

CHAPTER XXXV. UNDER THE WINDOW.

I SET the position of the harbor by my pocket-compass, and then followed the course of the first street that lay before me.

On either side, as I advanced, the desolate old houses frowned on me. There were no lights in the windows, no lamps in the streets. For a quarter of an hour at least I penetrated deeper and deeper into the city, without encountering a living creature on my way--with only the starlight to guide me. Turning by chance into a street broader than the rest, I at last saw a moving figure, just visible ahead, under the shadows of the houses. I quickened my pace, and found myself following a man in the dress of a peasant. Hearing my footsteps behind him, he turned and looked at me. Discovering that I was a stranger, he lifted a thick cudgel that he carried with him, shook it threateningly, and called to me in his own language (as I gathered by his actions) to stand back. A stranger in Eukhuizen at that time of night was evidently reckoned as a robber in the estimation of this citizen! I had learned on the voyage, from the captain of the boat, how to ask my way in Dutch, if I happened to be by myself in a strange town; and I now repeated my lesson, asking my way to the fishing office of Messrs. Van Brandt. Either my foreign accent made me unintelligible, or the man's suspicions disinclined him to trust me. Again he shook his cudgel, and again he signed to me to stand back. It was useless to persist. I crossed to the opposite side of the way, and soon afterward lost sight of him under the portico of a house.

Still following the windings of the deserted streets, I reached what I at first supposed to be the end of the town.

Before me, for half a mile or more (as well as I could guess), rose a tract of meadow-land, with sheep dotted over it at intervals reposing for the night. I advanced over the grass, and observed here and there, where the ground rose a little, some moldering fragments of brickwork. Looking onward as I reached the middle of the meadow, I perceived on its further side, towering gaunt and black in the night, a lofty arch or gateway, without walls at its sides, without a neighboring building of any sort, far or near. This (as I afterward learned) was one of the ancient gates of the city. The walls, crumbling to ruin, had been destroyed as useless obstacles that cumbered the ground. On the waste meadow-land round me had once stood the shops of the richest merchants, the palaces of the proudest nobles of North Holland. I was actually standing on what had been formerly the wealthy

quarter of Enkhuizen! And what was left of it now? A few mounds of broken bricks, a pasture-land of sweet-smelling grass, and a little flock of sheep sleeping.

The mere desolation of the view (apart altogether from its history) struck me with a feeling of horror. My mind seemed to lose its balance in the dreadful stillness that was round me. I felt unutterable forebodings of calamities to come. For the first time, I repented having left England. My thoughts turned regretfully to the woody shores of Greenwater Broad. If I had only held to my resolution, I might have been at rest now in the deep waters of the lake. For what had I lived and planned and traveled since I left Dermody's cottage? Perhaps only to find that I had lost the woman whom I loved--now that I was in the same town with her!

Regaining the outer rows of houses still left standing, I looked about me, intending to return by the street which was known to me already. Just as I thought I had discovered it, I noticed another living creature in the solitary city. A man was standing at the door of one of the outermost houses on my right hand, looking at me.

At the risk of meeting with another rough reception, I determined to make a last effort to discover Mrs. Van Brandt before I returned to the boat.

Seeing that I was approaching him, the stranger met me midway. His dress and manner showed plainly that I had not encountered this time a person in the lower ranks of life. He answered my question civilly in his own language. Seeing that I was at a loss to understand what he said, he invited me by signs to follow him. After walking for a few minutes in a direction which was quite new to me, we stopped in a gloomy little square, with a plot of neglected garden-ground in the middle of it. Pointing to a lower window in one of the houses, in which a light dimly appeared, my guide said in Dutch: "Office of Van Brandt, sir," bowed, and left me.

I advanced to the window. It was open, and it was just high enough to be above my head. The light in the room found its way outward through the interstices of closed wooden shutters. Still haunted by misgivings of trouble to come, I hesitated to announce my arrival precipitately by ringing the house-bell. How did I know what new calamity might not confront me when the door was opened? I waited under the window and listened.

Hardly a minute passed before I heard a woman's voice in the room. There was no mistaking the charm of those tones. It was the voice of Mrs. Van Brandt.

"Come, darling," she said. "It is very late--you ought to have been in bed two hours ago."

The child's voice answered, "I am not sleepy, mamma."

"But, my dear, remember you have been ill. You may be ill again if you keep out of bed so late as this. Only lie down, and you will soon fall asleep when I put the candle out."

"You must not put the candle out!" the child returned, with strong emphasis. "My new papa is coming. How is he to find his way to us, if you put out the light?"

The mother answered sharply, as if the child's strange words had irritated her.

"You are talking nonsense," she said; "and you must go to bed. Mr. Germaine knows nothing about us. Mr. Germaine is in England."

I could restrain myself no longer. I called out under the window:

"Mr. Germaine is here!"