveningen a week ago, and for five days have hung about the Gevangen Poort of 'S Graven Hage trying to get speech with my brother. I had gained the good will of an important official in the prison, but Grøneveld is too much of a coward to make a fight for freedom. Then I was recognized by a group of workmen outside my dead father's house. I read recognition in their eyes – knowledge of me and knowledge of the money which that recognition might mean to them. They feigned indifference at first, but I had read their thoughts. They drew together to concert over their future actions and I took to my heels. It was yesterday at noon, and I have been running ever since, running, running, with but brief intervals to regain my breath and beg for a drink of water – when thirst became more unendurable than the

thought of capture. I did not even know which way I was running till I saw the spires of Haarlem rising from out the evening haze; then I thought of you, Gilda, and of this house. You would not sell me, Gilda, for you are rich, and you loved me once," he added hoarsely, while his thin, grimy hands clutched the arms of the chair and he half-raised himself from his seat, as if ready to spring up and to start running again; running, running until he dropped.

But obviously his strength was exhausted, for the next moment he fell back against the cushions, the swollen lids fell upon the hollow eyes, the sunken cheeks and parched lips became ashen white.

"Water!" he murmured.

She ministered to him kindly and gently, first holding the water to his lips, then when he had quenched that raging thirst, she pulled the table up close to his chair, and gave him milk to drink and bread and meat to eat.

He seemed quite dazed, conscious only of bodily needs, for he ate and drank ravenously without thought at first of thanking her. Only when he had finished did he lean back once again against the cushions which her kindly hand had placed behind him, and he murmured feebly like a tired but satisfied child:

"You are an angel of goodness, Gilda. Had you not helped me to-night, I should either have perished in a ditch, or fallen in the hands of the Stadholder's minions."

Quickly she put a restraining hand on his shoulder. A firm step had echoed in the flagged corridor beyond the oaken door.

"My father!" she whispered.

In a moment the instinct for life and liberty was fully aroused in the fugitive; his apathy and exhaustion were forgotten; terror, mad, unreasoning terror, had once more taken possession of his mind.

"Hide me, Gilda," he entreated hoarsely, and his hands clutched wildly at her gown, "don't let him see me ... he would give me up ... he would give me up..."

"Hush, in the name of God," she commanded, "he will hear you if you speak."

Swiftly she blew out the candles, then with dilated anxious eyes searched the recesses of the room for a hiding-place – the cupboard which was too small – the wide hearth which was too exposed – the bed in the wall...

His knees had given way under him, and, as he clutched at her gown, he fell forward at her feet, and remained there crouching, trembling, his circled eyes trying to pierce the surrounding gloom, to locate the position of the door behind which lurked the most immediate danger.

"Hide me, Gilda," he murmured almost audibly under his breath, "for the love you bore me once."

"Gilda!" came in a loud, kindly voice from the other side of the door.

"Yes, father!"

"You are not yet abed, are you, my girl?"

"I have just blown out the candles, dear," she contrived to reply with a fairly steady voice.

"Why is your door locked?"

"I was a little nervous to-night, father dear. I don't know why."

"Well! open then! and say good-night."

"One moment, dear."

She was white to the lips, white as the gown which fell in straight heavy folds from her hips, and which Stoutenburg was still clutching with convulsive fingers. Alone her white figure detached itself from the darkness around. The wretched man as he looked up could see her small pale head, the stiff collar that rose above her shoulders, her embroidered corslet, and the row of pearls round her neck.

"Save me, Gilda," he repeated with the agony of despair, "do not let your father hand me over to the Stadholder ... there will be no mercy for me, Gilda ... hide me ... for the love of God."

Noiselessly she glided across the room, dragging him after her by the hand. She pulled aside the bed-curtains, without a word pointed to the recess. The bed, built into the wall, was narrow but sure; it smelt sweetly of lavender; the hunted man, his very senses blurred by that overwhelming desire to save his life at any cost, accepted the shelter so innocently offered him. Gathering his long limbs together, he was soon hidden underneath the coverlet.

"Gilda!" came more insistently from behind the heavy door.

"One moment, father. I was fastening my gown."

"Don't trouble to do that. I only wished to say good-night."

She pulled the curtains together very carefully in front of the bed: she even took the precaution of taking off her stiff collar and embroidered corslet. Then she lighted one of the candles, and with it in her hand she went to the door.

Then she drew back the bolt.

"May I not come in?" said Mynheer Beresteyn gaily, for she remained standing on the threshold.

"Well no, father!" she replied, "my room is very untidy ... I was just getting into bed..."

"Just getting into bed," he retorted with a laugh, "why, child, you have not begun to undress."

"I wished to undress in the dark. My head aches terribly ... it must be the spring air ... Good-night, dear."

"Good-night, little one!" said Beresteyn, as he kissed his daughter tenderly. "Nicolaes has just come home," he added, "he wanted to see you too."

"Ask him to wait till to-morrow then. My head feels heavy. I can scarcely hold it up."

"You are not ill, little one?" asked the father anxiously.

"No, no ... only oppressed with this first hot breath of spring."

"Why is not Maria here to undress you? I'll send her."

"Not just now, father. She will come presently. Her chattering wearied me and I sent her away."

"Well! good-night again, my girl. God bless you. You will not see Nicolaes?"

"Not to-night, father. Tell him I am not well. Good-night."

Mynheer Beresteyn went away at last, not before Gilda feared that she must drop or faint under the stress of this nerve-racking situation.

Even now when at last she was alone, when once again she was able to close and bolt the door, she could scarcely stand. She leaned against the wall with eyes closed, and heart that beat so furiously and so fast that she thought she must choke.

The sound of her father's footsteps died away along the corridor. She heard him opening and shutting a door at the further end of the passage, where there were two or three living rooms and his own sleeping chamber. For awhile now the house was still, so still that she could almost hear those furious heart-beats beneath her gown. Then only did she dare to move. With noiseless steps she crossed the room to that recess in the wall hidden by the gay-flowered cotton curtains.

She paused close beside these.

"My lord!" she called softly.

No answer.

"My lord! my father has gone! you are in no danger for the moment!"

Still no answer, and as she paused, straining her ears to listen, she caught the sound of slow and regular breathing. Going back to the table she took up the candle, then with it in her hand she returned to the recess and gently drew aside the curtain. The light from the candle fell full upon Stoutenburg's face. Inexpressibly weary, exhausted both bodily and mentally, not even the imminence of present danger had succeeded in keeping him awake. The moment that he felt the downy pillow under his head, he had dropped off to sleep as peacefully as he used to do years ago before the shadow of premeditated crime had left its impress on his wan face.

Gilda looking down on him sought in vain in the harsh and haggard features, the traces of those boyish good looks which had fascinated her years ago; she tried in vain to read on those thin, set lips those words of passionate affection which had so readily flown from them then.

She put down the candle again and drew a chair close to the bed, then she sat down and waited.

And he slept on calmly, watched over by the woman whom he had so heartlessly betrayed. All love for him had died out in her heart ere this, but pity was there now, and she was thankful that it had been in her power to aid him at the moment of his most dire peril.

But that danger still existed of course. The household was still astir and the servants not yet all abed. Gilda could hear Jakob, the old henchman, making his rounds, seeing that all the lights were safely out, the bolts pushed home and chains securely fastened, and Maria might come back at any moment, wondering why her mistress had not yet sent for her. Nicolaes too was at home, and had already said that he wished to see his sister.

She tried to rouse the sleeping man, but he lay there like a log. She dared not speak loudly to him or to call his name, and all her efforts at shaking him by the shoulder failed to waken him.

Lonely and seriously frightened now Gilda fell on her knees beside the bed. Clasping her hands she tried to pray. Surely God could not leave a young girl in such terrible perplexity, when her only sin had been an act of mercy. The candle on the bureau close by burnt low in its socket and its flickering light outlined her delicate profile and the soft tendrils of hair that escaped from beneath her coif. Her eyes were closed in the endeavour to concentrate her thoughts, and time flew by swiftly while she tried to pray. She did not perceive that after awhile the Lord of Stoutenburg woke and that he remained for a long time in mute contemplation of the exquisite picture which she presented, clad all in white, with the string of pearls still round her throat, her hands clasped, her lips parted breathing a silent prayer.

"How beautiful you are, Gilda!" he murmured quite involuntarily at last.

Then – as suddenly startled and terrified – she tried to jump up quickly, away from him, he put out his hand and succeeded in capturing her wrists and thus holding her pinioned and still kneeling close beside him.

"An angel of goodness," he said, "and exquisitely beautiful."

At his words, at the renewed pressure of his hand upon her wrists she made a violent effort to recover her composure.

"I pray you, my lord, let go my hands. They were clasped in prayer for your safety. You slept so soundly that I feared I could not wake you in order to tell you that you must leave this house instantly."

"I will go, Gilda," he said quietly, making no attempt to move or to relax his hold on her, "for this brief interval of sleep, your kind ministrations and the food you gave me have already put new strength into me. And the sight of you kneeling and praying near me has put life into me again."

"Then, since you are better," she rejoined coldly, "I pray you rise, my lord, and make ready to go. The garden is quite lonely, the Oude Gracht at its furthest boundary is more lonely still. The hour is late and the city is asleep ... you would be quite safe now."

"Do not send me away yet, Gilda, just when a breath of happiness – the first I have tasted for four years – has been wafted from heaven upon me. May I not stay here awhile and live for a brief moment in a dream which is born of unforgettable memories?"

"It is not safe for you to stay here, my lord," she said coldly.

"My lord? You used to call me Willem once."

"That was long ago, my lord, ere you gave Walburg de Marnix the sole right to call you by tender names."

"She has deserted me, Gilda. Fled from me like a coward, leaving me to bear my misery alone."

"She shared your misery for four years, my lord; it was your disgrace that she could not endure."

"You knew then that she had left me?"

"My father had heard of it."

"Then you know that I am a free man again?"

"The law no doubt will soon make you so."

"The law has already freed me through Walburg's own act of desertion. You know our laws as well as I do, Gilda. If you have any doubt ask your own father whose business it is to administer them. Walburg de Marnix has set me free, free to begin a new life, free to follow at last the dictates of my heart."

"For the moment, my lord," she retorted coldly, "you are not free even to live your old life."

"I would not live it again, Gilda, now that I have seen you again. The past seems even now to be falling away from me. Dreams and memories are stronger than reality. And you, Gilda ... have you forgotten?"

"I have forgotten nothing, my lord."

"Our love – your vows – that day in June when you yielded your lips to my kiss?"

"Nor that dull autumnal day, my lord, when I heard from the lips of strangers that in order to further your own ambitious schemes you had cast me aside like a useless shoe, and had married another woman who was richer and of nobler birth than I."

She had at last succeeded in freeing herself from his grasp, and had risen to her feet, and retreated further and further away from him until she stood up now against the opposite wall, her slender, white form lost in the darkness, her whispered words only striking clearly on his ear.

He too rose from the bed and drew up his tall lean figure with a gesture still expressive of that ruthless ambition with which Gilda had taunted him.

"My marriage then was pure expediency, Gilda," he said with a shrug of the shoulders. "My father, whose differences with the Stadtholder were reaching their acutest stage, had need of the influence of Marnix de St. Aldegonde; my marriage with Walburg de Marnix was done in my father's interests and went sorely against my heart ... it is meet and natural that she herself should have severed a tie which was one only in name. A year hence from now, the law grants me freedom to contract a new marriage tie; my love for you, Gilda, is unchanged."

"And mine for you, my lord, is dead."

He gave a short, low laugh in which there rang a strange note of triumph.

"Dormant mayhap, Gilda," he said as he groped his way across the darkened room and tried to approach her. "Your ears have been poisoned by your father's hatred of me. Let me but hold you once more in my arms, let me but speak to you once again of the past, and you will forget all save your real love for me."

"All this is senseless talk, my lord," she said coldly, "your life at this moment hangs upon the finest thread that destiny can weave. Human bloodhounds you said were upon your track; they have not wholly lost the scent, remember."

Her self-possession acted like a fall of icy-cold water upon the ardour of his temper. Once more that hunted look came into his face; he cast furtive, frightened glances around him, peering into the gloom, as if enemies might be lurking in every dark recess.

"They shall not have me," he muttered through set teeth, "not to-night ... not now that life again holds out to me a cup brimful of happiness. I will go, Gilda, just as you command ... they shall not find me ... I have something to live for now ... you and revenge... My father, my brother, my friends, I shall avenge them all – that treacherous Stadtholder shall not escape from my hatred the second time. Then will I have power, wealth, a great name to offer you. Gilda, you will remember me?"

"I will remember you, my lord, as one who has passed out of my life. My playmate of long ago, the man whom I once loved is dead to me. He who would stain his hands with blood is hateful in my sight. Go, go, my lord, I entreat you, ere you make my task of helping you to life and safety harder than I can bear."

She ran to the window and threw it open, then pointed out into the night.

"There lies your way, my lord. God only knows if I do right in not denouncing you even now to my father."

"You will not denounce me, Gilda," he said, drawing quite near to her, now that he could see her graceful figure silhouetted against the starlit sky, "you will not denounce me for unknown mayhap even to yourself, your love for me is far from dead. As for me I feel that I have never loved as I love you now. Your presence has intoxicated me, your nearness fills my brain as with a subtle, aromatic wine. All thought of my own danger fades before my longing to hold you just for one instant close to my heart, to press for one brief yet eternal second my lips against yours. Gilda, I love you!"

His arms quickly closed round her, she felt his hot breath against her cheek. For one moment did she close her eyes, for she felt sick and faint, but the staunch valour of that same Dutch blood which had striven and fought and endured and conquered throughout the ages past gave her just that courage, just that presence of mind which she needed.

"An you do not release me instantly," she said firmly, "I will rouse the house with one call."

Then, as his arms instinctively dropped away from her and he drew back with a muttered curse:

"Go!" she said, once more pointing toward the peaceful and distant horizon now wrapped in the veil of night. "Go! while I still have the strength to keep silent, save for a prayer for your safety."

Her attitude was so firm, her figure so rigid, that he knew that inevitably he must obey. His life was in danger, not hers; and she had of a truth but little to fear from him. He bowed his head in submission and humility, then he bent the knee and raising her gown to his lips he imprinted a kiss upon the hem. The next moment he had swung himself lightly upon the window sill, from whence he dropped softly upon the ground below.

For a few minutes longer she remained standing beside the open window, listening to his footfall on the flagged path. She could just distinguish his moving form from the surrounding gloom, as he crept along the shadows towards the boundary of the garden. Then as for one brief minute she saw his figure outlined above the garden wall, she closed the window very slowly and turned away from it.

The next moment she was lying in a swoon across the floor of her room.

THE ADVENTURE

CHAPTER I

NEW YEAR'S EVE

If the snow had come down again or the weather been colder, or wetter, or other than it was...

If one of the three men had been more thirsty, or the other more insistent...

If it had been any other day of the year, or any other hour of any other day...

If the three philosophers had taken their walk abroad in any other portion of the city of Haarlem...

If...

Nay! but there's no end to the Ifs which I might adduce in order to prove to you beyond a doubt that but for an extraordinary conglomeration of minor circumstances, the events which I am about to relate neither would nor could ever have taken place.

For indeed you must admit that had the snow come down again or the weather been colder, or wetter, the three philosophers would mayhap all have felt that priceless thirst and desire for comfort which the interior of a well-administered tavern doth so marvellously assuage. And had it been any other day of the year or any other hour of that same last day of the year 1623, those three philosophers would never have thought of wiling away the penultimate hour of the dying year by hanging round the Grootemarkt in order to see the respectable mynheer burghers and the mevrouws their wives, filing into the cathedral in a sober and orderly procession, with large silver-clasped Bibles under their arms, and that air of satisfied unctuousness upon their faces which is best suited to the solemn occasion of watch-night service, and the desire to put oneself right with Heaven before commencing a New Year of commercial and industrial activity.

And had those three philosophers not felt any desire to watch this same orderly procession they would probably have taken their walk abroad in another portion of the city from whence...

But now I am anticipating.

Events crowded in so thickly and so fast, during the last hour of the departing year, and the first of the newly-born one, that it were best mayhap to proceed with their relation in the order in which they occurred.

For look you, the links of a mighty chain had their origin on the steps of the Stadhuis, for it is at the foot of these that three men were standing precisely at the moment when the bell of the cathedral struck the penultimate hour of the last day of the year 1623.

Mynheer van der Meer, Burgomaster of Haarlem, was coming down those same steps in the company of Mynheer van Zilcken, Mynheer Beresteyn and other worthy gentlemen, all members of the town council and all noted for their fine collections of rare tulips, the finest in the whole of the province of Holland.

There was great rivalry between Mynheer van der Meer, Mynheer van Zilcken and Mynheer Beresteyn on the subject of their tulip bulbs, on which they expended thousands of florins every year. Some people held that the Burgomaster had exhibited finer specimens of "Semper Augustus" than any horticulturist in the land, while others thought that the "Schwarzer Kato" shown by Mynheer Beresteyn had been absolutely without a rival.

And as this group of noble councillors descended the steps of the Stadhuis, preparatory to joining their wives at home and thence escorting them to the watch-night service at the cathedral, their talk was of tulips and of tulip bulbs, of the specimens which they possessed and the prices which they had paid for these.

"Fourteen thousand florins did I pay for my 'Schwarzer Kato,'" said Mynheer Beresteyn complacently, "and now I would not sell it for twenty thousand."

"There's a man up at Overveen who has a new hybrid now, a sport of 'Schone Juffrouw' – the bulb has matured to perfection, he is putting it up for auction next week," said Mynheer van Zilcken.

"It will fetch in the open market sixteen thousand at least," commented Mynheer van der Meer sentimentously.

"I would give that for it and more," rejoined the other, "if it is as perfect as the man declares it to be."

"Too late," now interposed Mynheer Beresteyn with a curt laugh, "I purchased the bulb from the man at Overveen this afternoon. He did not exaggerate its merits. I never saw a finer bulb."

"You bought it?" exclaimed the Burgomaster in tones that were anything but friendly toward his fellow councillor.

"This very afternoon," replied the other. "I have it in the inner pocket of my doublet at this moment."

And he pressed his hand to his side, making sure that the precious bulb still reposed next to his heart.

"I gave the lout fifteen thousand florins for it," he added airily, "he was glad not to take the risks of an auction, and I equally glad to steal a march on my friends."

The three men, who were leaning up against the wall of the Stadhuis, and who had overheard this conversation, declared subsequently that they learned then and there an entirely new and absolutely comprehensive string of oaths, the sound of which they had never even known of before, from the two solemn and sober town-councillors who found themselves balked of a coveted prize. But this I do not altogether believe; for the three eavesdroppers had already forgotten more about swearing than all the burghers of Haarlem put together had ever known.

In the meantime the town councillors had reached the foot of the steps: here they parted company and there was a marked coldness in the manner of some of them toward Mynheer Beresteyn, who still pressed his hand against his doublet, in the inner pocket of which reposed a bit of dormant vegetation for which he had that same afternoon paid no less a sum than fifteen thousand florins.

"There goes a lucky devil," said a mocking voice in tones wherein ripples of laughter struggled for ever for mastery. It came from one of the three men who had listened to the conversation between the town-councillors on the subject of tulips and of tulip bulbs.

"To think," he continued, "that I have never even seen as much as fifteen thousand florins all at once. By St. Bavon himself do I swear that for the mere handling of so much money I would be capable of the most heroic deeds ... such as killing my worst enemy ... or ... or ... knocking that obese and self-complacent councillor in the stomach."

"Say but the word, good Diogenes," said a gruff voice in response, "the lucky devil ye speak of need not remain long in possession of that bulb. He hath name Beresteyn... I think I know whereabouts he lives ... the hour is late ... the fog fairly dense in the narrow streets of the city ... say but the word..."

"There is an honest man I wot of in Amsterdam," broke in a third voice, one which was curiously high-pitched and dulcet in its tones, "an honest dealer of Judaic faith, who would gladly give a couple of thousand for the bulb and ask no impertinent questions."

"Say but the word, Diogenes ..." reiterated the gruff voice solemnly.

"And the bulb is ours," concluded the third speaker in his quaint high-pitched voice.

"And three philosophers will begin the New Year with more money in their wallets than they would know what to do with," said he of the laughter-filled voice. "'Tis a sound scheme, O Pythagoras, and one that under certain circumstances would certainly commend itself to me. But just now..."

"Well?" queried the two voices – the gruff and the high-pitched – simultaneously, like a bassoon and a flute in harmony, "just now what?"

"Just now, worthy Socrates and wise Pythagoras, I have three whole florins in my wallet, and my most pressing creditor died a month ago – shot by a Spanish arquebuse at the storming of Breda

– he fell like a hero – God rest his soul! But as to me I can afford a little while – at any rate for to-night – to act like a gentleman rather than a common thief."

"Bah!" came in muffled and gruff tones of disgust, "you might lend me those three florins – 'twere the act of a gentleman..."

"An act moreover which would effectually free me from further scruples, eh?" laughed the other gaily.

"The place is dull," interposed the flute-like tones, "'twill be duller still if unworthy scruples do cause us to act like gentlemen."

"Why! 'tis the very novelty of the game that will save our lives from dullness," said Diogenes lightly, "just let us pretend to be gentlemen for this one night. I assure you that good philosophers though ye both are, you will find zest in the entertainment."

It is doubtful whether this form of argument would have appealed to the two philosophers in question. The point was never settled, for at that precise moment Chance took it on herself to forge the second link in that remarkable chain of events which I have made it my duty to relate.

From across the Grootemarkt there, where stands the cathedral backed by a network of narrow streets, there came a series of ear-piercing shrieks, accompanied by threatening cries and occasional outbursts of rough, mocking laughter.

"A row," said Socrates laconically.

"A fight," suggested Pythagoras.

Diogenes said nothing. He was already half-way across the Markt. The others followed him as closely as they could. His figure which was unusually tall and broad loomed weirdly out of the darkness and out of the fog ahead of them, and his voice with that perpetual undertone of merriment rippling through it, called to them from time to time.

Now he stopped, waiting for his companions. The ear-piercing shrieks, the screams and mocking laughter came more distinctly to their ears, and from the several bye-streets that gave on the Market Place, people came hurrying along, attracted by the noise.

"Let us go round behind the Fleischmarkt," said Diogenes, as soon as his two friends had come within ear-shot of him, "and reach the rear of the cathedral that way. Unless I am greatly mistaken the seat of yonder quarrel is by a small postern gate which I spied awhile ago at the corner of Dam Straat and where methinks I saw a number of men and women furtively gaining admittance: they looked uncommonly like Papists and the postern gate not unlike a Romanist chapel door."

"Then there undoubtedly will be a row," said Socrates dryly.

"And we are no longer likely to find the place dull," concluded Pythagoras in a flute-like voice.

And the three men pulling their plumed hats well over their eyes, turned off without hesitation in the wake of their leader. They had by tacit understanding unsheathed their swords and were carrying them under the folds of their mantles. They walked in single file, for the street was very narrow, the gabled roofs almost meeting overhead at their apex, their firm footsteps made no sound on the thick carpet of snow. The street was quite deserted and the confused tumult in the Dam Straat only came now as a faint and distant echo.

Thus walking with rapid strides the three men soon found themselves once more close to the cathedral: it loomed out of the fog on their left and the cries and the laughter on ahead sounded once more clear and shrill.

The words "for the love of Christ!" could be easily distinguished; uttered pleadingly at intervals and by a woman's voice they sounded ominous, more especially as they were invariably followed by cries of "Spaniards! Spies! Papists!" and a renewal of loud and ribald laughter.

The leader of the little party had paused once more, his long legs evidently carried him away faster than he intended: now he turned to his friends and pointed with his hand and sword on ahead.

"Now, wise Pythagoras," he said, "wilt thou not have enjoyment and to spare this night? Thou didst shower curses on this fog-ridden country, and call it insufferably dull. Lo! what a pleasing picture doth present itself to our gaze."

Whether the picture was pleasing or not depended entirely from the point of view of spectator or participant. Certes it was animated and moving and picturesque; and as three pairs of eyes beneath three broad-brimmed hats took in its several details, three muffled figures uttered three simultaneous gurgles of anticipated pleasure.

In the fog that hung thickly in the narrow street it was at first difficult to distinguish exactly what was going on. Certain it is that a fairly dense crowd, which swelled visibly every moment as idlers joined in from many sides, had congregated at the corner of Dam Straat, there where a couple of resin torches fixed in iron brackets against a tall stuccoed wall, shed a flickering and elusive light on the forms and faces of a group of men in the forefront of the throng.

The faces thus exposed to view appeared flushed and heated – either with wine or ebullient temper – whilst the upraised arms, the clenched fists and brandished staves showed a rampant desire to do mischief.

There was a low postern gate in the wall just below the resin torches. The gate was open and in the darkness beyond vague, moving forms could be seen huddled together in what looked like a narrow, unlighted passage. It was from this huddled mass of humanity that the wails and calls for divine protection proceeded, whilst the laughter and the threats came from the crowd.

From beneath three broad-brimmed hats there once more came three distinct chuckles of delight and three muffled figures hugged naked swords more tightly under their cloaks.

CHAPTER II

THE FRACAS BY THE POSTERN GATE

Thus am I proved right in saying that but for the conglomeration of minor circumstances within the past half hour, the great events which subsequently linked the fate of a penniless foreign adventurer with that of a highly honourable and highly esteemed family of Haarlem never would or could have occurred.

For had the three philosophers adhered to their usual custom of retiring to the warmth and comfort of the "Lame Cow," situate in the Kleine Hout Straat, as soon as the streets no longer presented an agreeable lolling place, they would never have known of the tumult that went on at this hour under the very shadow of the cathedral.

But seeing it all going on before them, what could they do but join in the fun?

The details of the picture which had the low postern gate for its central interest were gradually becoming more defined. Now the figure of a woman showed clearly under the flickering light of the resin torches, a woman with rough, dark hair that hung loosely round her face, and bare arms and legs, of which the flesh, blue with cold, gleamed weirdly against the dark oak panelling of the gate.

She was stooping forward, with arms outstretched and feet that vainly tried to keep a foothold of the ground which snow and frost had rendered slippery. The hands themselves were not visible, for one of them was lost in the shadows behind her and the other disappeared in the grip of six or eight rough hands.

Through the mist and in the darkness it was impossible to see whether the woman was young or old, handsome or ill-favoured, but her attitude was unmistakable. The men in the forefront of the crowd were trying to drag her away from the shelter of the gate to which she clung with desperate obstinacy.

Her repeated cries of "For the love of Christ!" only provoked loud and bibulous laughter. Obviously she was losing her hold of the ground, and was gradually being dragged out into the open.

"For the love of Christ, let me go, kind sirs!"

"Come out quietly then," retorted one of the men in front, "let's have a look at you."

"We only want to see the colour of your eyes," said another with mock gallantry.

"Are you Spanish spies or are you not, that's all that we want to know," added a third. "How many black-eyed wenches are there among ye? Papists we know you are."

"Papists! Spanish spies!" roared the crowd in unison.

"Shall we bait the Papists too, O Diogenes?" came in dulcet tones from out the shadow of the stuccoed wall.

"Bah! women and old men, and only twenty of these," said his companion with a laugh and a shrug of his broad shoulders, "whilst there are at least an hundred of the others."

"More amusing certainly," growled Socrates under the brim of his hat.

"For the love of Christ," wailed the woman piteously, as her bare feet buried in the snow finally slid away from the protecting threshold, and she appeared in the full light of the resin torches, with black unkempt hair, ragged shift and kirtle and a wild terror-stricken look in her black eyes.

"Black eyes! I guessed as much!" shouted one of the men excitedly. "Spaniards I tell you, friends! Spanish spies all of them! Out you come, wench! out you come!"

"Out you come!" yelled the crowd. "Papists! Spanish spies!"

The woman gave a scream of wild terror as half a dozen stones hurled from the rear of the crowd over the heads of the ringleaders came crashing against the wall and the gate all around her.

One of these stones was caught in mid air.

"I thank thee, friend," cried a loud, mocking voice that rang clearly above the din, "my nose was itching and thou didst strive to tickle it most effectually. Tell me does thine itch too? Here's a good cloth wherewith to wipe it."

And the stone was hurled back into the thick of the crowd by a sure and vigorous hand even whilst a prolonged and merry laugh echoed above the groans and curses of the throng.

For an instant after that the shouts and curses were still, the crowd – as is usual in such cases – pausing to see whence this unexpected diversion had come. But all that could be seen for the moment was a dark compact mass of plumed hats and mantles standing against the wall, and a triple glint as of steel peeping from out the shadows.

"By St. Bavon, the patron saint of this goodly city, but here's a feast for philosophers," said that same laughter-loving voice, "four worthy burghers grappling with a maid. Let go her arm I say or four pairs of hands will presently litter the corner of this street, and forty fingers be scattered amongst the refuse. Pythagoras, wilt take me at two guilders to three that I can cut off two of these ugly, red hands with one stroke of Bucephalus whilst Socrates and thou thyself wilt only account for one apiece?"

Whilst the merry voice went rippling on in pleasant mocking tones, the crowd had had ample time to recover itself and to shake off its surprise. The four stalwarts on in front swore a very comprehensive if heterogeneous oath. One of them did certainly let go the wench's arm somewhat hastily, but seeing that his companions had recovered courage and the use of their tongue, he swore once again and more loudly this time.

"By that same St. Bavon," he shouted, "who is this smeerlap whose interference I for one deeply resent. Come out, girl, and show thyself at once, we'll deal with thy protector later."

After which there were some lusty shouts of applause at this determined attitude, shouts that were interrupted by a dulcet high-pitched voice saying quietly:

"I take thee, friend Diogenes. Two guilders to three: do thou strike at the pair of hands nearest to thee and while I count three..."

From the torches up above there came a sharp glint of light as it struck three steel blades, that swung out into the open.

"One – two – "

Four pairs of hands, which had been dragging on the woman's arm with such determined force, disappeared precipitately into the darkness, and thus suddenly released, the woman nearly fell backwards against the gate.

"Pity!" said the dulcet voice gently, "that bet will never be decided now."

An angry murmur of protest rose from the crowd. The four men who had been the leaders of the gang were pushed forward from the rear amidst shouts of derision and brandishing fists.

"Cowards! cowards! cowards! Jan Tiele, art not ashamed? Piet, go for them! There are only three! Cowards to let yourselves be bullied!"

The crowd pushed from behind. The street being narrow, it could only express its desire for a fight by murmurs and by shouts, it had no elbow-room for it, and could only urge those in the forefront to pick a quarrel with the interfering strangers.

"The blessing of God upon thee, stranger, and of the Holy Virgin..." came in still quivering accents from out the darkness of the passage.

"Let the Holy Virgin help thee to hold thy tongue," retorted he who had name Diogenes, "and do thou let my friend Socrates close this confounded door."

"Jan Tiele!" shouted someone in the crowd, "dost see what they are doing? the gate is being closed..."

"And bolted," said a flute-like voice.

"Stand aside, strangers!" yelled the crowd.

"We are not in your way," came in calm response.

The three muffled figures side by side in close if somewhat unnumerical battle array had taken their stand in front of the postern gate, the heavy bolts of which were heard falling into their sockets behind them with a loud clang. A quivering voice came at the last from behind the iron judas in the door.

"God will reward ye, strangers! we go pray for you to the Holy Virgin..."

"Nay!" rejoined Diogenes lightly, "'twere wiser to pray for Jan Tiele, or for Piet or their mates – some of them will have need of prayers in about five minutes from now."

"Shame! cowards! plepshurk! At them Jan! Piet! Willem!" shouted the crowd lustily.

Once more stones were freely hurled followed by a regular fusillade of snowballs. One of these struck the crown of a plumed hat and knocked it off the wearer's head. A face, merry, a trifle fleshy perhaps, but with fine, straight brow, eyes that twinkled and mocked and a pair of full, joyous lips adorned by a fair upturned moustache, met the gaze of an hundred glowering eyes and towered half a head above the tallest man there.

As his hat fell to the ground, the man made a formal bow to the yelling and hooting crowd:

"Since one of you has been so kind as to lift my hat for me, allow me formally to present myself and my friends here. I am known to my compeers and to mine enemies as Diogenes," he said gravely, "a philosopher of whom mayhap ye have never heard. On my left stands Pythagoras, on my right Socrates. We are all at your service, including even my best friend who is slender and is made of steel and hath name Bucephalus – he tells me that within the next few minutes he means to become intimately acquainted with Dutch guts, unless ye disperse and go peaceably back to church and pray God to forgive ye this act of cowardice on New Year's eve!"

The answer was another volley of stones, one of which hit Socrates on the side of the head:

"With the next stone that is hurled," continued Diogenes calmly, "I will smash Jan Tiele's nose: and if more than one come within reach of my hand, then Willem's nose shall go as well."

The warning was disregarded: a shower of stones came crashing against the wall just above the postern gate.

"How badly these Dutchmen throw," growled Socrates in his gruff voice.

"This present from thy friends in the rear, Jan Tiele," rejoined Diogenes, as he seized that worthy by the collar and brandished a stone which he had caught in its flight. "'Tis they obviously who do not like the shape of thy nose, else they had not sent me the wherewithal to flatten it for thee."

"I'll do that, good Diogenes," said Pythagoras gently, as he took both the stone and the struggling Jan Tiele from his friend's grasp, "and Socrates will see to Willem at the same time. No trouble, I give thee my word – I like to do these kind of jobs for my friends."

An awful and prolonged howl from Jan Tiele and from Willem testified that the jobs had been well done.

"Papists! Spaniards! Spies!" roared the crowd, now goaded to fury.

"Bucephalus, I do humbly beg thy pardon," said Diogenes as he rested the point of his sword for one moment on the frozen ground, then raised it and touched it with his forehead and with his lips, "I apologize to thee for using thee against such rabble."

"More stones please," came in a shrill falsetto from Pythagoras, "here's Piet whose nose is itching fit to make him swear."

He was a great adept at catching missiles in mid-air. These now flew thick and fast, stones, short staves, heavy leather pouches as well as hard missiles made of frozen snow. But the throwers were hampered by one another: they had no elbow-room in this narrow street.

The missiles for the most part fell wide of the mark. Still! the numbers might tell in the end. Socrates' face was streaming with blood: a clump of mud and snow had extinguished one of the torches, and a moment ago a stone had caught Diogenes on the left shoulder.

The three men stood close together, sword in hand. To the excited gaze of the crowd they scarcely seemed to be using their swords or to heed those of their aggressors who came threateningly

nigh. They stood quite quietly up against the wall hardly making a movement, their sword hand and wrist never appeared to stir, but many who had been in the forefront had retired howling and the snow all around was deeply stained with red: Jan Tiele and Willem had broken noses and Piet had lost one ear.

The three men were hatless and the faces of two of them were smeared with blood. The third – taller and broader than the others – stood between them, and with those that pressed him closely he bandied mocking words.

"Spaniards! Papists!" yelled the crowd.

"If I hear those words again," he retorted pleasantly, "I'll run three of you through on Bucephalus as on a spit, and leave you thus ready for roasting in hell. We are no Spaniards. My father was English and my friend Pythagoras here was born in a donkey shed, whilst Socrates first saw the light of day in a travelling menagerie. So we are none of us Spaniards, and you can all disperse."

"Papists!"

"And if I hear that again I'll send the lot of you to hell."

"Art thou Samson then, to think thyself so strong?" shouted a shrill voice close to him.

"Give me thy jawbone and I'll prove thee that I am," he retorted gaily.

"Spies!" they cried.

"Dondersteen!" he shouted in his turn, swearing lustily, "I am tired of this rabble. Disperse! disperse, I tell ye! Bucephalus my friend wilt have a taste of Dutch guts? Another ear? a nose or two? What, ye will not go?"

"Spaniards! Spies! Papists!"

The crowd was gathering unto itself a kind of fury that greatly resembled courage. Those that were behind pushed and those that were in front could no longer retreat. Blood had begun to flow more freely and the groans of the wounded had roused the bellicose instincts of those whose skin was still whole. One or two of the more venturesome had made close and gruesome acquaintance with the silent but swift Bucephalus, whilst from the market place in the rear the numbers of the crowd thus packed in this narrow street corner swelled dangerously. The new comers did not know what had happened before their arrival. They could not see over the heads of the crowd what was going on at this moment. So they pushed from behind and the three combatants with their backs against the wall had much difficulty in keeping a sufficiently wide circle around them to allow their swords free play.

Already Socrates, dizzy from the blood that was streaming down his sharp, hooked nose, had failed to keep three of his foremost assailants at bay: he had been forced to yield one step and then another, and the elbow of his sword arm was now right up against the wall. Pythagoras, too, was equally closely pressed, and Diogenes had just sent an over bold lout sprawling on the ground. The noise was deafening. Every one was shouting, many were screaming or groaning. The town guard, realizing at last that a tumult of more than usual consequence was going on in some portion of the city, had decided to go and interfere; their slow and weighty steps and the clang of their halberds could be heard from over the Grootemarkt during the rare moments when shouts and clamour subsided for a few seconds only to be upraised again with redoubled power.

Then suddenly cries of "Help!" were raised from the further end of Dam Straat, there where it debouches on the bank of the Spaarne. It was a woman's voice that raised the cry, but men answered it with calls for the guard. The tumult in front of the postern gate now reached its climax, for the pressure from behind had become terrible, and men and women were being knocked down and trampled on. It seemed as if the narrow street could not hold another human soul, and yet apparently more and more were trying to squeeze into the restricted space. The trampled, frozen snow had become as slippery as a sheet of glass, and if the guard with their wonted ponderous clumsiness charged into the crowd with halberds now, then Heaven help the weak who could not elbow a way out for themselves; they would be sure to be trampled under foot.

Every one knew that on such occasions many a corpse littered the roads when finally the crowd disappeared. Those of sober sense realized all this, but they were but small units in this multitude heated with its own rage, and intoxicated with the first hope of victory. The three strangers who, bare-headed, still held their ground with their backs to the wall were obviously getting exhausted. But a little more determination – five minutes respite before the arrival of the guard, a few more stones skilfully hurled and the Papists, Spaniards or Spies – whatever they were – would have paid dearly for their impudent interference.

"Papists, have ye had enough?" yelled the crowd in chorus as a stone well thrown hit the sword arm of the tallest of the three men – he whose mocking voice had never ceased its incessant chatter.

"Not nearly enough," he replied loudly, as he quietly transferred faithful Bucephalus from his right hand to his left.

"We are just beginning to enjoy ourselves," came in dulcet tones from the small man beside him.

"At them! at them! Papists! Spies!"

Once more a volley of stones.

"Dondersteen! but methinks we might vary the entertainment," cried Diogenes lustily.

Quicker than a flash of lightning he turned, and once more grasping Bucephalus in the partially disabled hand he tore with the other the resin torch out of its iron socket, and shouting to his two companions to hold their ground he, with the guttering lighted torch charged straight into the crowd.

A wild cry of terror was raised, which echoed and re-echoed from one end of the street to the other, reverberated against the cathedral walls, and caused all peaceable citizens who had found refuge in their homes to thank the Lord that they were safely within.

Diogenes, with fair hair fluttering over his brow, his twinkling eyes aglow with excitement, held the torch well in front of him, the sparks flew in all directions, the lustiest aggressors fled to right and left, shrieking with horror. Fire – that most invincible weapon – had accomplished what the finest steel never could have done; it sobered and terrified the crowd, scattered it like a flock of sheep, sent it running hither and thither, rendering it helpless by fear.

In the space of three minutes the circle round the three combatants was several metres wide, five minutes later the corner of the street was clear, except for the wounded who lay groaning on the ground and one or two hideous rags of flesh that lay scattered among heaps of stones, torn wallets, staves and broken sticks.

From the precincts of the Grootemarkt the town guard were heard using rough language, violent oaths and pikes and halberds against the stragglers that were only too eager now to go peaceably back to their homes. The fear of burnt doublets or kirtles had effectually sobered these over-flowing tempers. There had been enough Papist baiting to please the most inveterate seeker after excitement this night.

A few youths, who mayhap earlier in the evening had indulged too freely in the taverns of the Grootemarkt, were for resuming the fun after the panic had subsided. A score of them or so talked it over under the shadow of the cathedral, but a detachment of town guard spied their manœuvres and turned them all back into the market-place.

The bell of the cathedral slowly struck the last hour of this memorable year; and through the open portals of the sacred edifice the cathedral choir was heard intoning the First Psalm.

Like frightened hens that have been scared, and now venture out again, the worthy burghers of Haarlem sallied out from the by-streets into the Grootemarkt, on their way to watch-night service: Mynheer the burgomaster, and mynheer the town advocate, and the mevrouws their wives, and the town councillors and the members of the shooting guilds, and the governors and governesses of the Alms-houses. With ponderous Bibles and prayer-books under their arms, and cloaks of fur closely wrapped round their shoulders, they once more filled the Grootemarkt with the atmosphere of their own solemnity. Their serving men carried the torches in front of them, waiting women helped the mevrouws in their unwieldy farthingales to walk on the slippery ground with becoming sobriety.

The cathedral bells sent forth a merry peal to greet the incoming year.

CHAPTER III

AN INTERLUDE

And at the corner of Dam Straat, where the low postern gate cuts into the tall stuccoed wall, there once more reigned silence as of the grave.

Those that were hurt and wounded had managed to crawl away, the town guard had made short work of it all; the laws against street brawling and noisy assemblies were over severe just now; it was best to hide a wound and go nurse it quietly at home. Fortunately the fog favoured the disturbers of the peace. Gradually they all contrived to sneak away, and later on in the night to sally forth again for watch-night revelries, looking for all the world as if nothing had happened.

"Tumult? Papist baiting? Was there really any Papist baiting this night? Ah! these foreign adventurers do fill our peaceful city with their noise."

In the Dam Straat the fog and the darkness reigned unchallenged. The second torch lay extinguished on the ground, trampled out under the heel of a heavy boot. And in the darkness three men were busy readjusting their mantles and trying to regain possession of their hats.

"A very unprofitable entertainment," growled Socrates.

"Total darkness, not a soul in sight, and cold! fit to chill the inner chambers of hell," assented Pythagoras.

"And no chance of adding anything to the stock of three guilders which must suffice us for to-night," concluded Diogenes airily.

He was carefully wiping the shining blade of Bucephalus with the corner of Pythagoras' mantle.

"Verrek jezelf! and what the d – l?" queried the latter in a high falsetto.

"My mantle is almost new," said Diogenes reproachfully; "thou would'st not have me soil it so soon?"

"I have a hole in my head fit to bury those three guilders in," murmured Socrates, with a sigh.

"And I a blow in the stomach which has chilled me to the marrow," sighed Pythagoras.

"And I a bruised shoulder," laughed Diogenes, "which hath engendered an unquenchable thirst."

"I wouldn't sell my thirst for any money this night," assented Pythagoras.

"To the 'Lame Cow,' then, O Pythagoras, and I'll toss thee for the first drink of hot ale."

"Ugh! but my head feels mightily hot and thick," said Socrates, somewhat huskily.

"Surely thou canst walk as far as the 'Lame Cow'?" queried Pythagoras, anxiously.

"I doubt me," sighed the other.

"Ale!" whispered Diogenes, encouragingly; "warm, sparkling, spicy ale!"

"Hm! hm!" assented the wounded man feebly.

"Easy! easy, my friend," said Diogenes, for his brother philosopher had fallen heavily against him.

"What are we to do?" moaned Pythagoras, in his dulcet tones. "I have a thirst ... and we cannot leave this irresponsible fool to faint here in the fog."

"Hoist him up by the seat of his breeches, then on to my back," retorted Diogenes lightly. "The 'Lame Cow' is not far, and I too have a thirst."

Socrates would have protested. He did not relish the idea of being tossed about like a bale of goods on his friend's back. But he could only protest by word of mouth, to which the others paid no heed; and when he tried to struggle he rolled, dizzy and faint, almost to the ground.

"There's nothing for it," piped Pythagoras with consummate philosophy. "I couldn't carry him if I tried."

Diogenes bent his broad back and rested his hands on his thighs, getting as firm hold of the slippery ground as he could. Socrates for the moment was like a helpless log. There was much

groping about in the darkness, a good deal of groaning, and a vast amount of swearing. Socrates had, fortunately, not fainted, and after a little while was able to settle down astride on his friend's back, his arms around the latter's neck, Pythagoras giving vigorous pushes from the rear.

When Diogenes, firmly grasping the wounded man's legs, was at last able to straighten himself out again, and did so to the accompaniment of a mighty groan and still more mighty oath, he found himself confronted by two lanterns which were held up within a few inches of his nose.

"Dondersteen!" he ejaculated loudly, and nearly dropped his half-conscious and swaying burden on the ground.

"What is it now, Jakob?" queried a woman's voice peremptorily.

"I cannot see clearly, lady," replied one of the lantern-bearers – "two men I think."

"Then do thy thoughts proclaim thee a liar, friend," said Diogenes lightly; "there are three men here at this lady's service, though one is sick, the other fat, and the third a mere beast of burden."

"Let me see them, Jakob," ordered the woman. "I believe they are the same three men who..."

The lantern-bearers made way for the lady, still holding the lanterns up so that the light fell fully on the quaint spectacle presented by the three philosophers. There was Socrates perched up aloft, his bird-like face smeared with blood, his eyes rolling in their effort to keep open, his thin back bent nearly double so that indeed he looked like a huge plucked crow the worse for a fight, and perched on an eminence where he felt none too secure. And below him his friend with broad shoulders bending under the burden, his plumed hat shading his brow, his merry, twinkling eyes fixed a little suspiciously on the four figures that loomed out of the fog in front of him, his mocking lips ready framed for a smile or an oath, his hands which supported the legs of poor wounded Socrates struggling visibly toward the hilt of his sword. And peeping round from behind him the short, rotund form of Pythagoras, crowned with a tall sugar-loaf hat which obviously had never belonged to him until now, for it perched somewhat insecurely above his flat, round face, with the small, upturned nose slightly tinged with pink and the tiny eyes, round and bright as new crowns.

Undoubtedly the sight was ludicrous in the extreme, and the woman who looked on it now burst into a merry peal of laughter.

"O Maria! dost see them?" she said, turning to her companion, an elderly woman in sober black gown and coif of tinsel lace. "Hast ever seen anything so quaint?"

She herself was young, and in the soft light of the two lanterns appeared to the three philosophers to be more than passing fair.

"Socrates, thou malapert," said Diogenes sternly, "take my hat off my head at once, and allow me to make obeisance to the lady, or I'll drop thee incontinently on thy back."

Then, as Socrates half mechanically lifted the plumed hat from his friend's head, the latter bowed as well as he could under the circumstances and said gallantly:

"Thy servants, lady, and eternally grateful are we for a sight of thee at this moment when the world appeared peculiarly fog-ridden and unpleasant. Having been the fortunate cause of thy merriment, might we now crave thy permission to continue our way. The weight of my friend up there is greater than his importance warrants, and I don't want to drop him ere we reach a haven of refuge, where our priceless thirst will soon, I hope, find solace."

The delicate face of the young girl had suddenly become more grave.

"Your pardon, gentle sirs," she said, with a pretty mixture of imperiousness and humility; "my levity was indeed misplaced. I know ye now for the same three brave fellows who were fighting a few moments ago against overwhelming odds, in order to protect a woman against a rowdy crowd. Oh, it was a valorous deed! My men and I were on our way to watch-night service, and saw it all from a distance. We dared not come nigh, the rabble looked so threatening. All I could do was to shout for help, and summon the town guard to your aid. It was you, was it not?" she added, regarding with great wondering blue eyes the three curious figures who stood somewhat sheepishly before her.

"Yes, fair lady," piped Pythagoras, in his neatest falsetto, "we were the three men who, in the face of well-nigh overwhelming odds, did save a defenceless woman from the insolent rabble. My friend who is perched up there was severely wounded in the fray, I myself received so violent a blow in the stomach that a raging thirst has since taken possession of my throat, and –"

He stopped abruptly and murmured a comprehensive oath. He had just received a violent kick in the shins from Diogenes.

"What the h – ?" he muttered.

But Diogenes paid no heed to him; looking on the dainty picture before him, with eyes that twinkled whilst they did not attempt to conceal the admiration which he felt, he said, with elaborate gallantry, which his position under the burden of Socrates' swaying figure rendered inexpressibly droll:

"For the help rendered to us all at the moment of distress, deign to accept, mejuffrouw, our humble thanks. For the rest, believe me, our deed was not one of valour, and such as it was it is wholly unworthy of the praise thou dost deign to bestow upon it. I would tell thee more," he added, whimsically, "only that my friend behind me is violently kicking the calves of my legs, which renders the elegant flow of language well nigh impossible. I stopped him talking just now – he retaliates ... it is but just."

"Gentle sir," said the girl, who obviously had much ado to preserve her gravity, "your modesty doth but equal your gallantry. This do I see quite plainly. But if at any time I can do aught to express in a more practical manner the real admiration which I feel for your worth I pray you command me. Alas! brave men are few these days! But my father's name is known throughout Holland; his wealth and influence are vast. I pray you tell me, can I do aught for you now?"

She spoke so artlessly and at the same time with such gentle dignity, it was small wonder that for the nonce even the most talkative of all philosophers was dumb, and that his habitual mocking banter failed to cross his lips. The girl was young and exquisitely pretty; the stiff, unwieldy costume of the time failed to conceal altogether the graceful slenderness of her figure, just as the prim coif of gold and silver tissue failed to hold the unruly golden curls in bondage. The light from the lanterns fell full on her face, and round her throat, beneath her fur-lined cloak, there was a glimmer of starched linen and lace, whilst gems in her ears and on her breast lent her an air of elegance and even of splendour.

Pythagoras in the rear heaved a deep sigh; he drew in his breath preparatory to a long and comprehensive oration. "Can I do aught for ye?" the lady had said: a lady who was rich and influential and willing. Ye thunders and lightnings! when but three guilders stood between three philosophers and absolute penury! Ye hails and storms! what an opportunity! He would have approached the lady, only Diogenes' wide shoulders blocked him out from her view.

"Can I do aught for you now?" she reiterated gently.

"Raise thy hand to my lips," said Diogenes lightly; "momentarily I have not the use of mine own."

She hesitated, but only for a brief moment, then did just what he asked. She held her hand to his lips, mayhap one second longer than was absolutely necessary, and her eyes, large, deep and shy, looked for that one second into a pair of merry, mocking ones. Then she sighed, whether with satisfaction or embarrassment I would not undertake to say, and asked with a gracious smile:

"And what is your next wish, gentle sir?"

"Thy leave to continue our journey to the 'Lame Cow,'" he replied airily; "my friend up there is getting damnably heavy."

She drew back, visibly surprised and hurt.

"I do not detain ye," she said curtly, and without another word she turned to her lantern-bearers and ordered them to precede her; she also called to her duenna to follow; but she did not bestow another look on the three men, nor did she acknowledge the respectful farewell which came from the lips of the beast of burden.

The next moment she had already crossed the road toward the cathedral, and she and her escort were swallowed up by the fog.

"Well, of all the d – d idiots that ever..." swore Pythagoras, in his shrillest tones.

Even Socrates pulled himself together in order to declare emphatically that Diogenes was a confounded fool.

"I pray thee raise thy hand to my lips," mimicked Pythagoras mockingly. "Verrek jezelf!" he muttered under his breath.

"If you do not hold your tongue, O wise Pythagoras," retorted Diogenes with all his wonted merriment, "I'll even have to drop Socrates on the top of you in order to break your head."

"But 'tis a fortune – the promise of a fortune which you let slip so stupidly."

"There is a certain wisdom even in stupidity sometimes, Pythagoras, as you will discover one day, when your nose is less red and your figure less fat. Remember that I have three guilders in my pocket, and that our thirst hath not grown less. Follow me now, we've talked enough for to-night."

And he started walking down the street with long and rapid strides. Socrates up aloft swaying about like a dummy figure in carnival time, and Pythagoras – still muttering a series of diversified oaths – bringing up the rear.

CHAPTER IV

WATCH-NIGHT

And am I not proved fully justified in my statement that but for many seemingly paltry circumstances, the further events which I am about to place on record, and which have been of paramount importance to the history of no less than two great and worthy families, never would have shaped themselves as they did.

For who could assert that but for the presence of three philosophers on the Grootemarkt on the eve of the New Year, and their subsequent interference in the fray outside the Papist convent door in the Dam Straat, who could assert, I say, that but for these minor circumstances Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn would ever have condescended to exchange half a dozen words with three out-at-elbows, homeless, shiftless, foreign adventurers who happened to have drifted into Haarlem – the Lord only knew for what purpose and with what hopes.

Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn had been well and rigidly brought up; she was well educated, and possessed more knowledge than most young girls of her social standing or of her age. Mynheer Beresteyn, her father, was a gentleman of vast consideration in Haarlem, and as his two children had been motherless as soon as the younger one saw the light of day, he had been doubly careful in his endeavours that his daughter should in no way feel the lack of that tender supervision of which it had pleased God to deprive her.

Thus she had been taught early in life to keep herself aloof from all persons save those approved of by her father or her brother – a young man of sound understanding, some half dozen years older than herself. As for the strangers who for purposes of commerce or other less avowable motives filled the town of Haarlem with their foreign ways – which oft were immoral and seldom sedate – she had been strictly taught to hold these in abhorrence and never to approach such men either with word or gesture.

Was it likely, then, that she ever would have spoken to three thriftless knaves? – and this at a late hour of the night – but for the fact that she had witnessed their valour from a distance, and with queenly condescension hoped to reward them with a gracious word.

The kiss imprinted upon her hand by respectful, if somewhat bantering, lips had greatly pleased her: such she imagined would be the homage of a vassal proud to have attracted the notice of his lady paramount. The curtly expressed desire to quit her presence, in order to repair to a tavern, had roused her indignation and her contempt.

She was angered beyond what the circumstance warranted, and while the minister preached an admirable and learned watch-night sermon she felt her attention drifting away from the discourse and the solemnity of the occasion, whilst her wrath against a most unworthy object was taking the place of more pious and charitable feelings.

The preacher had taken for his text the sublime words from the New Testament: "The greatest of these is charity." He thought that the first day of the New Year was a splendid opportunity for the good inhabitants of Haarlem to cast off all gossiping and back-biting ways and to live from this day forth in greater amity and benevolence with one another. "Love thy neighbour as thyself," he adjured passionately, and the burghers, with their vrouws in their Sunday best, were smitten with remorse of past scandal-mongering, and vowed that in the future they would live in perfect accord and good-will.

Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn, too, thought of all her friends and acquaintances with the kindest of feelings, and she had not a harsh thought for anyone in her heart ... not for anyone, at any rate, who was good and deserving... As for that knavish malapert with the merry, twinkling eyes and the mocking smile, surely God would not desire her to be in charity with him; a more ungrateful, more impertinent wretch, she had never met, and it was quite consoling to think of all that Mynheer

Beresteyn's influence could have done for those three ragamuffins, and how in the near future they must all suffer abominable discomfort, mayhap with shortage of food and drink, or absence of shelter, when no doubt one of them at least would remember with contrition the magnanimous offer of help made to him by gracious lips, and which he had so insolently refused.

So absorbed was Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn in these thoughts that she never even noticed that the watch-night service was over, and the minister already filing out with the clerk. The general exodus around her recalled her to herself and also to a sense of contrition for the absent way in which she had assisted at this solemn service.

She whispered to Maria to wait for her outside the church with the men.

"I must yet pray for a little while alone," she said. "I will join you at the north door in a quarter of an hour."

And she fell on her knees, and was soon absorbed in prayer.

Maria found the two serving men in the crowd, and transmitted to them her mistress's orders. The cathedral had been very full for the service, and the worshippers took a long time filing out; they lingered about in the aisles, exchanging bits of city gossip and wishing one another a happy New Year.

The verger had much ado to drive the goodly people out of the edifice, no sooner had he persuaded one group of chatterers to continue their conversation on the Grootemarkt outside, than another batch seemed to loom out of the shadows, equally determined to conclude its gossip here in the warmth, before sallying forth once more into the foggy midnight air.

"I must close the cathedral for the night," the worthy man repeated piteously, "do you think that I don't want to get home and eat my watch-night supper at a reasonable hour. Move on there, my masters, move out please! My orders are to have the church closed before one o'clock."

He came on a group of men who sat together in the shadow of a heavy pillar close behind the pulpit.

"Now then, mynheers," he said, "'tis closing time."

But those that were there made no sign to obey.

"All right, Perk," said one of them in a whisper, "we are not going just yet."

"Aye, but ye are," retorted the verger gruffly, for he was cross now and wanting his supper, "what should I allow ye to stay for?"

"For the memory of Jan!" was the whispered response.

The verger's manner changed in an instant, the few words evidently bore some portentous meaning of which he held the key – and I doubt not but that the key was made of silver.

"All right, mynheers," he said softly, "the church will be clear in a few minutes now."

"Go round, Perk," said he who had first spoken, "and let us know when all is safe."

The verger touched his forelock and silently departed. Those that were there in the shadow by the great pillar remained in silence awaiting his return. The congregation was really dispersing now, the patter of leather shoes on the flagstones of the floor became gradually more faint; then it died out altogether. That portion of the Groote Kerk where is situated the magnificent carved pulpit was already quite dark and wholly deserted save for that group of silent, waiting figures that looked like shadows within the shadows.

Anon the verger returned. He had only been absent a few minutes.

"Quite safe now, mynheers," he said, "the last of them has just gone through the main door. I have locked all the doors save the West. If you want anything you will find me there. I can leave this one light for you, the others I must put out."

"Put them out, Perk, by all means," was the ready response. "We can find our way about in the dark."

The verger left them undisturbed; his shuffling steps were heard gliding along the flagstones until their murmur died away in the vastness of the sacred edifice.

The group of men who sat behind the pulpit against the heavy pillar, now drew their rush chairs closer to one another.

There were six of them altogether, and the light from the lamp above illumined their faces, which were stern looking, dark and of set determination. All six of them were young; only one amongst them might have been more than thirty years of age; that a great purpose brought them here to-night was obvious from their attitude, the low murmur of their voices, that air of mystery which hung round them, fostered by the dark cloaks which they held closely wrapped round their shoulders and the shadows from the pillar which they sought.

One of them appeared to be the centre of their interest, a man, lean and pallid-looking, with hollow purple-rimmed eyes, that spoke of night vigils or mayhap of unavowed, consuming thoughts. The mouth was hard and thin, and a febrile excitement caused his lips to quiver and his hand to shake.

The others hung upon his words.

"Tell us some of your adventures, Stoutenburg!" said one of them eagerly.

Stoutenburg laughed harshly and mirthlessly.

"They would take years in telling," he said, "mayhap one day I'll write them down. They would fill many a volume."

"Enough that you did contrive to escape," said another man, "and that you are back here amongst us once more."

"Yes! in order to avenge wrongs that are as countless by now as the grains of sand on the sea-shore," rejoined Stoutenburg earnestly.

"You know that you are not safe inside Holland," suggested he who had first spoken.

"Aye, my good Beresteyn, I know that well enough," said Stoutenburg with a long and bitter sigh. "Your own father would send me to the gallows if he had the chance, and you with me mayhap, for consorting with me."

"My father owes his position, his wealth, the prosperity of his enterprise to the Stadtholder," said Beresteyn, speaking with as much bitterness as his friend. "He looked upon the last conspiracy against the life of the Prince of Orange as a crime blacker than the blackest sin that ever deserved hell... If he thought that I ... at the present moment..."

"Yes I know. But he has not the power to make you false to me, has he, Nicolaes?" asked Stoutenburg anxiously. "You are still at one with us?"

"With you to the death!" replied Beresteyn fervently, "so are we all."

"Aye! that we are," said the four others with one accord, whilst one of them added dryly:

"And determined not to fail like the last time by trusting those paid hirelings, who will take your money and betray you for more."

"Last February we were beset with bunglers and self-seekers," said Stoutenburg, "my own brother Grøneveld was half-hearted in everything save the desire to make money. Slatius was a vindictive boor, van Dyk was a busy-body and Korenwinder a bloated fool. Well! they have paid their penalty. Heaven have their souls! But for God's sake let us do the work ourselves this time."

"They say that the Stadtholder is sick unto death," said one of the men sombrely. "Disease strikes with a surer hand sometimes than doth the poniard of an enemy."

"Bah! I have no time to waste waiting for his death," retorted Stoutenburg roughly, "there is an opportunity closer at hand and more swift than the weary watching for the slow ravages of disease. The Stadtholder comes to Amsterdam next week; the burghers of his beloved city have begged of him to be present at the consecration of the Western Kerk, built by Mynheer van Keyser, as well as at the opening of the East India Company's new hall. He plays up for popularity just now. The festivals in connection with the double event at Amsterdam have tempted him to undertake the long journey from the frontier, despite his failing health. His visit to this part of the country is a golden opportunity which I do not intend to miss."

"You will find it very difficult to get near the Stadtholder on such an occasion," remarked Beresteyn. "He no longer drives about unattended as he used to do."

"All the escort in the world will not save him from my revenge," said Stoutenburg firmly. "Our position now is stronger than it has ever been. I have adherents in every city of Holland and of Zealand, aye, and in the south too as far as Breda and in the east as far as Arnhem. I tell you, friends, that I have spread a net over this country out of which Maurice of Orange cannot escape. My organisation too is better than it was. I have spies within the camp at Sprang, a knot of determined men all along the line between Breda and Amsterdam, at Gouda, at Delft ... especially at Delft."

"Why specially there?" asked Beresteyn.

"Because I have it in my mind that mayhap we need not take the risks of accomplishing our coup in Amsterdam itself. As you say it might be very difficult and very dangerous to get at the Stadtholder on a public occasion... But Delft is on the way... Maurice of Orange is certain to halt at Delft, if only in order to make a pilgrimage to the spot where his father was murdered. He will, I am sure, sleep more than one night at the Prinsenhof... And from Delft the way leads northwards past Ryswyk – Ryswyk close to which I have had my headquarters three weeks past – Ryswyk, my friends!" he continued, speaking very rapidly almost incoherently in his excitement, "where I have arms and ammunition, Ryswyk, which is the rallying point for all my friends ... the molens! you remember?... close to the wooden bridge which spans the Schie... I have enough gunpowder stored at that molens to blow up twenty wooden bridges ... and the Stadtholder with his escort must cross the wooden bridge which spans the Schie not far from the molens where I have my headquarters... I have it all in my mind already... I only wait to hear news of the actual day when the Stadtholder leaves his camp... I can tell you more to-morrow, but in the meanwhile I want to know if there are a few men about here on whom I can rely at a moment's notice ... whom I can use as spies or messengers ... or even to lend me a hand at Ryswyk in case of need ... thirty or forty would be sufficient ... if they are good fighting men... I said something about this in my message to you all."

"And I for one acted on your suggestion at once," said one of the others. "I have recruited ten stout fellows: Germans and Swiss, who know not a word of our language. I pay them well and they ask no questions. They will fight for you, spy for you, run for you, do anything you choose, and can betray nothing, since they know nothing. They are at your disposal at any moment."

"That is good, and I thank you, my dear Heemskerk."

"I have half a dozen peasants on my own estate on whom I can rely," said another of Stoutenburg's friends. "They are good fighters, hard-headed and ready to go through fire and water for me. They are as safe as foreign mercenaries, for they will do anything I tell them and will do it without asking the reason why."

"I have another eight or ten foreigners to offer you," said a third, "they come from a part of Britain called Scotland so I understand. I picked them up a week ago when they landed at Scheveningen and engaged them in my service then and there."

"And I can lay my hand at any moment on a dozen or so young apprentices in my father's factory," added a fourth, "they are always ready for a frolic or a fight and ready to follow me to hell if need be."

"You see that you can easily count on three dozen men," concluded Beresteyn.

"Three dozen men ready to hand," said Stoutenburg, "for our present needs they should indeed suffice. Knowing that I can reckon on them I can strike the decisive blow when and how I think it best. It is the blow that counts," he continued between set teeth, "after that everything is easy enough. The waverers hang back until success is assured. But our secret adherents in Holland can be counted by the score, in Zealand and Utrecht by the hundred. When Maurice of Orange has paid with his own blood the penalty which his crimes have incurred, when I can proclaim myself over his dead body Stadtholder of the Northern Provinces, Captain and Admiral General of the State, thousands will rally round us and flock to our banner. Thousands feel as we do, think as we do, and know what we know,

that John of Barneveld will not rest in his grave till I, his last surviving son, have avenged him. Who made this Republic what she is? My father. Who gave the Stadtholder the might which he possesses? My father. My father whose name was revered and honoured throughout the length and breadth of Europe and whom an ingrate's hand hath branded with the mark of traitor. The Stadtholder brought my father to the scaffold, heaping upon him accusations of treachery which he himself must have known were groundless. When the Stadtholder sent John of Barneveld to the scaffold he committed a crime which can only be atoned for by his own blood. Last year we failed. The mercenaries whom we employed betrayed us. My brother, our friends went the way my father led, victims all of them of the rapacious ambition, the vengeful spite of the Stadtholder. But I escaped as by a miracle! – a miracle I say it was, my friends, a miracle wrought by the God of vengeance, who hath said: 'I will repay!' He hath also said that whosoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed! I am the instrument of his vengeance. Vengeance is mine! 'tis I who will repay!"

He had never raised his voice during this long peroration, but his diction had been none the less impressive because it was spoken under his breath. The others had listened in silence, awed, no doubt, by the bitter flood of hate which coursed through every vein of this man's body and poured in profusion from his lips. The death of father and brother and of many friends, countless wrongs, years of misery, loss of caste, of money and of home had numbed him against every feeling save that of revenge.

"This time I'll let no man do the work for me," he said after a moment's silence, "if you will all stand by me, I will smite the Stadtholder with mine own hand."

This time he had raised his voice, just enough to wake the echo that slept in the deserted edifice.

"Hush!" whispered one of his friends, "Hush! for God's sake!"

"Bah! the church is empty," retorted Stoutenburg, "and the verger too far away to hear. I'll say it again, and proclaim it loudly now in this very church before the altar of God: I will kill the Stadtholder with mine own hand!"

"Silence in the name of God!"

More than one muffled voice had uttered the warning and Beresteyn's hand fell heavily on Stoutenburg's arm.

"Hush, I say!" he whispered hoarsely, "there's something moving there in the darkness."

"A rat mayhap!" quoth Stoutenburg lightly.

"No, no ... listen!.. some one moves ... some one has been there ... all along..."

"A spy!" murmured the others under their breath.

In a moment every man there had his hand on his sword: Stoutenburg and Beresteyn actually drew theirs. They did not speak to one another for they had caught one another's swift glance, and the glance had in it the forecast of a grim resolve.

Whoever it was who thus moved silently out of the shadows – spy or merely indiscreet listener – would pay with his life for the knowledge which he had obtained. These men here could no longer afford to take any risks. The words spoken by Stoutenburg and registered by them all could be made the stepping stones to the scaffold if strange ears had caught their purport.

They meant death to someone, either to the speakers or to the eavesdropper; and six men were determined that it should be the eavesdropper who must pay for his presence here.

They forced their eyes to penetrate the dense gloom which surrounded them, and one and all held their breath, like furtive animals that await their prey. They stood there silent and rigid, a tense look on every face; the one light fixed in the pillar above them played weirdly on their starched ruffs scarce whiter than the pallid hue of their cheeks.

Then suddenly a sound caught their ears, which caused each man to start and to look at his nearest companion with set inquiring eyes; it was the sound of a woman's skirt swishing against the stone-work of the floor. The seconds went by leaden-footed and full of portentous meaning. Each heart-beat beneath the vaulted roof of the cathedral to-night seemed like a knell from eternity.

How slow the darkness was in yielding up its secret!

At last as the conspirators gazed, they saw the form of a woman emerging out of the shadows. At first they could only see her starched kerchief and a glimmer of jewels beneath her cloak. Then gradually the figure – ghostlike in this dim light – came more fully into view; the face of a woman, her lace coif, the gold embroidery of her stomacher all became detached one by one, but only for a few seconds, for the woman was walking rapidly, nor did she look to right or left, but glided along the floor like a vision – white, silent, swift – which might have been conjured up by a fevered brain.

"A ghost!" whispered one of the young men hoarsely.

"No. A woman," said another, and the words came like a hissing sound through his teeth.

Beresteyn and Stoutenburg said nothing for a while. They looked silently on one another, the same burning anxiety glowing in their eyes, the same glance of mute despair passing from one to the other.

"Gilda!" murmured Stoutenburg at last.

The swish of the woman's skirt had died away in the distance; not one of the men had attempted to follow her or to intercept her passage.

Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn, no spy of course, just a chance eavesdropper! but possessed nevertheless now of a secret which meant death to them all!

"How much did she hear think you?" asked Stoutenburg at last.

He had replaced his sword in his scabbard with a gesture that expressed his own sense of fatality. He could not use his sword against a woman – even had that woman not been Gilda Beresteyn.

"She cannot have heard much," said one of the others, "we spoke in whispers."

"If she had heard anything she would have known that only the west door was to remain open. Yet she has made straight for the north portal," suggested another.

"If she did not hear the verger speaking she could not have heard what we said," argued a third somewhat lamely.

Every one of them had some suggestion to put forward, some surmise to express, some hope to urge. Only Beresteyn said nothing. He had stood by, fierce and silent ever since he had first recognized his sister; beneath his lowering brows the resolve had not died out of his eyes, and he still held his sword unsheathed in his hand.

Stoutenburg now appealed directly to him.

"What do you think of it, Beresteyn?" he asked.

"I think that my sister did hear something of our conversation," he answered quietly.

"Great God!" ejaculated the others.

"But," added Beresteyn slowly, "I pledge you mine oath that she will not betray us."

"How will you make sure of that?" retorted Stoutenburg, not without a sneer.

"That is mine affair."

"And ours too. We can do nothing, decide on nothing until we are sure."

"Then I pray you wait for me here," concluded Beresteyn. "I will bring you a surety before we part this night."

"Let me go and speak to her," urged Stoutenburg.

"No, no, 'tis best that I should go."

Stoutenburg made a movement as if he would detain him, then seemed to think better of it, and finally let him go.

Beresteyn did not wait for further comment from his friends but quickly turned on his heel. The next moment he was speeding away across the vast edifice and his tall figure was soon swallowed up by the gloom.

CHAPTER V

BROTHER AND SISTER

The verger on guard at the west door had quietly dropped to sleep. He did not wake apparently when Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn slipped past him and out through the door.

Beresteyn followed close on his sister's heels. He touched her shoulder just as she stood outside the portal, wrapping her fur cloak more snugly over her shoulders and looking round her, anxious where to find her servants.

"'Tis late for you to be out this night, Gilda," he said, "and alone."

"I am only alone for the moment," she replied quietly. "Maria and Jakob and Piet are waiting for me at the north door. I did not know it would be closed."

"But why are you so late?"

"I stayed in church after the service."

"But why?" he insisted more impatiently.

"I could not pray during service," she said. "My thoughts wandered. I wanted to be alone for a few moments with God."

"Did you not know then that you were not alone?"

"No. Not at first."

"But ... afterwards...?"

"Your voice, Nicolaes, struck on my ear. I did not want to hear. I wanted to pray."

"Yet you listened?"

"No. I did not wish to listen."

"But you heard?"

She gave no actual reply, but he could see her profile straight and white, the curved lips firmly pressed together, the brow slightly puckered, and from the expression of her face and of her whole attitude, he knew that she had heard.

He drew in his breath, like one who has received a blow and has not yet realized how deeply it would hurt. His right hand which was resting on his hip tore at the cloth of his doublet, else mayhap it would already have wandered to the hilt of his sword.

He had expected it of course. Already when he saw Gilda gliding out of the shadows with that awed, tense expression on her face, he knew that she must have heard ... something at least ... something that had horrified her to the soul.

But now of course there was no longer any room for doubt. She had heard everything and the question was what that knowledge, lodged in her brain, might mean to him and to his friends.

Just for a moment the frozen, misty atmosphere took on a reddish hue, his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, a cold sweat broke out upon his forehead.

He looked around him furtively, fearfully, wondering whence came that hideous, insinuating whisper which was freezing the marrow in his bones. No doubt that had she spoken then, had she reproached or adjured, he would have found it impossible to regain mastery over himself. But she looked so unimpassioned, so still, so detached, that self-control came back to him, and for the moment she was safe.

"Will you tell me what you did hear?" he asked after awhile, with seeming calm, though he felt as if his words must choke him, and her answer strike him dead.

"I heard," she said, speaking very slowly and very quietly, "that the Lord of Stoutenburg has returned, and is trying to drag you and others into iniquity to further his own ambitious schemes."

"You wrong him there, Gilda. The Lord of Stoutenburg has certain wrongs to avenge which cry aloud to Heaven."

"We will not argue about that, Nicolaes," she said coldly. "Murder is hideous, call it what you will. The brand of Cain doth defame a man and carries its curse with it. No man can justify so dastardly a crime. 'Tis sophistry to suggest it."

"Then in sending Barneveld to the scaffold did the Prince of Orange call that curse upon himself, a curse which – please the God of vengeance! – will come home to him now at last."

"'Tis not for you, Nicolaes, to condemn him, who has heaped favours, kindness, bounties upon our father and upon us. 'Tis not for you, the Stadtholder's debtor for everything you are, for everything that you possess, 'tis not for you to avenge Barneveld's wrongs."

"'Tis not for you, my sister," he retorted hotly, "to preach to me your elder brother. I alone am responsible for mine actions, and have no account to give to any one."

"You owe an account of your actions to your father and to me, Nicolaes, since your dishonour will fall upon us too."

"Take care, Gilda, take care!" he exclaimed hoarsely, "you speak of things which are beyond your ken, but in speaking them you presume on my forbearance ... and on your sex."

"There is no one in sight," she said calmly, "you may strike me without fear. One crime more or less on your conscience will soon cease to trouble you."

"Gilda!" he cried with sudden passionate reproach.

At this involuntary cry – in which the expression of latent affection for her struggled with that of his rage and of his burning anxiety – all her own tender feelings for him, her womanliness, her motherly instincts were re-awakened in an instant. They had only been dormant for awhile, because of her horror of what she had heard. And that horror of a monstrous deed, that sense of shame that he – her brother – should be so ready to acquiesce in a crime had momentarily silenced the call of sisterly love. But this love once re-awakened was strong enough to do battle in her heart on his behalf: the tense rigidity of her attitude relaxed, her mouth softened, her eyes filled with tears. The next moment she had turned fully to him and was looking pleadingly into his face.

"Little brother," she murmured gently, "tell me that it is not true. That it was all a hideous dream."

He looked down on her for a moment. It pleased him to think that her affection for him was still there, that at any rate his personal safety might prove a potent argument against the slightest thought of indiscretion on her part. She tried to read his thoughts, but everything was dark around them both, the outline of his brow and mouth alone stood clearly out from the gloom: the expression of his eyes she could not fathom. But womanlike she was ready to believe that he would relent. It is so difficult for a woman to imagine that one whom she loves is really prone to evil. She loved this brother dearly, and did not grasp the fact that he had reached a point in his life when a woman's pleading had not the power to turn him from his purpose. She did not know how deeply he had plunged into the slough of conspiracy, and that the excitement of it had fired his blood to the exclusion of righteousness and of loyalty. She hoped – in the simplicity of her heart – that he was only misled, that evil counsels had only temporarily prevailed. Like a true woman she still saw the child in this brother who had grown to manhood by her side.

Therefore she appealed and she pleaded, she murmured tender words and made fond suggestions, all the while that his heart was hard to everything except to the one purpose which she was trying to thwart.

Not unkindly but quite firmly he detached her clinging arms from round his neck.

"Let us call it a dream, little sister," he said firmly, "and do you try and forget it."

"That I cannot, Nicolaes," she replied, "unless you will promise me..."

"To betray my friends?" he sneered.

"I would not ask you to do that: but you can draw back ... it is not too late... For our father's sake, and for mine, Nicolaes," she pleaded once more earnestly. "Oh think, little brother, think! It cannot be that you could countenance such a hideous crime, you who were always so loyal and so

brave! I remember when you were quite a tiny boy what contempt you had for little Jakob Steyn because he told lies, and how you thrashed Frans van Overstein because he ill-treated a dog... Little brother, when our father was ruined, penniless, after that awful siege of Haarlem, which is still a hideous memory to him, the Prince of Orange helped him with friendship and money to re-establish his commerce, he stood by him loyally, constantly, until more prosperous days dawned upon our house. Little brother, you have oft heard our father tell the tale, think ... oh, think of the blow you would be dealing him if you lent a hand to conspiracy against the Prince. Little brother, for our father's sake, for mine, do not let yourself be dragged into the toils of that treacherous Stoutenburg."

"You call him treacherous now, but you loved him once."

"It is because I loved him once," she rejoined earnestly, "that I call him treacherous now."

He made no comment on this, for he knew in his heart of hearts that what she said was true. He knew nothing of course of the events of that night in the early spring of the year when Gilda had sheltered and comforted the man who had so basely betrayed her; but for her ministrations to him then, when exhausted and half-starved he sought shelter under her roof, in her very room – he would not have lived for this further plotting and this further infamy, nor yet to drag her brother down with him into the abyss of his own disgrace.

Of this nocturnal visit Gilda had never spoken to anyone, not even to Nicolaes who she knew was Stoutenburg's friend, least of all to her father, whose wrath would have fallen heavily on her had he known that she had harboured a traitor in his house.

"Stoutenburg lied to me, Nicolaes," she now said, seeing that still her brother remained silent and morose, "he lied to me when he stole my love, only to cast it away from him as soon as ambition called him from my side. And as he lied then, so will he lie to you, little brother, he will steal your allegiance, use you for his own ends and cast you ruthlessly from him if he find you no longer useful. Yes, I did love him once," she continued earnestly, "when he thought of staining his hands with murder my love finally turned to contempt. This new infamy which he plots hath filled the measure of my hate. Turn from him, little brother, I do entreat you with my whole soul. He has been false to his God, false to his prince, false to me! he will be false to you!"

"It is too late, Gilda," he retorted sombrely, "even if I were so minded, which please God! I am not."

"It is never too late to draw back from such an abyss of shame."

"Be silent, girl," he said more roughly, angered that he was making no headway against her obstinacy. "God-verdomme! but I am a fool indeed to stand and parley here with you, when grave affairs wait upon my time. You talk at random and of things you do not understand: I had no mind to argue this matter out with you."

"I do not detain you, Nicolaes," she said simply, with a sigh of bitter disappointment. "If you will but call Maria and the men who wait at the north door, I can easily relieve you of my presence."

"Yes, and you can go home to your pots and pans, to your sewing and your linen-chest, and remember to hold your tongue, as a woman should do, for if you breathe of what you have heard, if you betray Stoutenburg who is my friend, it is me – your only brother – whom you will be sending to the scaffold."

"I would not betray you, Nicolaes," she said.

"Or any of my friends?"

"Or any of your friends."

"You swear it?" he urged.

"There is no need for an oath."

"Yes, there is a pressing need for an oath, Gilda," he retorted sternly. "My friends expect it of you, and you must pledge yourself to them, to forget all that you heard to-night and never to breathe of it to any living soul."

"I cannot swear," she replied, "to forget that which my memory will retain in spite of my will: nor would I wish to forget, because I mean to exert all the power I possess to dissuade you from this abominable crime, and because I mean to pray to God with all my might that He may prevent the crime from being committed."

"You may pray as much as you like," he said roughly, "but I'll not have you breathe a word of it to any living soul."

"My father has the right to know of the disgrace that threatens him."

"You would not tell him?" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"Not unless..."

"Unless what?"

"I cannot say. 'Tis all in God's hands and I do not know yet what my duty is. As you say I am only a woman, and my place is with my pots and pans, my sewing and my spindle. I have no right to have thoughts of mine own. Perhaps you are right, and in that case my father must indeed be the one to act. But this I do swear to you, Nicolaes, that before you stain your hand with the blood of one who, besides being your sovereign lord, is your father's benefactor and friend, I will implore God above, that my father and I may both die ere we see you and ourselves so disgraced."

Before he could detain her by word or gesture she had slipped past him and turned to walk quickly toward the façade of the cathedral. An outstanding piece of masonry soon hid her from his view. For the moment he had thoughts of following her. Nicolaes Beresteyn was not a man who liked being thwarted, least of all by a woman, and there was a sense of insecurity for him in what she had said at the last. His life and that of his friends lay in the hands of that young girl who had spoken some very hard words to him just now. He loved her as a brother should, and would not for his very life have seen her in any danger, but he had all a man's desire for mastery and hatred of dependence: she had angered and defied him, and yet remained in a sense his master.

He and his friends were dependent on her whim – he would not call it loyalty or sense of duty to be done – it was her whim that would hold the threads of a conspiracy which he firmly believed had the welfare of Holland and of religion for its object, and it was her whim that would hold the threat of the scaffold over himself and Stoutenburg and the others. The situation was intolerable.

He ground his heel upon the stone and muttered an oath under his breath. If only Gilda had been a man how simple would his course of action have been. A man can be coerced by physical means, but a woman ... and that woman his own sister!

It was hard for Nicolaes Beresteyn, to have to think the situation out calmly, dispassionately, to procrastinate, to let the matter rest at any rate until the next day. But this he knew that he must do. He felt that he had exhausted all the arguments, all the reasonings that were consistent with his own pride; and how could he hope to coerce her into oaths or promises of submission here in the open street and with Maria and Jakob and Piet close by – eavesdropping mayhap?

Gilda was obstinate and had always been allowed more latitude in the way of thinking things out for herself than was good for any woman; but Nicolaes knew that she would not take any momentous step in a hurry. She would turn the whole of the circumstances over in her mind and as she said do some praying too. What she would do afterwards he dared not even conjecture.

For the moment he was forced to leave her alone, and primarily he decided to let his friends know at once how the matter stood.

He found them waiting anxiously for his return. I doubt if they had spoken much during his absence. A chorus of laconic inquiry greeted him as soon as his firm step rang out upon the flagstones.

"Well?"

"She has heard everything," he said quietly, "but, she will not betray us. To this I pledge ye my word."

CHAPTER VI

THE COUNSELS OF PRUDENCE

Neither Stoutenburg nor any of the others had made reply to Beresteyn's firmly spoken oath. They were hard-headed Dutchmen, every one of them: men of action rather than men of words: for good or ill the rest of the world can judge them forever after by their deeds alone.

Therefore when the spectre of betrayal and of subsequent death appeared so suddenly before them they neither murmured nor protested. They could not in reason blame Beresteyn for his sister's presence in the cathedral this night, nor yet that her thoughts and feelings in the matter of the enmity between the Stadtholder and the Barneveld family did not coincide with their own.

Silently they walked across the vast and lonely cathedral and filed one by one out of the western door where Perk still held faithful watch. Stoutenburg, their leader, had his lodgings in a small house situate at the top of the Kleine Hout Straat, close to the well-known hostelry at the sign of the "Lame Cow." This latter was an hostelry of unimpeachable repute and thither did the six friends decide to go ere finally going home for the night.

It had been decided between them some time ago that those who were able to do so would show themselves in public as much as possible during the next few days, so as to ward off any suspicion of intrigue which their frequent consorting in secluded places might otherwise have aroused.

Out in the open they thought it best to disperse, electing to walk away two and two rather than in a compact group which might call forth the close attention of the night watchmen.

Stoutenburg linked his arm in that of Beresteyn.

"Let the others go on ahead," he said confidentially, "you and I, friend, must understand one another ere we part for this night."

Then as Beresteyn made no immediate reply, he continued calmly:

"This will mean hanging for the lot of us this time, Nicolaes!"

"I pray to God ..." exclaimed the other hoarsely.

"God will have nought to say in the matter, my friend," retorted Stoutenburg dryly, "'tis only the Stadtholder who will have his say, and do you think that he is like to pardon..."

"Gilda will never..."

"Oh, yes, she will," broke in Stoutenburg firmly; "be not deluded into thoughts of security. Gilda will think the whole of this matter over for four and twenty hours at the longest, after which, feeling herself in an impasse between her affection for you and her horror of me, she will think it her duty to tell your father all that she heard in the cathedral to-night."

"Even then," said Beresteyn, hotly, "my father would not send his only son to the gallows."

"Do you care to take that risk?" was the other man's calm retort.

"What can I do?"

"You must act decisively and at once, my friend," said Stoutenburg dryly, "an you do not desire to see your friends marched off to torture and the scaffold with yourself following in their wake."

"But how? how?" exclaimed Beresteyn.

His was by far the weaker nature of the two: easily led, easily swayed by a will stronger than his own. Stoutenburg wielded vast influence over him; he had drawn him into the net of his own ambitious schemes, and had by promises and cajolery won his entire allegiance. Now that destruction and death threatened Nicolaes through his own sister – whom he sincerely loved – he turned instinctively to Stoutenburg for help and for advice.

"It is quite simple," said the latter slowly. "Gilda must be temporarily made powerless to do us any harm."

"How?" reiterated Beresteyn helplessly.

"Surely you can think of some means yourself," retorted Stoutenburg somewhat impatiently. "Self-preservation is an efficient sharpener of wits as a rule, and your own life is in the hands of a woman now, my friend."

"You seem to forget that that woman is my sister. How can I conspire to do her bodily harm?"

"Who spake of bodily harm, you simpleton?" quoth Stoutenburg with a harsh laugh, "'tis you who seem to forget that if Gilda is your sister she is also the woman whom I love more than my life ... more than my ambition ... more even than my revenge..."

He paused a moment, for despite his usual self-control his passion at this moment threatened to master him. His voice rose harsh and quivering, and was like to attract the notice of passers-by. After a moment or two he conquered his emotion and said more calmly:

"Friend, we must think of our country and of our faith; we must think of the success of our schemes: and, though Gilda be dear to us both – infinitely dear to me – she must not be allowed to interfere with the great object which we hope to attain. Think out a way therefore of placing her in such a position that she cannot harm us: have her conveyed to some place where she can be kept a prisoner for a few days until I have accomplished what I have set out to do."

Then as Beresteyn said nothing, seeming to be absorbed in some new train of thought, Stoutenburg continued more persuasively:

"I would I could carry her away myself and hold her – a beloved prisoner – while others did my work for me. But that I cannot do: for 'twere playing the part of a coward and I have sworn before the altar of God that I would kill the Stadtholder with mine own hand. Nor would I have the courage so to offend her: for let me tell you this, Nicolaes, that soaring even above my most ambitious dreams, is the hope that when these have been realized, I may ask Gilda to share my triumph with me."

"Nor would I have the courage so to offend my sister ... my father," said Beresteyn. "You speak of carrying her off, and holding her a prisoner for eight days perhaps, or even a fortnight. How can I, her own brother, do that? 'Tis an outrage she would never forgive: my father would curse me ... disinherit me ... turn me out of house and home..."

"And will he not curse you now, when he knows – when to-morrow mayhap, Gilda will have told him that you, his son, have joined hands with the Lord of Stoutenburg in a conspiracy to murder the Prince of Orange – will he not disinherit you then? turn you out of house and home?"

"Hold on for mercy's sake," exclaimed Beresteyn, who bewildered by the terrible alternative thus put ruthlessly before him, felt that he must collect his thoughts, and must – for the moment at any rate – put away from him the tempter who insinuated thoughts of cowardice into his brain.

"I'll say no more, then," said Stoutenburg quietly, "think it all over, Nicolaes. My life, your own, those of all our friends are entirely in your hands: the welfare of the State, the triumph of our faith depend on the means which you will devise for silencing Gilda for a few brief days."

After which there was silence between the two men. Beresteyn walked more rapidly along, his fur-lined cloak wrapped closely round him, his arms folded tightly across his chest and his hands clenched underneath his cloak. Stoutenburg on the other hand was also willing to let the matter drop and to allow the subtle poison which he had instilled into his friend's mind to ferment and bring forth such thoughts as would suit his own plans.

He knew how to gauge exactly the somewhat vacillating character of Nicolaes Beresteyn, and had carefully touched every string of that highly nervous organization till he left it quivering with horror at the present and deathly fear for the future.

Gilda was a terrible danger, of that there could be no doubt. Nicolaes had realized this to the full: the instinct of self-preservation was strong in him; he would think over Stoutenburg's bold suggestion and would find a way how to act on it. And at the bottom of his tortuous heart Stoutenburg already cherished the hope that this new complication which had dragged Gilda into the net of his own intrigues would also ultimately throw her – a willing victim – into his loving arms.

CHAPTER VII

THREE PHILOSOPHERS AND THEIR FRIENDS

Whereupon Chance forged yet another link in the chain of a man's destiny.

I pray you follow me now to the tapperij of the "Lame Cow." I had not asked you to accompany me thither were it not for the fact that the "Lame Cow" situate in the Kleine Hout Straat not far from the Cathedral, was a well-ordered and highly respectable tavern, where indeed the sober merry-makers of Haarlem as well as the gay and gilded youth of the city were wont to seek both pleasure and solace.

You all know the house with its flat façade of red brick, its small windows and tall, very tall gabled roof that ends in a point high up above the front door. The tapperij is on your left as you enter. It is wainscotted with oak which was already black with age in the year 1623; above the wainscot the walls are white-washed, and Mynheer Beek, the host of the "Lame Cow," who is a pious man, has hung the walls round with scriptural texts, appropriate to his establishment, such as: "Eat, drink and be merry!" and "Drink thy wine with a merry heart!"

From which I hope that I have convinced you that the "Lame Cow" was an eminently orderly place of conviviality, where worthy burghers of Haarlem could drink ale and hot posset in the company of mevrrouws, their wives.

And it was to this highly praised and greatly respected establishment that three tired-out and very thirsty philosophers repaired this New Year's night, instead of attending the watch-night service at one of the churches.

Diogenes, feeling that three guilders still reposed safely in his wallet, declared his intention of continuing his career as a gentleman, and a gentleman of course could not resort to one of those low-class taverns which were usually good enough for foreign adventurers.

And thus did Fate have her will with him and brought him here this night.

Moreover the tap-room of the "Lame Cow" wore a very gay appearance always on New Year's night. It was noted for its clientèle on that occasion, for the good Rhenish wine which it dispensed, and for the gay sight engendered by the Sunday gowns of the burghers and their ladies who came here after service for a glass of wine and multifarious relish.

As the night was fine, despite the hard frost, Mynheer Beek expected to be unusually busy. Already he had arranged on the polished tables the rows of pewter platters heaped up with delicacies which he knew would be in great request when the guests would begin to arrive: smoked sausage garnished with horseradish, roasted liver and slabs of cheese.

The serving wenches with the sleeves of their linen shifts tucked well up above their round red arms, their stolid faces streaming with perspiration, were busy polishing tables that already were over-polished and making pewter mugs to shine that already shone with a dazzling radiance.

For the nonce the place was still empty and the philosophers when they entered were able to select the table at which they wished to sit – one near the hearth in which blazed gigantic logs, and at which they could stretch out their limbs with comfort.

At Diogenes' suggestion they all made hasty repairs to their disordered toilet, and re-adjusted the set of their collars and cuffs with the help of the small mirror that hung close by against the wall.

Three strange forms of a truth that were thus mirrored in turns.

Socrates with a hole in his head, now freshly bandaged with a bit of clean linen by the sympathetic hand of a serving maid: his hooked nose neatly washed till it shone like the pewter handle of a knife, his pointed cranium but sparsely furnished with lanky black hair peeping out above the bandage like a yellow wurzel in wrappings of paper. His arms and legs were unusually long and unusually thin, and he had long lean hands and long narrow feet, but his body was short and slightly

bent forward as if under the weight of his head, which also was narrow and long. His neck was like that of a stork that has been half-plucked, it rose from out the centre of his ruffled collar with a curious undulating movement, which suggested that he could turn it right round and look at the middle of his own back. He wore a brown doublet of duffle and brown trunks and hose, and boots that appeared to be too big even for his huge feet.

Beside him Pythagoras looked like the full stop in a semi-colon, for he was but little over five feet in height and very fat. His doublet of thick green cloth had long ago burst its buttons across his protuberent chest. His face, which was round as a full moon, was highly coloured even to the tip of his small upturned nose, and his forehead, crowned by a thick mass of red-brown hair which fell in heavy and lanky waves down to his eyebrows, was always wet and shiny. He had a habit of standing with legs wide apart, his abdomen thrust forward and his small podgy hands resting upon it. His eyes were very small and blinked incessantly. Below his double chin he wore a huge bow of starched white linen, which at this moment was sadly crumpled and stained, and his collar which also had seen more prosperous days was held together by a piece of string.

Like his friend Socrates, his trunk and hose were of worsted, and he wore high leather boots which reached well above the knee and looked to have been intended for a much taller person. The hat, with the tall sugar-loaf crown, which he had picked up after the fray in the Dam Straat, was much too small for his big round head. He tried, before the mirror, to adjust it at a becoming angle.

In strange contrast to these two worthies was their friend whom they called Diogenes. He himself, had you questioned him ever so closely, could not have told you from what ancestry or what unknown parent had come to him that air of swagger and of assurance which his avowed penury had never the power to subdue. Tall above the average, powerfully built and solidly planted on firm limbs he looked what he easily might have been, a gentleman to the last inch of him. The brow was fine and broad, the nose sensitive and well shaped, the mouth a perfect expression of gentle irony. The soft brown hair, abundant and unruly, lent perhaps a certain air of untamed wildness to the face, whilst the upturned moustache and the tiny tuft below the upper lip accentuated the look of devil-may-care independence which was the chief characteristic of the mouth.

But the eyes were the most remarkable feature of all. They shone with an unconquerable merriment, they twinkled and sparkled, and smiled and mocked, they winked and they beckoned. They were eyes to which you were obliged to smile in response, eyes that made you laugh if you felt ever so sad, eyes that jested even before the mouth had spoken, and the mouth itself was permanently curved into a smile.

Unlike his two companions, Diogenes was dressed not only with scrupulous care but with a show of elegance. His doublet though well-worn was fashioned of fine black cloth, the slashed sleeves still showed the remnants of gold embroidery, whilst the lace of his pleated collar was of beautiful design.

Having completed their toilet the three friends sat at their table and sipped their ale and wine in comparative silence for a time. Socrates, weary with his wound, soon fell asleep with his arms stretched out before him and his head resting in the bend of his elbow.

Pythagoras too nodded in his chair; but Diogenes remained wide awake, and no doubt Mynheer Beek's wine gave him pleasing thoughts, for the merry look never fled from his eyes.

Half an hour later you would scarce have recognised the tapperij from its previous orderly silence, for at about one o'clock it began to fill very fast. Mynheer Beek's guests were arriving.

It was still bitterly cold and they all came into the warm room clapping their hands together and stamping the frozen snow off their feet, loudly demanding hot ale or mulled wine, to be supplemented later on by more substantial fare.

The two serving wenches were more busy, hotter and more profusely streaming with moisture than they had ever been before. It was "Käthi here!" and "Luise, why don't you hurry?" all over the tapperij now; and every moment the noise became louder and more cheery.

Every corner of the low, raftered room was filled to over-flowing with chairs and tables. People sat everywhere where a perch was to be found – on the corners of the tables and on the window sill and many sat on the floor who could not find room elsewhere. The women sat on the men's knees, and many of them had children in their arms as well. For indeed, on watch-night, room had to be found for every one who wanted to come in; no one who wanted to drink and to make merry must be left to wander out in the cold.

A veritable babel of tongues made the white-washed walls echo from end to end, for Haarlem now was a mightily prosperous city, and there were a great many foreign traders inside her walls, and some of these had thought to make merry this night in the famed tap-room of the "Lame Cow." French merchants with their silks, English ones with fine cloths and paper, then there were the Jew dealers from Frankfurt and Amsterdam, and the Walloon cattle drovers from Flanders.

Here and there the splendid uniform of a member of one of the shooting guilds struck a note of splendour among the drabs and russets of worsted doublets and the brilliant crimson or purple sashes gleamed in the feeble light of the tallow candles which spluttered and flickered in their sconces.

Then amongst them all were the foreign mercenaries, from Italy or Brabant or Germany, or from God knows where, loud of speech, aggressive in appearance, carrying swords and wearing spurs, filling the place with their swagger and their ribaldry.

They had come to the Netherlands at the expiration of the truce with Spain, offering to sell their sword and their skin to the highest bidder. They seemed all to be friends and boon companions together, called each other queer, fantastic names and shouted their rough jests to one another across the width of the room. Homeless, shiftless, thriftless, they knew no other names save those which chance or the coarse buffoonery of their friends had endowed them with. There was a man here tonight who was called Wry-face and another who went by the name of Gutter-rat. Not one amongst them mayhap could have told you who his father was or who his mother, nor where he himself had first seen the light of day; but they all knew of one another's career, of one another's prowess in the field at Prague or Ghent or Magdeburg, and they formed a band of brothers – offensive and defensive – which was the despair of the town-guard whenever the law had to be enforced against anyone of them.

It was at the hour when Mynheer Beek was beginning to hope that his guests would soon bethink themselves of returning home and leaving him to his own supper and bed, that a party of these worthies made noisy interruption into the room. They brought with them an atmosphere of boisterous gaiety with their clanking spurs and swords, their loud verbiage and burly personality.

"Hech da!" yelled one of these in a stentorian voice, "whom have we there, snug and cosy in the warmest corner of this hole but our three well-beloved philosophers. Diogenes, old compeer," he shouted still louder than before, "is there room in your tub for your friends?"

"Plenty round this table, O noble Gutter-rat," shouted Diogenes in joyful response, "but let me give you warning that space as well as common funds are running short, and that every newcomer who wants to sit must stand the others a draught of ale apiece; that is the price of a corner of this bench on which ye may sit if ye have a mind."

"Done with you," agreed all the newcomers lustily, and with scant ceremony they pushed their way through the closely packed throng.

They took no notice of the mutterings of more sober customers, angered at seeing their mantles crushed or feeling their toes trodden on. It suddenly seemed as if the whole place belonged to these men and that the peaceful burghers of the city were only here on suffrance.

The three philosophers had already called for some old Rhenish wine on draught. Käthi and Luise brought pewter jugs and more goblets along. Soon Gutter-rat and his friends were installed at the table, squeezed against one another on the narrow wooden benches. Pythagoras had already rolled off his corner seat and was sitting on the floor; Diogenes was perched on the corner of the table.

Socrates roused by the noise, opened a pair of heavy eyes and blinked round him in astonishment. Gutter-rat deposited his bulky form close beside him and brought his large and grimy hand down on the shoulder of the sleepy philosopher.

"Hello, wise Socrates," he cried in his rough, husky voice, "I hope you have been having pleasant dreams."

"No, I have not," growled Socrates laconically.

"Take no heed of him," laughed Diogenes, "he has a hole in his head through which his good temper has been oozing out bit by bit. And yet if you'll all believe me he has been reposing there so peacefully and snoring so lustily that I thought he must be dreaming of Heaven and the last trumpet call."

"I was dreaming of all the chances which Pythagoras and I have missed to-night owing to your d – d nonsense," said Socrates, who was more sulky now than he had been before he went to sleep.

Pythagoras uttered a prolonged sigh and gazed meditatively down into the depths of his mug of ale. Gutter-rat and the others looked inquiringly from one philosopher to the other.

"Diogenes been at his tricks again?" asked Gutter-rat.

Socrates and Pythagoras nodded in their gloomy response.

"Gallantry, eh? some beauteous damsel, to succour whom we throw our life, our best chances away?" continued the other with ironical sympathy, the while Diogenes' entire face was wreathed in one huge, all-embracing smile. Gutter-rat admonished him with solemn voice and uplifted finger.

"Conduct unworthy a philosopher," he said.

"If he had only injured himself," growled Socrates.

"And let us enjoy the gifts which a beneficent goddess was ready to pour into our lap," added Pythagoras dulcetly from the floor.

"Let's hear the story," concluded Gutter-rat.

The others clapped their mugs against the table-top and shouted: "The story! the story!" to the accompaniment of din that drowned all other noises in the room.

Pythagoras from his lowly position began his narrative in a faint, injured tone of voice. He related the incidents of this night from the moment when the chance of possessing oneself with but little trouble of a tulip bulb worth fifteen thousand florins was so airily flouted, down to the awful moment when a young and beauteous lady made offers of influence and of money which were equally airily refused.

Gutter-rat and the others listened attentively. They specially relished the exciting incidents connected with the affray in Dam Straat, the breaking of Jan Tiele's nose and the dispersal of the mob with the aid of a lighted torch.

"Bravo! splendid!" they shouted at intervals and loudly expressed their regret at having missed such furious fun.

Socrates threw in a word or two now and then, when Pythagoras did not fully explain his own valorous position in the fight, but Diogenes said nothing at all; he allowed his comrade to tell the tale his own way; the recollection of it seemed to afford him vast amusement for he hummed a lively tune to himself all the while.

Pythagoras now was mimicking his friend, throwing into this performance all the disgust which he felt.

"Raise thy hand to my lips, mejuffrouw," he said mincing his words, "momentarily I have not the use of mine own."

His round, beady eyes appealed to his listeners for sympathy, and there is no doubt that he got that in plenty. Gutter-rat more especially highly disapproved of the dénouement of what might have proved a lucrative adventure.

"The rich jongejuffrouw might even have fallen in love with you," he said sternly to Diogenes, "and endowed you with her father's wealth and influence."

"That's just my complaint," said Pythagoras, "but no! what else do you think he said earlier in the evening?"

"Well?"

"To-night we'll behave like gentlemen," quoted the other with ever-growing disgust, "and not like common thieves."

"Why to-night?" queried Gutter-rat in amazement. "Why more especially to-night?"

Pythagoras and Socrates both shrugged their shoulders and suggested no explanation. After which there was more vigorous clapping of mugs against the table-top and Diogenes was loudly summoned to explain.

"Why to-night? why to-night?" was shouted at him from every side.

Diogenes' face became for one brief moment quite grave – quite grave be it said, but for his eyes which believe me could not have looked grave had they tried.

"Because," he said at last when the shouts around him had somewhat subsided, "I had three guilders in my wallet, because my night's lodging is assured for the next three nights and because my chief creditor has died like a hero. Therefore, O comrades all! I could afford the luxury."

"What luxury?" sneered Gutter-rat in disgust, "to refuse the patronage of an influential burgher of this city, backed by the enthusiasm of the beauteous damsel, his daughter?"

"To refuse all patronage, good comrade," assented Diogenes with emphasis.

"Bah! for twenty-four hours!.."

"Yes! for twenty-four hours, friend Gutter-rat, while those three florins last and I have a roof over my head for which I have already paid ... I can for those four and twenty hours afford the luxury of doing exactly and only what it pleases me to do."

He threw up his head and stretched out his massive limbs with a gesture of infinite satisfaction, his merry mocking glance sweeping over the company of watch-night revellers, out-at-elbows ragamuffins, and sober burghers with their respectable vrouws, all of whom were gaping on him open-mouthed.

"For four and twenty hours, my dear Gutter-rat," he continued after a long sigh of contentment, "that is during this day which has just dawned and the night which must inevitably follow it, I am going to give myself the luxury of speaking only when I choose and of being dumb if the fancy so takes me ... while my three florins last and I know that I need not sleep under the stars, I shall owe my fealty only to my whim – I shall dream when and what I like, sing what I like, walk in company or alone. For four and twenty hours I need not be the ivy that clings nor the hose that is ragged at the knee. I shall be at liberty to wear my sash awry, my shoes unbuckled, my hat tilted at an angle which pleases me best. Above all, O worthy rat of the gutter, I need not stoop for four and twenty hours one inch lower than I choose, or render aught to Cæsar for Cæsar will have rendered naught to me. On this the first day of the New Year there is no man or woman living who can dictate to me what I shall do, and to-night in the lodgings for which I have paid, when I am asleep I can dream that I am climbing up the heights toward a mountain top which mayhap doth not quite stretch as far as the clouds, but which I can reach alone. To-day and to-night I am a man and not a bit of ribbon that flutters at the breath of man or woman who has paid for the fluttering with patronage."

Gradually as he spoke and his fresh young voice, sonorous with enthusiasm rang clearly from end to end of the raftered room, conversation, laughter, bibulous songs were stilled and every one turned to look at the speaker, wondering who he could be. The good burghers of Haarlem had no liking for the foreign mercenaries for whom they professed vast contempt because of their calling, and because of the excesses which they committed at the storming of these very walls, which event was within the memory of most. Therefore, though they were attracted by the speaker, they were disgusted to find that he belonged to that rabble; but the women thought that he was goodly to look upon, with those merry, twinkling eyes of his, and that atmosphere of light-heartedness and a gaiety

which he diffused around him. Some of the men who were there and who professed knowledge in such matters, declared that this man's speech betrayed him for an Englishman.

"I like not the race," said a pompous man who sat with wife and kindred round a table loaded with good things. "I remember the English Leicester and his crowd, men of loose morals and doubtful piety; braggarts and roisterers we all thought them. This man is very like some of them in appearance."

"Thou speakest truly, O wise citizen of this worthy republic," said Diogenes, boldly answering the man's low-spoken words, "my father was one of the roisterers who came in English Leicester's train. An Englishman he, of loose morals and doubtful piety no doubt, but your sound Dutch example and my mother's Dutch blood – Heaven rest her soul – have both sobered me since then."

He looked round at the crowd of faces, all of which were now turned toward him, kindly faces and angry ones, contemptuous eyes and good-natured ones, and some that expressed both compassion and reproof.

"By the Lord," he said, and as he spoke he threw back his head and burst into a loud and prolonged fit of laughter, "but I have never in my life seen so many ugly faces before."

There was a murmur and many angry words among the assembly. One or two of the men half rose from their seats, scowling viciously and clenching their fists. Master Beek perspiring with anxiety saw these signs of a possible fray. The thought drove him well-nigh frantic. An affray in his establishment on New Year's morning! it was unthinkable! He rushed round to his customers with a veritable dictionary of soothing words upon his tongue.

"Gentlemen! gentlemen," he entreated, "I beg of you to calm yourselves... I humbly beseech you to pay no heed to these men..."

"Plephsurk! Insolent rabble!" quoth a corpulent gentleman who was crimson with wrath.

"Yes, mynheer, yes, yes," stammered Beek meekly, "but they are foreigners ... they ... they do not understand our Dutch ways ... but they mean no harm ... they..."

Some of the younger men were not easily pacified.

"Throw them out, Beek," said one of them curtly.

"They make the place insufferable with their bragging and their insolence," muttered another.

Diogenes and his friends could not help but see these signs of latent storm, and Mynheer Beek's feeble efforts at pacifying his wrathful guests. Diogenes had laughed long and loudly, now he had to stop in order to wipe his eyes which were streaming; then quite casually he drew Bucephalus from its scabbard and thoughtfully examined its blade.

Almost simultaneously the fraternity of merry-makers at his table also showed a sudden desire to examine the blade of their swords and immediately half a dozen glints of steel caught the reflection of tallow candles.

I would not assert that order was restored because of these unconscious gestures on the part of the insolent rabble aforesaid, but certain it is that within the next few seconds decorum once more prevailed as if magic had called it forth.

Mynheer Beek heaved a sigh of relief.

"All that you said just now was well spoken, sir," broke in a firm voice which proceeded from a group of gentlemen who sat at a table next to the one occupied by the philosophers and their friends, "but 'twere interesting to hear what you propose doing on the second day of this New Year."

Diogenes was in no hurry to reply. The man who had just spoken sat directly behind him, and Bucephalus – so it seemed – still required his close attention. When he had once more replaced his faithful friend into its delicately wrought scabbard he turned leisurely round and from the elevated position which he still occupied on the corner of the table he faced his interlocutor.

"What I propose doing?" he quoth politely.

"Why yes. You said just now that for four and twenty hours you were free to dream and to act as you will, but how will it be to-morrow?"

"To-morrow, sir," rejoined Diogenes lightly, "I shall be as poor in pocket as the burghers of Haarlem are in wits, and then..."

"Yes? and then?"

"Why then, sir, I shall once more become an integral portion of that rabble to which you and your friends think no doubt that I rightly belong. I shall not have one silver coin in my wallet and in order to obtain a handful I shall be ready to sell my soul to the devil, my skin to the Stadtholder..."

"And your honour, sir?" queried the other with a sneer, "to whom will you sell that precious guerdon to-morrow?"

"To you, sir," retorted Diogenes promptly, "an you are short of the commodity."

An angry word rose to the other man's lips, but his eyes encountered those of his antagonist and something in the latter's look, something in the mocking eyes, the merry face, seemed to disarm him and to quench his wrath. He even laughed good-humouredly and said:

"Well spoken, sir. You had me fairly there with the point of your tongue. No doubt you are equally skilful with the point of your rapier..."

"It shall be at your service after to-morrow, sir," rejoined Diogenes lightly.

"You live by the profession of arms, sir? No offence, 'tis a noble calling, though none too lucrative I understand."

"My wits supply, sir, what my sword cannot always command."

"You are ambitious?"

"I told my friends just now wherein lay my ambition."

"Money – an independent competence ... so I understand. But surely at your age, and – if you will pardon mine outspokenness – with your looks, sir, women or mayhap one woman must play some part in your dreams of the future."

"Women, sir," retorted Diogenes dryly, "should never play a leading rôle in the comedy of a philosopher's life. As a means to an end – perhaps ... the final dénouement..."

"Always that one aim I see – a desire for complete independence which the possession of wealth alone can give."

"Always," replied the other curtly.

"And beyond that desire, what is your chief ambition, sir?"

"To be left alone when I have no mind to talk," said Diogenes with a smile which was so pleasant, so merry, so full of self-deprecating irony that it tempered the incivility of his reply.

Again the other bit his lip, checking an angry word; for some unexplained reason he appeared determined not to quarrel with this insolent young knave. The others stared at their friend in utter astonishment.

"What fly hath bitten Beresteyn's ear?" whispered one of them under his breath. "I have never known him so civil to a stranger or so unwilling to take offence."

Certainly the other man's good humour did not seem to have abated one jot; after an imperceptible moment's pause, he rejoined with perfect suavity:

"You do not belie your name, sir, I heard your friends calling you Diogenes, and I feel proud that you should look on me as Alexander and call on me to stand out of your sunshine."

"I crave your pardon, sir," said Diogenes somewhat more seriously, "my incivility is unwarrantable in the face of your courtesy. No doubt it had its origin in the fact that like my namesake I happened to want nothing at the moment. To-morrow, sir, an you are minded to pay for my services, to ask for my sword, my soul or my wits, and in exchange will offer me the chance of winning a fortune or of marrying a wife who is both rich and comely, why sir, I shall be your man, and will e'en endeavour to satisfy you with the politeness of my speech and the promptness and efficiency of my deeds. To-morrow, sir, you and the devil will have an equal chance of purchasing my soul for a few thousand guilders, my wits for a paltry hundred, my skin for a good supper and a downy bed – to-morrow the desire will seize me once again to possess wealth at any cost, and my friends here

will have no cause to complain of my playing a part which becomes a penniless wastrel like myself so ill – the part of a gentleman. Until then, sir, I bid you good-night. The hour is late and Mynheer Beek is desirous of closing this abode of pleasure. As for me, my lodgings being paid for I do not care to leave them unoccupied."

Whereupon he rose and to Mynheer Beek – who came to him with that same ubiquitous smile which did duty for all the customers of the "Lame Cow" – he threw the three silver guilders which the latter demanded in payment for the wine and ale supplied to the honourable gentleman: then as he met the mocking glance of his former interlocutor he said with a recrudescence of gaiety:

"I still have my lodgings, gentle sir, and need not sell my soul or my skin until after I have felt a gnawing desire for breakfast."

With a graceful flourish of his plumed hat he bowed to the assembled company and walked out of the tap-room of the "Lame Cow" with swagger that would have befitted the audience chamber of a king.

In his wake followed the band of his boon companions, they too strode out of the place with much jingle of steel and loud clatter of heavy boots and accoutrements. They laughed and talked loudly as they left and gesticulated with an air of independence which once more drew upon them the wrathful looks and contemptuous shrugs of the sober townsfolk.

Diogenes alone as he finally turned once again in the doorway encountered many a timid glance levelled at him that were soft and kindly. These glances came from the women, from the young and from the old, for women are strange creatures of whims and of fancies, and there was something in the swaggering insolence of that young malapert that made them think of breezy days upon the sea-shore, of the song of the soaring lark, of hyacinths in bloom and the young larches on the edge of the wood.

And I imagine that their sluggish Dutch blood yielded to these influences and was greatly stirred by memories of youth.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LODGINGS WHICH WERE PAID FOR

And once again Chance set to with a will and forged yet another link in that mighty chain which she had in hand.

For was it not in the natural course of things that the three philosophers, weary and thirsty as they were, should go and seek solace and material comfort under the pleasing roof of the "Lame Cow" – which as I remarked before was reputed one of the best conducted hostelries in Haarlem, and possessing a cellar full of wines and ales which had not its equal even in Amsterdam.

And was it not equally natural since the Lord of Stoutenburg lodged not far from that self-same hostelry – again I repeat one of the soberest in Haarlem – that his friends should choose to join him in the tap-room there ere parting from one another on this eventful night.

Stoutenburg and his family were but little known in these parts and the hue and cry after the escaped traitor had somewhat abated these few months past: moreover he was well disguised with beard and cloak and he kept a broad-brimmed hat pulled well down over his brow. On watch-night too, the burghers and their vrouws as well as the civic and military dignitaries of the town had plenty to do to think on their own enjoyment and the entertainment of their friends: they certes were not on the look-out for conspiracies and dangerous enemies within their gates.

Stoutenburg had sat well screened from general observation within a dark recess of the monumental fireplace. Nicolaes Beresteyn, the most intimate of all his friends, sat close to him, but neither of them spoke much. Beresteyn was exceptionally moody; he appeared absorbed in thought and hardly gave answer to those who attempted to draw him into conversation. Stoutenburg, on the other hand affected a kind of grim humour, and made repeated allusions to scaffold or gallows as if he had already wholly resigned himself to an inevitable fate.

The others sipped their mulled wine and tried to cheat themselves out of the burning anxiety which Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn's presence in the cathedral had awakened in their hearts. They had made great efforts not to seem pre-occupied and to be outwardly at least as gay as any of the other watch-night revellers in the room.

But with their thoughts fixed upon that vision of awhile ago – a woman appearing before them within twenty paces of the spot where death to the Stadtholder had just been loudly proclaimed amongst them – with that vision fixed upon their minds, they found light conversation and ordinary manner very difficult to keep up.

The peroration of the young adventurer had proved a welcome diversion: it had immediately aroused Stoutenburg's interest. He it was who first drew Beresteyn's attention to it, and he again who checked the angry words which more than once rose to his friend's lips at the insolent attitude affected by the knave.

And now when the latter finally swaggered out of the room it was Stoutenburg who made a sign to Beresteyn and then immediately rose to go.

Beresteyn paid his account and went out too, in the wake of his friend.

With the advent of the small morning hours the snow once more began to fall in large sparse flakes that lay thick and glistening where they fell. At the end of the Kleine Hout Straat where the two men presently found themselves, the feeble light of a street lamp glimmered through this white fluttering veil: with its help the group of foreign mercenaries could be dimly seen in the distance as they took leave of one another.

The tall form of Diogenes, crowned with his plumed hat, was easily distinguishable amongst them. He with his two special friends, fat Pythagoras and lean Socrates, remained standing for a few

moments at the corner of the street after the others had departed: then only did the three of them turn and walk off in the direction of the Oude Gracht.

For some reason, as unexplainable as that which had guided their conduct at the "Lame Cow," Beresteyn and Stoutenburg, quite unconscious of the cold, elected to follow.

Was it not Chance that willed it so? Chance who was busy forging a chain and who had need of these two men's extraordinary interest in a nameless adventurer in order to make the links of that chain fit as neatly as she desired.

At the bottom of the Kleine Hout Straat, where it abuts on the Oude Gracht, the three philosophers had again paused, obviously this time in order to take leave of one another. The houses here were of a peculiarly woe-begone appearance, with tiny windows which could not possibly have allowed either air or light to penetrate within, and doors that were left ajar and were creaking on their hinges, showing occasional glimpses of dark unventilated passages beyond and of drifts of snow heaped up against the skirting of the worm-eaten, broken-down wooden floors. They were miserable lodging-houses of flimsy construction and low rentals, which the close proximity of the sluggish canal rendered undesirable.

The ground floor was in most instances occupied by squalid-looking shops, from which fetid odours emanated through the chinks and cracks of the walls. The upper rooms were let out as night-lodgings to those who were too poor to afford better quarters.

Diogenes with all his swagger and his airs of an out-at-elbows gentleman evidently was one of those, for he was now seen standing on the threshold of one of these dilapidated houses and his two friends were finally bidding him good-night.

By tacit consent Beresteyn and Stoutenburg drew back further into the shadow of the houses opposite. There appeared to be some understanding between these two men, an understanding anent a matter of supremely grave import, which caused them to stand here on the watch with feet buried in the snow that lay thick in the doorways, silently taking note of every word spoken and of every act that occurred on the other side of this evil-smelling street.

There seemed to be no need for speech between them; for the nonce each knew that the other's thoughts were running in the same groove as his own; and momentarily these thoughts were centred into a desire to ascertain definitely if it was the tallest and youngest of those three knaves over there who lodged in that particular house.

It was only when the fat man and the lean one had finally turned away and left their comrade on the doorstep that the watchers appeared satisfied and nodding silently to one another made ready to go home. They had turned their steps once more toward the more salubrious and elegant quarter of the city, and had gone but a few steps in that direction when something occurred behind them which arrested their attention and caused them to look back once more.

The Something was a woman's cry, pitiful in the extreme: not an unusual sound in the streets of a prosperous city surely, and one which under ordinary circumstances would certainly not have aroused Stoutenburg's or Beresteyn's interest. But the circumstances were not ordinary; the cry came from the very spot where the two men had last seen the young stranger standing in the doorway of his lodgings and the appeal was obviously directed toward him.

"Kind sir," the woman was saying in a quavering voice, "half a guilder I entreat you for the love of Christ."

"Half a guilder, my good woman," Diogenes said in response, "'Tis a fortune to such as I. I have not a kreutzer left in my wallet, 'pon my honour!"

Whereupon the two men who watched this scene from the opposite side of the street saw that the woman fell on her knees, and that beside her there stood an old man who made ready to follow her example.

"It's no use wearing out your stockings on this snow-covered ground, my good girl," said Diogenes good-humouredly. "All the kneeling in the world will not put half a guilder into my pocket nor apparently into yours."

"And father and I must sleep under the canal bridge and it is so bitterly cold," the woman moaned more feebly.

"Distinctly an uncomfortable place whereat to spend a night," rejoined the philosopher, "I have slept there myself before now, so I know."

Seemingly he made an attempt to turn incontinently on his heel, for the woman put out her hands and held on to his cloak.

"Father is crippled with ague, kind sir, he will die if he sleeps out there to-night," she cried.

"I am afraid he will," said Diogenes blandly.

In the meanwhile, Pythagoras and Socrates, who evidently had not gone very far, returned in order to see what was going on, on their friend's doorstep. It was Pythagoras who first recognized the wench.

"Thunder and lightning," he exclaimed, "'tis the Papist!"

"Which Papist?" queried Diogenes.

"Yes, gentle sirs," said the woman piteously, "you rescued me nobly this evening from that awful, howling mob. My father and I were able to go to midnight mass in peace. May God reward you all. But," she added naïvely, "'twas no good preventing those horrid men from killing us, if we are to die from cold and hunger under the bridge of the canal."

All of which was not incomprehensible to the two men on the watch who had heard a graphic account of the affray in Dam Straat as it was told by Pythagoras in the tap-room of the "Lame Cow." And they both drew a little nearer so as not to lose a word of the scene which they were watching with ever growing interest. Neither of them attempted to interfere in it, however, though Beresteyn at any rate could have poured many a guilder in the hands of those two starving wretches, without being any the poorer himself and though he was in truth not a hard-hearted man.

"The wench is right," now said Diogenes firmly, "the life which we helped to save, we must not allow to be frittered away. I talked of stockings, girl," he added lightly, "but I see thy feet are bare... Brrr! I freeze when I look at thee..."

"For a quarter guilder father and I could find a lodging..."

"But Dondersteen!" he exclaimed, "did I not tell thee that I have not one kreutzer in my wallet, and unless my friends can help thee..."

"Diogenes thou speakest trash," interposed Pythagoras softly.

"We must both starve of cold this night," moaned the woman in despair.

"Nay ye shall not!" said Diogenes with sudden decision. "There is a room in this very house which has been paid for three nights in advance. Go to it, wench, 'tis at the very top of the stairs, crawl thither as fast as thou canst, dragging thy ramshackle parent in thy wake. What ho there!" he shouted at the top of his ringing voice, "what ho my worthy landlord! What ho!"

And with his powerful fists he began pounding against the panels of the door which swung loosely under the heavy blows.

Stoutenburg and Beresteyn drew yet a little nearer: they were more deeply interested than ever in all that was going on outside this squalid lodging house.

The three philosophers were making a sufficiency of noise to wake half the street and within a very few minutes they succeeded in their purpose. Through one or two of the narrow frames overhead heads appeared enveloped in shawls or cloaks, and anon the landlord of the house came shuffling down the passage, carrying a lighted, guttering taper.

The two silent watchers could not see this man, but they could hear him grumbling and scolding audibly in short jerky sentences which he appeared to throw somewhat tentatively at his rowdy lodger.

"Late hour of the night," they heard him muttering. "New Year's morning... Respectable house ... noise to attract the town guard..."

"Hadst thou turned out of thy bed sooner, O well-beloved lord of this abode of peace," said Diogenes cheerily, "there would have been less noise outside its portals. Had I not loved thee as I do, I would not have wakened thee from thy sleep, but would have acted in accordance with my rights and without bringing to thy ken a matter which would vastly have astonished thee in the morning."

The man continued to mutter, more impatiently this time:

"New Year's morning ... respectable citizen ... work to do in the morning ... undesirable lodgers..."

"All lodgers are desirable who pay for their lodging, O wise landlord," continued Diogenes imperturbably, "I have paid thee for mine, for three nights from this day and I herewith desire thee to place my palatial residence at the disposal of this jongeuffrouw and of mynheer her father."

The man's mutterings became still more distinct.

"Baggage ... how do I know?.. not bound to receive them..."

"Nay! but thou art a liar, Master Landlord," quoth Diogenes still speaking quite pleasantly, "for the lodgings being mine, I have the right to receive in them anybody whom I choose. Therefore now do I give thee the option, either to show my guests straightway and with meticulous politeness into my room, or to taste the power and weight of my boot in the small of thy back and the hardness of my sword-hilt across thy shoulders."

This time the man's mutterings became inaudible. Nicolaes Beresteyn and Stoutenburg could only guess what was passing in the narrow corridor of the house opposite. The one moment there was a heart-rending howl, which suggested that the landlord's obduracy had lasted a few moments too long for the impatient temper of a philosopher; but the howl was not repeated and soon Diogenes' clear voice rang out lustily again:

"There! I knew that gentle persuasion would prevail. Dearly beloved landlord, now I pray thee guide the jongeuffrouw and mynheer her father to my sleeping chamber. It is at thy disposal, wench, for three nights," he added airily, "make the most of it; and if thou hast aught to complain of my friend the landlord, let me know. I am always to be found at certain hours of the day within the congenial four walls of the 'Lame Cow.' Good-night then and pleasant dreams."

What went on after that the watchers could, of course, not see. The wench and the old man had disappeared inside the house, where, if they had a spark of gratitude in them, they would undoubtedly be kneeling even now at the feet of their whimsical benefactor.

The next moment the interested spectators of this stirring little scene beheld the three philosophers once more standing together at the corner of the street under the feebly flickering lamp and the slowly falling snow; the door of the lodging-house had been slammed to behind them and the muffled heads had disappeared from out the framework of the windows above.

"And now, perhaps you will tell us what you are going to do," said Pythagoras in flute-like tones.

"There is not a bed vacant in the dormitory where I sleep," said Socrates.

"Nor would I desire to sleep in one of those kennels fit only for dogs which I cannot imagine how you both can stomach," quoth Diogenes lightly; "the close proximity of Pythagoras and yourself and of all those who are most like you in the world would chase pleasing sleep from mine eyelids. I prefer the Canal."

"You cannot sleep out of doors in this h – l of a cold night," growled Socrates.

"And I cannot go back to the 'Lame Cow' for I have not a kreutzer left in my wallet wherewith to pay for a sip."

"Then what the d – l are you going to do?" reiterated Pythagoras plaintively.

"I have a friend," said Diogenes after a slight pause.

"Hm?" was the somewhat dubious comment on this fairly simple statement.

"He will give me breakfast early in the morning."

"Hm!"

"'Tis but a few hours to spend in lonely communion with nature."

"Hm!"

"The cathedral clock has struck three, at seven my good Hals will ply me with hot ale and half his hunk of bread and cheese."

"Hals?" queried Socrates.

"Frans Hals," replied Diogenes; "he paints pictures and contrives to live on the proceeds. If his wife does not happen to throw me out, he will console me for the discomforts of this night."

"Bah!" ejaculated Pythagoras in disgust, "a painter of pictures!"

"And a brave man when he is sober."

"With a scold for a wife! Ugh! what about your playing the part of a gentleman now?"

"The play was short, O wise Pythagoras," retorted Diogenes with imperturbable good humour, "the curtain has already come down upon the last act. I am once more a knave, a merchant ready to flatter the customer who will buy his wares: Hech there, sir, my lord! what are your needs? My sword, my skin, they are yours to command! so many guilders, sir, and I will kill your enemy for you, fight your battles, abduct the wench that pleases you. So many guilders! and when they are safely in my pocket I can throw my glove in your face lest you think I have further need of your patronage."

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