

Chapter 9

The Family Cell

It was about midnight when poor Van Baerle was locked up in the prison of the Buytenhof.

What Rosa foresaw had come to pass. On finding the cell of Cornelius de Witt empty, the wrath of the people ran very high, and had Gryphus fallen into the hands of those madmen he would certainly have had to pay with his life for the prisoner.

But this fury had vented itself most fully on the two brothers when they were overtaken by the murderers, thanks to the precaution which William -- the man of precautions -- had taken in having the gates of the city closed.

A momentary lull had therefore set in whilst the prison was empty, and Rosa availed herself of this favourable moment to come forth from her hiding place, which she also induced her father to leave.

The prison was therefore completely deserted. Why should people remain in the jail whilst murder was going on at the Tol-Hek?

Gryphus came forth trembling behind the courageous Rosa. They went to close the great gate, at least as well as it would close, considering that it was half demolished. It was easy to see that a hurricane of mighty fury had vented itself upon it.

About four o'clock a return of the noise was heard, but of no threatening character to Gryphus and his daughter. The people were only dragging in the two corpses, which they came back to gibbet at the usual place of execution.

Rosa hid herself this time also, but only that she might not see the ghastly spectacle.

At midnight, people again knocked at the gate of the jail, or rather at the barricade which served in its stead: it was Cornelius van Baerle whom they were bringing.

When the jailer received this new inmate, and saw from the warrant the name and station of his prisoner, he muttered with his turnkey smile, --

"Godson of Cornelius de Witt! Well, young man, we have the family cell here, and we will give it to you."

And quite enchanted with his joke, the ferocious Orangeman took his cresset and his keys to conduct Cornelius to the cell, which on that very morning Cornelius de Witt had left to go into exile, or what in revolutionary times is meant instead by those sublime philosophers who lay it down as an axiom of high policy, "It is the dead only who do not return."

On the way which the despairing florist had to traverse to reach that cell he heard nothing but the barking of a dog, and saw nothing but the face of a young girl.

The dog rushed forth from a niche in the wall, shaking his heavy chain, and sniffing all round Cornelius in order so much the better to recognise him in case he should be ordered to pounce upon him.

The young girl, whilst the prisoner was mounting the staircase, appeared at the narrow door of her chamber, which opened on that very flight of steps; and, holding the lamp in her right hand, she at the same time lit up her pretty blooming face, surrounded by a profusion of rich wavy golden locks, whilst with her left she held her white night-dress closely over her breast,

having been roused from her first slumber by the unexpected arrival of Van Baerle.

It would have made a fine picture, worthy of Rembrandt, the gloomy winding stairs illuminated by the reddish glare of the cresset of Gryphus, with his scowling jailer's countenance at the top, the melancholy figure of Cornelius bending over the banister to look down upon the sweet face of Rosa, standing, as it were, in the bright frame of the door of her chamber, with embarrassed mien at being thus seen by a stranger.

And at the bottom, quite in the shade, where the details are absorbed in the obscurity, the mastiff, with his eyes glistening like carbuncles, and shaking his chain, on which the double light from the lamp of Rosa and the lantern of Gryphus threw a brilliant glitter.

The sublime master would, however, have been altogether unable to render the sorrow expressed in the face of Rosa, when she saw this pale, handsome young man slowly climbing the stairs, and thought of the full import of the words, which her father had just spoken, "You will have the family cell."

This vision lasted but a moment, -- much less time than we have taken to describe it. Gryphus then proceeded on his way, Cornelius was forced to follow him, and five minutes afterwards he entered his prison, of which it is unnecessary to say more, as the reader is already acquainted with it.

Gryphus pointed with his finger to the bed on which the martyr had suffered so much, who on that day had rendered his soul to God. Then, taking up his cresset, he quitted the cell.

Thus left alone, Cornelius threw himself on his bed, but he slept not, he kept his eye fixed on the narrow window, barred with iron, which looked on the Buytenhof; and in this way saw from behind the trees that first pale beam of light which morning sheds on the earth as a white mantle.

Now and then during the night horses had galloped at a smart pace over the Buytenhof, the heavy tramp of the patrols had resounded from the pavement, and the slow matches of the arquebuses, flaring in the east wind, had thrown up at intervals a sudden glare as far as to the panes of his window.

But when the rising sun began to gild the coping stones at the gable ends of the houses, Cornelius, eager to know whether there was any living creature about him, approached the window, and cast a sad look round the circular yard before him

At the end of the yard a dark mass, tinted with a dingy blue by the morning dawn, rose before him, its dark outlines standing out in contrast to the houses already illuminated by the pale light of early morning.

Cornelius recognised the gibbet.

On it were suspended two shapeless trunks, which indeed were no more than bleeding skeletons.

The good people of the Hague had chopped off the flesh of its victims, but faithfully carried the remainder to the gibbet, to have a pretext for a double inscription written on a huge placard, on which Cornelius; with the keen sight of a young man of twenty-eight, was able to read the following lines, daubed by the coarse brush of a sign-painter: --

"Here are hanging the great rogue of the name of John de Witt, and the little rogue Cornelius de Witt, his brother, two enemies of the people, but great friends of the king of France."

Cornelius uttered a cry of horror, and in the agony of his frantic terror knocked with his hands and feet at the door so violently and continuously, that Gryphus, with his huge bunch of keys in his hand, ran furiously up.

The jailer opened the door, with terrible imprecations against the prisoner who disturbed him at an hour which Master Gryphus was not accustomed to be aroused.

"Well, now, by my soul, he is mad, this new De Witt," he cried, "but all those De Witts have the devil in them."

"Master, master," cried Cornelius, seizing the jailer by the arm and dragging him towards the window, -- "master, what have I read down there?"

"Where down there?"

"On that placard."

And, trembling, pale, and gasping for breath, he pointed to the gibbet at the other side of the yard, with the cynical inscription surmounting it.

Gryphus broke out into a laugh.

"Eh! eh!" he answered, "so, you have read it. Well, my good sir, that's what people will get for corresponding with the enemies of his Highness the Prince of Orange."

"The brothers De Witt are murdered!" Cornelius muttered, with the cold sweat on his brow, and sank on his bed, his arms hanging by his side, and his eyes closed.

"The brothers De Witt have been judged by the people," said Gryphus; "you call that murdered, do you? well, I call it executed."

And seeing that the prisoner was not only quiet, but entirely prostrate and senseless, he rushed from the cell, violently slamming the door, and noisily drawing the bolts.

Recovering his consciousness, Cornelius found himself alone, and recognised the room where he was, -- "the family cell," as Gryphus had called it, -- as the fatal passage leading to ignominious death.

And as he was a philosopher, and, more than that, as he was a Christian, he began to pray for the soul of his godfather, then for that of the Grand Pensionary, and at last submitted with resignation to all the sufferings which God might ordain for him.

Then turning again to the concerns of earth, and having satisfied himself that he was alone in his dungeon, he drew from his breast the three bulbs of the black tulip, and concealed them behind a block of stone, on which the traditional water-jug of the prison was standing, in the darkest corner of his cell.

Useless labour of so many years! such sweet hopes crushed; his discovery was, after all, to lead to naught, just as his own career was to be cut short. Here, in his prison, there was not a trace of vegetation, not an atom of soil, not a ray of sunshine.

At this thought Cornelius fell into a gloomy despair, from which he was only aroused by an extraordinary circumstance.

What was this circumstance?

We shall inform the reader in our next chapter.