

## Chapter 4

### The Murderers

The young man with his hat slouched over his eyes, still leaning on the arm of the officer, and still wiping from time to time his brow with his handkerchief, was watching in a corner of the Buytenhof, in the shade of the overhanging weather-board of a closed shop, the doings of the infuriated mob, a spectacle which seemed to draw near its catastrophe.

"Indeed," said he to the officer, "indeed, I think you were right, Van Deken; the order which the deputies have signed is truly the death-warrant of Master Cornelius. Do you hear these people? They certainly bear a sad grudge to the two De Witts."

"In truth," replied the officer, "I never heard such shouts."

"They seem to have found out the cell of the man. Look, look! is not that the window of the cell where Cornelius was locked up?"

A man had seized with both hands and was shaking the iron bars of the window in the room which Cornelius had left only ten minutes before.

"Halloa, halloa!" the man called out, "he is gone."

"How is that? gone?" asked those of the mob who had not been able to get into the prison, crowded as it was with the mass of intruders.

"Gone, gone," repeated the man in a rage, "the bird has flown."

"What does this man say?" asked his Highness, growing quite pale.

"Oh, Monseigneur, he says a thing which would be very fortunate if it should turn out true!"

"Certainly it would be fortunate if it were true," said the young man; "unfortunately it cannot be true."

"However, look!" said the officer.

And indeed, some more faces, furious and contorted with rage, showed themselves at the windows, crying, --

"Escaped, gone, they have helped them off!"

And the people in the street repeated, with fearful imprecations, --

"Escaped gone! After them, and catch them!"

"Monseigneur, it seems that Mynheer Cornelius has really escaped," said the officer.

"Yes, from prison, perhaps, but not from the town; you will see, Van Deken, that the poor fellow will find the gate closed against him which he hoped to find open."

"Has an order been given to close the town gates, Monseigneur?"

"No, -- at least I do not think so; who could have given such an order?"

"Indeed, but what makes your Highness suppose?"

"There are fatalities," Monseigneur replied, in an offhand manner; "and the greatest men have sometimes fallen victims to such fatalities."

At these words the officer felt his blood run cold, as somehow or other he was convinced that the prisoner was lost.

At this moment the roar of the multitude broke forth like thunder, for it was now quite certain that Cornelius de Witt was no longer in the prison.

Cornelius and John, after driving along the pond, had taken the main street, which leads to the Tol-Hek, giving directions to the coachman to slacken his pace, in order not to excite any suspicion.

But when, on having proceeded half-way down that street, the man felt that he had left the prison and death behind, and before him there was life and liberty, he neglected every precaution, and set his horses off at a gallop.

All at once he stopped.

"What is the matter?" asked John, putting his head out of the coach window.

"Oh, my masters!" cried the coachman, "it is ---- "

Terror choked the voice of the honest fellow.

"Well, say what you have to say!" urged the Grand Pensionary.

"The gate is closed, that's what it is."

"How is this? It is not usual to close the gate by day."

"Just look!"

John de Witt leaned out of the window, and indeed saw that the man was right.

"Never mind, but drive on," said John, "I have with me the order for the commutation of the punishment, the gate-keeper will let us through."

The carriage moved along, but it was evident that the driver was no longer urging his horses with the same degree of confidence.

Moreover, as John de Witt put his head out of the carriage window, he was seen and recognized by a brewer, who, being behind his companions, was just shutting his door in all haste to join them at the Buytenhof. He uttered a cry of surprise, and ran after two other men before him, whom he overtook about a hundred yards farther on, and told them what he had seen. The three men then stopped, looking after the carriage, being however not yet quite sure as to whom it contained.

The carriage in the meanwhile arrived at the Tol-Hek.

"Open!" cried the coachman.

"Open!" echoed the gatekeeper, from the threshold of his lodge; "it's all very well to say 'Open!' but what am I to do it with?"

"With the key, to be sure!" said the coachman.

"With the key! Oh, yes! but if you have not got it?"

"How is that? Have not you got the key?" asked the coachman.

"No, I haven't."

"What has become of it?"

"Well, they have taken it from me."

"Who?"

"Some one, I dare say, who had a mind that no one should leave the town."

"My good man," said the Grand Pensionary, putting out his head from the window, and risking all for gaining all; "my good man, it is for me, John de Witt, and for my brother Cornelius, who I am taking away into exile."

"Oh, Mynheer de Witt! I am indeed very much grieved," said the gatekeeper, rushing towards the carriage; "but, upon my sacred word, the key has been taken from me."

"When?"

"This morning."

"By whom?"

"By a pale and thin young man, of about twenty-two."

"And wherefore did you give it up to him?"

"Because he showed me an order, signed and sealed."

"By whom?"

"By the gentlemen of the Town-hall."

"Well, then," said Cornelius calmly, "our doom seems to be fixed."

"Do you know whether the same precaution has been taken at the other gates?"

"I do not."

"Now then," said John to the coachman, "God commands man to do all that is in his power to preserve his life; go, and drive to another gate."

And whilst the servant was turning round the vehicle the Grand Pensionary said to the gatekeeper, --

"Take our thanks for your good intentions; the will must count for the deed; you had the will to save us, and that, in the eyes of the Lord, is as if you had succeeded in doing so."

"Alas!" said the gatekeeper, "do you see down there?"

"Drive at a gallop through that group," John called out to the coachman, "and take the street on the left; it is our only chance."

The group which John alluded to had, for its nucleus, those three men whom we left looking after the carriage, and who, in the meanwhile, had been joined by seven or eight others.

These new-comers evidently meant mischief with regard to the carriage.

When they saw the horses galloping down upon them, they placed themselves across the street, brandishing cudgels in their hands, and calling out, --

"Stop! stop!"

The coachman, on his side, lashed his horses into increased speed, until the coach and the men encountered.

The brothers De Witt, enclosed within the body of the carriage, were not able to see anything; but they felt a severe shock, occasioned by the rearing of the horses. The whole vehicle for a moment shook and stopped; but immediately after, passing over something round and elastic, which seemed to be the body of a prostrate man set off again amidst a volley of the fiercest oaths.

"Alas!" said Cornelius, "I am afraid we have hurt some one."

"Gallop! gallop!" called John.

But, notwithstanding this order, the coachman suddenly came to a stop.

"Now, then, what is the matter again?" asked John.

"Look there!" said the coachman.

John looked. The whole mass of the populace from the Buytenhof appeared at the extremity of the street along which the carriage was to proceed, and its stream moved roaring and rapid, as if lashed on by a hurricane.

"Stop and get off," said John to the coachman; "it is useless to go any farther; we are lost!"

"Here they are! here they are!" five hundred voices were crying at the same time.

"Yes, here they are, the traitors, the murderers, the assassins!" answered the men who were running after the carriage to the people who were coming to meet it. The former carried in their arms the bruised body of one of their companions, who, trying to seize the reins of the horses, had been trodden down by them.

This was the object over which the two brothers had felt their carriage pass.

The coachman stopped, but, however strongly his master urged him, he refused to get off and save himself.

In an instant the carriage was hemmed in between those who followed and those who met it. It rose above the mass of moving heads like a floating



island. But in another instant it came to a dead stop. A blacksmith had with his hammer struck down one of the horses, which fell in the traces.

At this moment, the shutter of a window opened, and disclosed the sallow face and the dark eyes of the young man, who with intense interest watched the scene which was preparing. Behind him appeared the head of the officer, almost as pale as himself.

"Good heavens, Monseigneur, what is going on there?" whispered the officer.

"Something very terrible, to a certainty," replied the other.

"Don't you see, Monseigneur, they are dragging the Grand Pensionary from the carriage, they strike him, they tear him to pieces!"

"Indeed, these people must certainly be prompted by a most violent indignation," said the young marl, with the same impassible tone which he had preserved all along.

"And here is Cornelius, whom they now likewise drag out of the carriage, -- Cornelius, who is already quite broken and mangled by the torture. Only look, look!"

"Indeed, it is Cornelius, and no mistake."

The officer uttered a feeble cry, and turned his head away; the brother of the Grand Pensionary, before having set foot on the ground, whilst still on the bottom step of the carriage, was struck down with an iron bar which broke his skull. He rose once more, but immediately fell again.

Some fellows then seized him by the feet, and dragged him into the crowd, into the middle of which one might have followed his bloody track, and he was soon closed in among the savage yells of malignant exultation.

The young man -- a thing which would have been thought impossible -- grew even paler than before, and his eyes were for a moment veiled behind the lids.

The officer saw this sign of compassion, and, wishing to avail himself of this softened tone of his feelings, continued, --

"Come, come, Monseigneur, for here they are also going to murder the Grand Pensionary."

But the young man had already opened his eyes again.

"To be sure," he said. "These people are really implacable. It does no one good to offend them."

"Monseigneur," said the officer, "may not one save this poor man, who has been your Highness's instructor? If there be any means, name it, and if I should perish in the attempt ---- "

William of Orange -- for he it was -- knit his brows in a very forbidding manner, restrained the glance of gloomy malice which glistened in his half-closed eye, and answered, --

"Captain Van Deken, I request you to go and look after my troops, that they may be armed for any emergency."

"But am I to leave your Highness here, alone, in the presence of all these murderers?"

"Go, and don't you trouble yourself about me more than I do myself," the Prince gruffly replied.

The officer started off with a speed which was much less owing to his sense of military obedience than to his pleasure at being relieved from the necessity of witnessing the shocking spectacle of the murder of the other brother.

He had scarcely left the room, when John -- who, with an almost superhuman effort, had reached the stone steps of a house nearly opposite that where his former pupil concealed himself -- began to stagger under the blows which were inflicted on him from all sides, calling out, --

"My brother! where is my brother?"

One of the ruffians knocked off his hat with a blow of his clenched fist.

Another showed to him his bloody hands; for this fellow had ripped open Cornelius and disembowelled him, and was now hastening to the spot in order not to lose the opportunity of serving the Grand Pensionary in the same manner, whilst they were dragging the dead body of Cornelius to the gibbet.

John uttered a cry of agony and grief, and put one of his hands before his eyes.

"Oh, you close your eyes, do you?" said one of the soldiers of the burgher guard; "well, I shall open them for you."

And saying this he stabbed him with his pike in the face, and the blood spurted forth.

"My brother!" cried John de Witt, trying to see through the stream of blood which blinded him, what had become of Cornelius; "my brother, my brother!"

"Go and run after him!" bellowed another murderer, putting his musket to his temples and pulling the trigger.

But the gun did not go off.

The fellow then turned his musket round, and, taking it by the barrel with both hands, struck John de Witt down with the butt-end. John staggered and fell down at his feet, but, raising himself with a last effort, he once more called out, --

"My brother!" with a voice so full of anguish that the young man opposite closed the shutter.

There remained little more to see; a third murderer fired a pistol with the muzzle to his face; and this time the shot took effect, blowing out his brains. John de Witt fell to rise no more.

On this, every one of the miscreants, emboldened by his fall, wanted to fire his gun at him, or strike him with blows of the sledge-hammer, or stab him with a knife or swords, every one wanted to draw a drop of blood from the fallen hero, and tear off a shred from his garments.

And after having mangled, and torn, and completely stripped the two brothers, the mob dragged their naked and bloody bodies to an extemporised gibbet, where amateur executioners hung them up by the feet.

Then came the most dastardly scoundrels of all, who not having dared to strike the living flesh, cut the dead in pieces, and then went about the town selling small slices of the bodies of John and Cornelius at ten sous a piece.

We cannot take upon ourselves to say whether, through the almost imperceptible chink of the shutter, the young man witnessed the conclusion of this shocking scene; but at the very moment when they were hanging the two martyrs on the gibbet he passed through the terrible mob, which was too much absorbed in the task, so grateful to its taste, to take any notice of him, and thus he reached unobserved the Tol-Hek, which was still closed.

"Ah! sir," said the gatekeeper, "do you bring me the key?"

"Yes, my man, here it is."

"It is most unfortunate that you did not bring me that key only one quarter of an hour sooner," said the gatekeeper, with a sigh.

"And why that?" asked the other.

"Because I might have opened the gate to Mynheers de Witt; whereas, finding the gate locked, they were obliged to retrace their steps."

"Gate! gate!" cried a voice which seemed to be that of a man in a hurry.

The Prince, turning round, observed Captain Van Deken.

"Is that you, Captain?" he said. "You are not yet out of the Hague? This is executing my orders very slowly."

"Monseigneur," replied the Captain, "this is the third gate at which I have presented myself; the other two were closed."

"Well, this good man will open this one for you; do it, my friend."

The last words were addressed to the gatekeeper, who stood quite thunderstruck on hearing Captain Van Deken addressing by the title of Monseigneur this pale young man, to whom he himself had spoken in such a familiar way.

As it were to make up for his fault, he hastened to open the gate, which swung creaking on its hinges.

"Will Monseigneur avail himself of my horse?" asked the Captain.

"I thank you, Captain, I shall use my own steed, which is waiting for me close at hand."

And taking from his pocket a golden whistle, such as was generally used at that time for summoning the servants, he sounded it with a shrill and prolonged call, on which an equerry on horseback speedily made his appearance, leading another horse by the bridle.

William, without touching the stirrup, vaulted into the saddle of the led horse, and, setting his spurs into its flanks, started off for the Leyden road. Having reached it, he turned round and beckoned to the Captain who was far behind, to ride by his side.

"Do you know," he then said, without stopping, "that those rascals have killed John de Witt as well as his brother?"

"Alas! Monseigneur," the Captain answered sadly, "I should like it much better if these two difficulties were still in your Highness's way of becoming de facto Stadtholder of Holland."

"Certainly, it would have been better," said William, "if what did happen had not happened. But it cannot be helped now, and we have had nothing to do with it. Let us push on, Captain, that we may arrive at Alphen before the message which the States-General are sure to send to me to the camp."

The Captain bowed, allowed the Prince to ride ahead and, for the remainder of the journey, kept at the same respectful distance as he had done before his Highness called him to his side.

"How I should wish," William of Orange malignantly muttered to himself, with a dark frown and setting the spurs to his horse, "to see the figure which Louis will cut when he is apprised of the manner in which his dear friends De Witt have been served! Oh thou Sun! thou Sun! as truly as I am called William the Silent, thou Sun, thou hadst best look to thy rays!"

And the young Prince, the relentless rival of the Great King, sped away upon his fiery steed, -- this future Stadtholder who had been but the day before very uncertainly established in his new power, but for whom the burghers of the Hague had built a staircase with the bodies of John and Cornelius, two princes as noble as he in the eyes of God and man.