## Chapter 6

## The Hatred of a Tulip-fancier

From that moment Boxtel's interest in tulips was no longer a stimulus to his exertions, but a deadening anxiety. Henceforth all his thoughts ran only upon the injury which his neighbour would cause him, and thus his favourite occupation was changed into a constant source of misery to him.

Van Baerle, as may easily be imagined, had no sooner begun to apply his natural ingenuity to his new fancy, than he succeeded in growing the finest tulips. Indeed; he knew better than any one else at Haarlem or Leyden -- the two towns which boast the best soil and the most congenial climate -- how to vary the colours, to modify the shape, and to produce new species.

He belonged to that natural, humorous school who took for their motto in the seventeenth century the aphorism uttered by one of their number in 1653, -- "To despise flowers is to offend God."

From that premise the school of tulip-fanciers, the most exclusive of all schools, worked out the following syllogism in the same year: --

"To despise flowers is to offend God.

"The more beautiful the flower is, the more does one offend God in despising it.

"The tulip is the most beautiful of all flowers.

"Therefore, he who despises the tulip offends God beyond measure."

By reasoning of this kind, it can be seen that the four or five thousand tulip-growers of Holland, France, and Portugal, leaving out those of Ceylon and China and the Indies, might, if so disposed, put the whole world under the ban, and condemn as schismatics and heretics and deserving of death the several hundred millions of mankind whose hopes of salvation were not centred upon the tulip.

We cannot doubt that in such a cause Boxtel, though he was Van Baerle's deadly foe, would have marched under the same banner with him.

Mynheer van Baerle and his tulips, therefore, were in the mouth of everybody; so much so, that Boxtel's name disappeared for ever from the list of the notable tulip-growers in Holland, and those of Dort were now represented by Cornelius van Baerle, the modest and inoffensive savant.

Engaging, heart and soul, in his pursuits of sowing, planting, and gathering, Van Baerle, caressed by the whole fraternity of tulip-growers in Europe, entertained nor the least suspicion that there was at his very door a pretender whose throne he had usurped.

He went on in his career, and consequently in his triumphs; and in the course of two years he covered his borders with such marvellous productions as no mortal man, following in the tracks of the Creator, except perhaps Shakespeare and Rubens, have equalled in point of numbers.

And also, if Dante had wished for a new type to be added to his characters of the Inferno, he might have chosen Boxtel during the period of Van Baerle's successes. Whilst Cornelius was weeding, manuring, watering his beds, whilst, kneeling on the turf border, he analysed every vein of the flowering tulips, and meditated on the modifications which might be effected by crosses of colour or otherwise, Boxtel, concealed behind a small sycamore which he had trained at the top of the partition wall in the shape of a fan, watched, with his eyes starting from their sockets and with foaming mouth, every step and every gesture of his neighbour; and whenever he thought he saw him look happy, or descried a smile on his lips, or a flash of contentment glistening in his eyes, he poured out towards him such a volley of maledictions and furious threats as to make it indeed a matter of wonder

that this venomous breath of envy and hatred did not carry a blight on the innocent flowers which had excited it.

When the evil spirit has once taken hold of the heart of man, it urges him on, without letting him stop. Thus Boxtel soon was no longer content with seeing Van Baerle. He wanted to see his flowers, too; he had the feelings of an artist, the master-piece of a rival engrossed his interest.

He therefore bought a telescope, which enabled him to watch as accurately as did the owner himself every progressive development of the flower, from the moment when, in the first year, its pale seed-leaf begins to peep from the ground, to that glorious one, when, after five years, its petals at last reveal the hidden treasures of its chalice. How often had the miserable, jealous man to observe in Van Baerle's beds tulips which dazzled him by their beauty, and almost choked him by their perfection!

And then, after the first blush of the admiration which he could not help feeling, he began to be tortured by the pangs of envy, by that slow fever which creeps over the heart and changes it into a nest of vipers, each devouring the other and ever born anew. How often did Boxtel, in the midst of tortures which no pen is able fully to describe, -- how often did he feel an inclination to jump down into the garden during the night, to destroy the plants, to tear the bulbs with his teeth, and to sacrifice to his wrath the owner himself, if he should venture to stand up for the defence of his tulips!

But to kill a tulip was a horrible crime in the eyes of a genuine tulip-fancier; as to killing a man, it would not have mattered so very much.

Yet Van Baerle made such progress in the noble science of growing tulips, which he seemed to master with the true instinct of genius, that Boxtel at last was maddened to such a degree as to think of throwing stones and sticks into the flower-stands of his neighbour. But, remembering that he would be sure to be found out, and that he would not only be punished by law, but also dishonoured for ever in the face of all the tulip-growers of Europe, he had recourse to stratagem, and, to gratify his hatred, tried to devise a plan by means of which he might gain his ends without being compromised himself.

He considered a long time, and at last his meditations were crowned with success.

One evening he tied two cats together by their hind legs with a string about six feet in length, and threw them from the wall into the midst of that noble, that princely, that royal bed, which contained not only the "Cornelius de Witt," but also the "Beauty of Brabant," milk-white, edged with purple and pink, the "Marble of Rotterdam," colour of flax, blossoms feathered red and flesh colour, the "Wonder of Haarlem," the "Colombin obscur," and the "Columbin clair terni."

The frightened cats, having alighted on the ground, first tried to fly each in a different direction, until the string by which they were tied together was tightly stretched across the bed; then, however, feeling that they were not able to get off, they began to pull to and fro, and to wheel about with hideous caterwaulings, mowing down with their string the flowers among which they were struggling, until, after a furious strife of about a quarter of an hour, the string broke and the combatants vanished.

Boxtel, hidden behind his sycamore, could not see anything, as it was pitch-dark; but the piercing cries of the cats told the whole tale, and his heart overflowing with gall now throbbed with triumphant joy.

Boxtel was so eager to ascertain the extent of the injury, that he remained at his post until morning to feast his eyes on the sad state in which the two cats had left the flower-beds of his neighbour. The mists of the morning chilled his frame, but he did not feel the cold, the hope of revenge keeping his blood at fever heat. The chagrin of his rival was to pay for all the inconvenience which he incurred himself.

At the earliest dawn the door of the white house opened, and Van Baerle made his appearance, approaching the flower-beds with the smile of a man who has passed the night comfortably in his bed, and has had happy dreams.

All at once he perceived furrows and little mounds of earth on the beds which only the evening before had been as smooth as a mirror, all at once he perceived the symmetrical rows of his tulips to be completely disordered, like the pikes of a battalion in the midst of which a shell has fallen.

He ran up to them with blanched cheek.

Boxtel trembled with joy. Fifteen or twenty tulips, torn and crushed, were lying about, some of them bent, others completely broken and already withering, the sap oozing from their bleeding bulbs: how gladly would Van Baerle have redeemed that precious sap with his own blood!

But what were his surprise and his delight! what was the disappointment of his rival! Not one of the four tulips which the latter had meant to destroy was injured at all. They raised proudly their noble heads above the corpses of their slain companions. This was enough to console Van Baerle, and enough to fan the rage of the horticultural murderer, who tore his hair at the sight of the effects of the crime which he had committed in vain.

Van Baerle could not imagine the cause of the mishap, which, fortunately, was of far less consequence than it might have been. On making inquiries, he learned that the whole night had been disturbed by terrible caterwaulings. He besides found traces of the cats, their footmarks and hairs left behind on the battle-field; to guard, therefore, in future against a similar outrage, he gave orders that henceforth one of the under gardeners should sleep in the garden in a sentry-box near the flower-beds.

Boxtel heard him give the order, and saw the sentry-box put up that very day; but he deemed himself lucky in not having been suspected, and, being more than ever incensed against the successful horticulturist, he resolved to bide his time.

Just then the Tulip Society of Haarlem offered a prize for the discovery (we dare not say the manufacture) of a large black tulip without a spot of colour,

a thing which had not yet been accomplished, and was considered impossible, as at that time there did not exist a flower of that species approaching even to a dark nut brown. It was, therefore, generally said that the founders of the prize might just as well have offered two millions as a hundred thousand guilders, since no one would be able to gain it.

The tulip-growing world, however, was thrown by it into a state of most active commotion. Some fanciers caught at the idea without believing it practicable, but such is the power of imagination among florists, that although considering the undertaking as certain to fail, all their thoughts were engrossed by that great black tulip, which was looked upon to be as chimerical as the black swan of Horace or the white raven of French tradition.

Van Baerle was one of the tulip-growers who were struck with the idea; Boxtel thought of it in the light of a speculation. Van Baerle, as soon as the idea had once taken root in his clear and ingenious mind, began slowly the necessary planting and cross-breeding to reduce the tulips which he had grown already from red to brown, and from brown to dark brown.

By the next year he had obtained flowers of a perfect nut-brown, and Boxtel espied them in the border, whereas he had himself as yet only succeeded in producing the light brown.

It might perhaps be interesting to explain to the gentle reader the beautiful chain of theories which go to prove that the tulip borrows its colors from the elements; perhaps we should give him pleasure if we were to maintain and establish that nothing is impossible for a florist who avails himself with judgment and discretion and patience of the sun's heat; the clear water, the juices of the earth, and the cool breezes. But this is not a treatise upon tulips in general; it is the story of one particular tulip which we have undertaken to write, and to that we limit ourselves, however alluring the subject which is so closely allied to ours.

Boxtel, once more worsted by the superiority of his hated rival, was now completely disgusted with tulip-growing, and, being driven half mad, devoted himself entirely to observation.

The house of his rival was quite open to view; a garden exposed to the sun; cabinets with glass walls, shelves, cupboards, boxes, and ticketed pigeon-holes, which could easily be surveyed by the telescope. Boxtel allowed his bulbs to rot in the pits, his seedlings to dry up in their cases, and his tulips to wither in the borders and henceforward occupied himself with nothing else but the doings at Van Baerle's. He breathed through the stalks of Van Baerle's tulips, quenched his thirst with the water he sprinkled upon them, and feasted on the fine soft earth which his neighbour scattered upon his cherished bulbs.

But the most curious part of the operations was not performed in the garden.

It might be one o'clock in the morning when Van Baerle went up to his laboratory, into the glazed cabinet whither Boxtel's telescope had such an easy access; and here, as soon as the lamp illuminated the walls and windows, Boxtel saw the inventive genius of his rival at work.

He beheld him sifting his seeds, and soaking them in liquids which were destined to modify or to deepen their colours. He knew what Cornelius meant when heating certain grains, then moistening them, then combining them with others by a sort of grafting, -- a minute and marvellously delicate manipulation, -- and when he shut up in darkness those which were expected to furnish the black colour, exposed to the sun or to the lamp those which were to produce red, and placed between the endless reflections of two water-mirrors those intended for white, the pure representation of the limpid element.

This innocent magic, the fruit at the same time of child-like musings and of manly genius -- this patient untiring labour, of which Boxtel knew himself to be incapable -- made him, gnawed as he was with envy, centre all his life, all his thoughts, and all his hopes in his telescope.

For, strange to say, the love and interest of horticulture had not deadened in Isaac his fierce envy and thirst of revenge. Sometimes, whilst covering Van Baerle with his telescope, he deluded himself into a belief that he was levelling a never-failing musket at him; and then he would seek with his finger for the trigger to fire the shot which was to have killed his neighbour. But it is time that we should connect with this epoch of the operations of the one, and the espionage of the other, the visit which Cornelius de Witt came to pay to his native town.