Chapter 7

The Happy Man makes Acquaintance with Misfortune

Cornelius de Witt, after having attended to his family affairs, reached the house of his godson, Cornelius van Baerle, one evening in the month of January, 1672.

De Witt, although being very little of a horticulturist or of an artist, went over the whole mansion, from the studio to the green-house, inspecting everything, from the pictures down to the tulips. He thanked his godson for having joined him on the deck of the admiral's ship "The Seven Provinces," during the battle of Southwold Bay, and for having given his name to a magnificent tulip; and whilst he thus, with the kindness and affability of a father to a son, visited Van Baerle's treasures, the crowd gathered with curiosity, and even respect, before the door of the happy man.

All this hubbub excited the attention of Boxtel, who was just taking his meal by his fireside. He inquired what it meant, and, on being informed of the cause of all this stir, climbed up to his post of observation, where in spite of the cold, he took his stand, with the telescope to his eye.

This telescope had not been of great service to him since the autumn of 1671. The tulips, like true daughters of the East, averse to cold, do not abide in the open ground in winter. They need the shelter of the house, the soft bed on the shelves, and the congenial warmth of the stove. Van Baerle, therefore, passed the whole winter in his laboratory, in the midst of his books and pictures. He went only rarely to the room where he kept his bulbs, unless it were to allow some occasional rays of the sun to enter, by opening one of the movable sashes of the glass front.

On the evening of which we are speaking, after the two Corneliuses had visited together all the apartments of the house, whilst a train of domestics followed their steps, De Witt said in a low voice to Van Baerle, --

"My dear son, send these people away, and let us be alone for some minutes."

The younger Cornelius, bowing assent, said aloud, --

"Would you now, sir, please to see my dry-room?"

The dry-room, this pantheon, this sanctum sanctorum of the tulip-fancier, was, as Delphi of old, interdicted to the profane uninitiated.

Never had any of his servants been bold enough to set his foot there. Cornelius admitted only the inoffensive broom of an old Frisian housekeeper, who had been his nurse, and who from the time when he had devoted himself to the culture of tulips ventured no longer to put onions in his stews, for fear of pulling to pieces and mincing the idol of her foster child.

At the mere mention of the dry-room, therefore, the servants who were carrying the lights respectfully fell back. Cornelius, taking the candlestick from the hands of the foremost, conducted his godfather into that room, which was no other than that very cabinet with a glass front into which Boxtel was continually prying with his telescope.

The envious spy was watching more intently than ever.

First of all he saw the walls and windows lit up.

Then two dark figures appeared.

One of them, tall, majestic, stern, sat down near the table on which Van Baerle had placed the taper.

In this figure, Boxtel recognised the pale features of Cornelius de Witt, whose long hair, parted in front, fell over his shoulders.

De Witt, after having said some few words to Cornelius, the meaning of which the prying neighbour could not read in the movement of his lips, took from his breast pocket a white parcel, carefully sealed, which Boxtel, judging from the manner in which Cornelius received it, and placed it in one of the presses, supposed to contain papers of the greatest importance.

His first thought was that this precious deposit enclosed some newly imported bulbs from Bengal or Ceylon; but he soon reflected that Cornelius de Witt was very little addicted to tulip-growing, and that he only occupied himself with the affairs of man, a pursuit by far less peaceful and agreeable than that of the florist. He therefore came to the conclusion that the parcel contained simply some papers, and that these papers were relating to politics.

But why should papers of political import be intrusted to Van Baerle, who not only was, but also boasted of being, an entire stranger to the science of government, which, in his opinion, was more occult than alchemy itself?

It was undoubtedly a deposit which Cornelius de Witt, already threatened by the unpopularity with which his countrymen were going to honour him, was placing in the hands of his godson; a contrivance so much the more cleverly devised, as it certainly was not at all likely that it should be searched for at the house of one who had always stood aloof from every sort of intrigue.

And, besides, if the parcel had been made up of bulbs, Boxtel knew his neighbour too well not to expect that Van Baerle would not have lost one moment in satisfying his curiosity and feasting his eyes on the present which he had received.

But, on the contrary, Cornelius had received the parcel from the hands of his godfather with every mark of respect, and put it by with the same

respectful manner in a drawer, stowing it away so that it should not take up too much of the room which was reserved to his bulbs.

The parcel thus being secreted, Cornelius de Witt got up, pressed the hand of his godson, and turned towards the door, Van Baerle seizing the candlestick, and lighting him on his way down to the street, which was still crowded with people who wished to see their great fellow citizen getting into his coach.

Boxtel had not been mistaken in his supposition. The deposit intrusted to Van Baerle, and carefully locked up by him, was nothing more nor less than John de Witt's correspondence with the Marquis de Louvois, the war minister of the King of France; only the godfather forbore giving to his godson the least intimation concerning the political importance of the secret, merely desiring him not to deliver the parcel to any one but to himself, or to whomsoever he should send to claim it in his name.

And Van Baerle, as we have seen, locked it up with his most precious bulbs, to think no more of it, after his godfather had left him; very unlike Boxtel, who looked upon this parcel as a clever pilot does on the distant and scarcely perceptible cloud which is increasing on its way and which is fraught with a storm.

Little dreaming of the jealous hatred of his neighbour, Van Baerle had proceeded step by step towards gaining the prize offered by the Horticultural Society of Haarlem. He had progressed from hazel-nut shade to that of roasted coffee, and on the very day when the frightful events took place at the Hague which we have related in the preceding chapters, we find him, about one o'clock in the day, gathering from the border the young suckers raised from tulips of the colour of roasted coffee; and which, being expected to flower for the first time in the spring of 1675, would undoubtedly produce the large black tulip required by the Haarlem Society.

On the 20th of August, 1672, at one o'clock, Cornelius was therefore in his dry-room, with his feet resting on the foot-bar of the table, and his elbows on the cover, looking with intense delight on three suckers which he had just detached from the mother bulb, pure, perfect, and entire, and from

which was to grow that wonderful produce of horticulture which would render the name of Cornelius van Baerle for ever illustrious.

"I shall find the black tulip," said Cornelius to himself, whilst detaching the suckers. "I shall obtain the hundred thousand guilders offered by the Society. I shall distribute them among the poor of Dort; and thus the hatred which every rich man has to encounter in times of civil wars will be soothed down, and I shall be able, without fearing any harm either from Republicans or Orangists, to keep as heretofore my borders in splendid condition. I need no more be afraid lest on the day of a riot the shopkeepers of the town and the sailors of the port should come and tear out my bulbs, to boil them as onions for their families, as they have sometimes quietly threatened when they happened to remember my having paid two or three hundred guilders for one bulb. It is therefore settled I shall give the hundred thousand guilders of the Haarlem prize to-the poor. And yet ---- "

Here Cornelius stopped and heaved a sigh. "And yet," he continued, "it would have been so very delightful to spend the hundred thousand guilders on the enlargement of my tulip-bed or even on a journey to the East, the country of beautiful flowers. But, alas! these are no thoughts for the present times, when muskets, standards, proclamations, and beating of drums are the order of the day."

Van Baerle raised his eyes to heaven and sighed again. Then turning his glance towards his bulbs, -- objects of much greater importance to him than all those muskets, standards, drums, and proclamations, which he conceived only to be fit to disturb the minds of honest people, -- he said: --

"These are, indeed, beautiful bulbs; how smooth they are, how well formed; there is that air of melancholy about them which promises to produce a flower of the colour of ebony. On their skin you cannot even distinguish the circulating veins with the naked eye. Certainly, certainly, not a light spot will disfigure the tulip which I have called into existence. And by what name shall we call this offspring of my sleepless nights, of my labour and my thought? Tulipa nigra Barlaensis?

"Yes Barlaensis: a fine name. All the tulip-fanciers -- that is to say, all the intelligent people of Europe -- will feel a thrill of excitement when the rumour spreads to the four quarters of the globe: The grand black tulip is found! 'How is it called?' the fanciers will ask. -- 'Tulipa nigra Barlaensis!' -- 'Why Barlaensis?' -- 'After its grower, Van Baerle,' will be the answer. -- 'And who is this Van Baerle?' -- 'It is the same who has already produced five new tulips: the Jane, the John de Witt, the Cornelius de Witt, etc.' Well, that is what I call my ambition. It will cause tears to no one. And people will talk of my Tulipa nigra Barlaensis when perhaps my godfather, this sublime politician, is only known from the tulip to which I have given his name.

"Oh! these darling bulbs!

"When my tulip has flowered," Baerle continued in his soliloquy, "and when tranquillity is restored in Holland, I shall give to the poor only fifty thousand guilders, which, after all, is a goodly sum for a man who is under no obligation whatever. Then, with the remaining fifty thousand guilders, I shall make experiments. With them I shall succeed in imparting scent to the tulip. Ah! if I succeed in giving it the odour of the rose or the carnation, or, what would be still better, a completely new scent; if I restored to this queen of flowers its natural distinctive perfume, which she has lost in passing from her Eastern to her European throne, and which she must have in the Indian peninsula at Goa, Bombay, and Madras, and especially in that island which in olden times, as is asserted, was the terrestrial paradise, and which is called Ceylon, -- oh, what glory! I must say, I would then rather be Cornelius van Baerle than Alexander, Caesar, or Maximilian.

"Oh the admirable bulbs!"

Thus Cornelius indulged in the delights of contemplation, and was carried away by the sweetest dreams.

Suddenly the bell of his cabinet was rung much more violently than usual.

Cornelius, startled, laid his hands on his bulbs, and turned round.

"Who is here?" he asked.

"Sir," answered the servant, "it is a messenger from the Hague."

"A messenger from the Hague! What does he want?"

"Sir, it is Craeke."

"Craeke! the confidential servant of Mynheer John de Witt? Good, let him wait."

"I cannot wait," said a voice in the lobby.

And at the same time forcing his way in, Craeke rushed into the dry-room.

This abrupt entrance was such an infringement on the established rules of the household of Cornelius van Baerle, that the latter, at the sight of Craeke, almost convulsively moved his hand which covered the bulbs, so that two of them fell on the floor, one of them rolling under a small table, and the other into the fireplace.

"Zounds!" said Cornelius, eagerly picking up his precious bulbs, "what's the matter?"

"The matter, sir!" said Craeke, laying a paper on the large table, on which the third bulb was lying, -- "the matter is, that you are requested to read this paper without losing one moment."

And Craeke, who thought he had remarked in the streets of Dort symptoms of a tumult similar to that which he had witnessed before his departure from the Hague, ran off without even looking behind him.

"All right! all right! my dear Craeke," said Cornelius, stretching his arm under the table for the bulb; "your paper shall be read, indeed it shall."

Then, examining the bulb which he held in the hollow of his hand, he said: "Well, here is one of them uninjured. That confounded Craeke! thus to rush into my dry-room; let us now look after the other."

And without laying down the bulb which he already held, Baerle went to the fireplace, knelt down and stirred with the tip of his finger the ashes, which fortunately were quite cold.

He at once felt the other bulb.

"Well, here it is," he said; and, looking at it with almost fatherly affection, he exclaimed, "Uninjured as the first!"

At this very instant, and whilst Cornelius, still on his knees, was examining his pets, the door of the dry-room was so violently shaken, and opened in such a brusque manner, that Cornelius felt rising in his cheeks and his ears the glow of that evil counsellor which is called wrath.

"Now, what is it again," he demanded; "are people going mad here?"

"Oh, sir! sir!" cried the servant, rushing into the dry-room with a much paler face and with a much more frightened mien than Craeke had shown.

"Well!" asked Cornelius, foreboding some mischief from the double breach of the strict rule of his house.

"Oh, sir, fly! fly quick!" cried the servant.

"Fly! and what for?"

"Sir, the house is full of the guards of the States."

"What do they want?"

"They want you."

"What for?"

"To arrest you."

"Arrest me? arrest me, do you say?"

"Yes, sir, and they are headed by a magistrate."

"What's the meaning of all this?" said Van Baerle, grasping in his hands the two bulbs, and directing his terrified glance towards the staircase.

"They are coming up! they are coming up!" cried the servant.

"Oh, my dear child, my worthy master!" cried the old housekeeper, who now likewise made her appearance in the dry-room, "take your gold, your jewelry, and fly, fly!"

"But how shall I make my escape, nurse?" said Van Baerle.

"Jump out of the window."

"Twenty-five feet from the ground!"

"But you will fall on six feet of soft soil!"

"Yes, but I should fall on my tulips."

"Never mind, jump out."

Cornelius took the third bulb, approached the window and opened it, but seeing what havoc he would necessarily cause in his borders, and, more than this, what a height he would have to jump, he called out, "Never!" and fell back a step.

At this moment they saw across the banister of the staircase the points of the halberds of the soldiers rising.

The housekeeper raised her hands to heaven.

As to Cornelius van Baerle, it must be stated to his honour, not as a man, but as a tulip-fancier, his only thought was for his inestimable bulbs.

Looking about for a paper in which to wrap them up, he noticed the fly-leaf from the Bible, which Craeke had laid upon the table, took it without in his confusion remembering whence it came, folded in it the three bulbs, secreted them in his bosom, and waited.

At this very moment the soldiers, preceded by a magistrate, entered the room.

"Are you Dr. Cornelius van Baerle?" demanded the magistrate (who, although knowing the young man very well, put his question according to the forms of justice, which gave his proceedings a much more dignified air).

"I am that person, Master van Spennen," answered Cornelius, politely, to his judge, "and you know it very well."

"Then give up to us the seditious papers which you secrete in your house."

"The seditious papers!" repeated Cornelius, quite dumfounded at the imputation.

"Now don't look astonished, if you please."

"I vow to you, Master van Spennen, "Cornelius replied, "that I am completely at a loss to understand what you want."

"Then I shall put you in the way, Doctor," said the judge; "give up to us the papers which the traitor Cornelius de Witt deposited with you in the month of January last."

A sudden light came into the mind of Cornelius.

"Halloa!" said Van Spennen, "you begin now to remember, don't you?"

"Indeed I do, but you spoke of seditious papers, and I have none of that sort."

"You deny it then?"

"Certainly I do."

The magistrate turned round and took a rapid survey of the whole cabinet.

"Where is the apartment you call your dry-room?" he asked.

"The very same where you now are, Master van Spennen."

The magistrate cast a glance at a small note at the top of his papers.

"All right," he said, like a man who is sure of his ground.

Then, turning round towards Cornelius, he continued, "Will you give up those papers to me?"

"But I cannot, Master van Spennen; those papers do not belong to me; they have been deposited with me as a trust, and a trust is sacred."

"Dr. Cornelius," said the judge, "in the name of the States, I order you to open this drawer, and to give up to me the papers which it contains."

Saying this, the judge pointed with his finger to the third drawer of the press, near the fireplace.

In this very drawer, indeed the papers deposited by the Warden of the Dikes with his godson were lying; a proof that the police had received very exact information.

"Ah! you will not," said Van Spennen, when he saw Cornelius standing immovable and bewildered, "then I shall open the drawer myself."

And, pulling out the drawer to its full length, the magistrate at first alighted on about twenty bulbs, carefully arranged and ticketed, and then on the paper parcel, which had remained in exactly the same state as it was when delivered by the unfortunate Cornelius de Witt to his godson.

The magistrate broke the seals, tore off the envelope, cast an eager glance on the first leaves which met his eye and then exclaimed, in a terrible voice, --

"Well, justice has been rightly informed after all!"

"How," said Cornelius, "how is this?"

"Don't pretend to be ignorant, Mynheer van Baerle," answered the magistrate. "Follow me."

"How's that! follow you?" cried the Doctor.

"Yes, sir, for in the name of the States I arrest you."

Arrests were not as yet made in the name of William of Orange; he had not been Stadtholder long enough for that.

"Arrest me!" cried Cornelius; "but what have I done?"

"That's no affair of mine, Doctor; you will explain all that before your judges."

"Where?"

"At the Hague."

Cornelius, in mute stupefaction, embraced his old nurse, who was in a swoon; shook hands with his servants, who were bathed in tears, and followed the magistrate, who put him in a coach as a prisoner of state and had him driven at full gallop to the Hague.