Chapter 11

Cornelius van Baerle's Will

Rosa had not been mistaken; the judges came on the following day to the Buytenhof, and proceeded with the trial of Cornelius van Baerle. The examination, however, did not last long, it having appeared on evidence that Cornelius had kept at his house that fatal correspondence of the brothers De Witt with France.

He did not deny it.

The only point about which there seemed any difficulty was whether this correspondence had been intrusted to him by his godfather, Cornelius de Witt.

But as, since the death of those two martyrs, Van Baerle had no longer any reason for withholding the truth, he not only did not deny that the parcel had been delivered to him by Cornelius de Witt himself, but he also stated all the circumstances under which it was done.

This confession involved the godson in the crime of the godfather; manifest complicity being considered to exist between Cornelius de Witt and Cornelius van Baerle.

The honest doctor did not confine himself to this avowal, but told the whole truth with regard to his own tastes, habits, and daily life. He described his indifference to politics, his love of study, of the fine arts, of science, and of flowers. He explained that, since the day when Cornelius de Witt handed to him the parcel at Dort, he himself had never touched, nor even noticed it.

To this it was objected, that in this respect he could not possibly be speaking the truth, since the papers had been deposited in a press in which both his hands and his eyes must have been engaged every day.

Cornelius answered that it was indeed so; that, however, he never put his hand into the press but to ascertain whether his bulbs were dry, and that he never looked into it but to see if they were beginning to sprout.

To this again it was objected, that his pretended indifference respecting this deposit was not to be reasonably entertained, as he could not have received such papers from the hand of his godfather without being made acquainted with their important character.

He replied that his godfather Cornelius loved him too well, and, above all, that he was too considerate a man to have communicated to him anything of the contents of the parcel, well knowing that such a confidence would only have caused anxiety to him who received it.

To this it was objected that, if De Witt had wished to act in such a way, he would have added to the parcel, in case of accidents, a certificate setting forth that his godson was an entire stranger to the nature of this correspondence, or at least he would during his trial have written a letter to him, which might be produced as his justification.

Cornelius replied that undoubtedly his godfather could not have thought that there was any risk for the safety of his deposit, hidden as it was in a press which was looked upon as sacred as the tabernacle by the whole household of Van Baerle; and that consequently he had considered the certificate as useless. As to a letter, he certainly had some remembrance that some moments previous to his arrest, whilst he was absorbed in the contemplation of one of the rarest of his bulbs, John de Witt's servant entered his dry-room, and handed to him a paper, but the whole was to him only like a vague dream; the servant had disappeared, and as to the paper, perhaps it might be found if a proper search were made.

As far as Craeke was concerned, it was impossible to find him, as he had left Holland.

The paper also was not very likely to be found, and no one gave himself the trouble to look for it.

Cornelius himself did not much press this point, since, even supposing that the paper should turn up, it could not have any direct connection with the correspondence which constituted the crime.

The judges wished to make it appear as though they wanted to urge Cornelius to make a better defence; they displayed that benevolent patience which is generally a sign of the magistrate's being interested for the prisoner, or of a man's having so completely got the better of his adversary that he needs no longer any oppressive means to ruin him.

Cornelius did not accept of this hypocritical protection, and in a last answer, which he set forth with the noble bearing of a martyr and the calm serenity of a righteous man, he said, --

"You ask me things, gentlemen, to which I can answer only the exact truth. Hear it. The parcel was put into my hands in the way I have described; I vow before God that I was, and am still, ignorant of its contents, and that it was not until my arrest that I learned that this deposit was the correspondence of the Grand Pensionary with the Marquis de Louvois. And lastly, I vow and protest that I do not understand how any one should have known that this parcel was in my house; and, above all, how I can be deemed criminal for having received what my illustrious and unfortunate godfather brought to my house."

This was Van Baerle's whole defence; after which the judges began to deliberate on the verdict.

They considered that every offshoot of civil discord is mischievous, because it revives the contest which it is the interest of all to put down.

One of them, who bore the character of a profound observer, laid down as his opinion that this young man, so phlegmatic in appearance, must in reality be very dangerous, as under this icy exterior he was sure to conceal an ardent desire to avenge his friends, the De Witts.

Another observed that the love of tulips agreed perfectly well with that of politics, and that it was proved in history that many very dangerous men were engaged in gardening, just as if it had been their profession, whilst really they occupied themselves with perfectly different concerns; witness Tarquin the Elder, who grew poppies at Gabii, and the Great Conde, who watered his carnations at the dungeon of Vincennes at the very moment when the former meditated his return to Rome, and the latter his escape from prison.

The judge summed up with the following dilemma: --

"Either Cornelius van Baerle is a great lover of tulips, or a great lover of politics; in either case, he has told us a falsehood; first, because his having occupied himself with politics is proved by the letters which were found at his house; and secondly, because his having occupied himself with tulips is proved by the bulbs which leave no doubt of the fact. And herein lies the enormity of the case. As Cornelius van Baerle was concerned in the growing of tulips and in the pursuit of politics at one and the same time, the prisoner is of hybrid character, of an amphibious organisation, working with equal ardour at politics and at tulips, which proves him to belong to the class of men most dangerous to public tranquillity, and shows a certain, or rather a complete, analogy between his character and that of those master minds of which Tarquin the Elder and the Great Conde have been felicitously quoted as examples."

The upshot of all these reasonings was, that his Highness the Prince Stadtholder of Holland would feel infinitely obliged to the magistracy of the Hague if they simplified for him the government of the Seven Provinces by destroying even the least germ of conspiracy against his authority.

This argument capped all the others, and, in order so much the more effectually to destroy the germ of conspiracy, sentence of death was unanimously pronounced against Cornelius van Baerle, as being arraigned, and convicted, for having, under the innocent appearance of a tulip-fancier, participated in the detestable intrigues and abominable plots of the brothers De Witt against Dutch nationality and in their secret relations with their French enemy.

A supplementary clause was tacked to the sentence, to the effect that "the aforesaid Cornelius van Baerle should be led from the prison of the Buytenhof to the scaffold in the yard of the same name, where the public executioner would cut off his head."

As this deliberation was a most serious affair, it lasted a full half-hour, during which the prisoner was remanded to his cell.

There the Recorder of the States came to read the sentence to him.

Master Gryphus was detained in bed by the fever caused by the fracture of his arm. His keys passed into the hands of one of his assistants. Behind this turnkey, who introduced the Recorder, Rosa, the fair Frisian maid, had slipped into the recess of the door, with a handkerchief to her mouth to stifle her sobs.

Cornelius listened to the sentence with an expression rather of surprise than sadness.

After the sentence was read, the Recorder asked him whether he had anything to answer.

"Indeed, I have not," he replied. "Only I confess that, among all the causes of death against which a cautious man may guard, I should never have supposed this to be comprised."

On this answer, the Recorder saluted Van Baerle with all that consideration which such functionaries generally bestow upon great criminals of every sort.

But whilst he was about to withdraw, Cornelius asked, "By the bye, Mr. Recorder, what day is the thing -- you know what I mean -- to take place?"

"Why, to-day," answered the Recorder, a little surprised by the self-possession of the condemned man.

A sob was heard behind the door, and Cornelius turned round to look from whom it came; but Rosa, who had foreseen this movement, had fallen back.

"And," continued Cornelius, "what hour is appointed?"

"Twelve o'clock, sir."

"Indeed," said Cornelius, "I think I heard the clock strike ten about twenty minutes ago; I have not much time to spare."

"Indeed you have not, if you wish to make your peace with God," said the Recorder, bowing to the ground. "You may ask for any clergyman you please."

Saying these words he went out backwards, and the assistant turnkey was going to follow him, and to lock the door of Cornelius's cell, when a white and trembling arm interposed between him and the heavy door.

Cornelius saw nothing but the golden brocade cap, tipped with lace, such as the Frisian girls wore; he heard nothing but some one whispering into the ear of the turnkey. But the latter put his heavy keys into the white hand which was stretched out to receive them, and, descending some steps, sat down on the staircase which was thus guarded above by himself, and below by the dog. The head-dress turned round, and Cornelius beheld the face of Rosa, blanched with grief, and her beautiful eyes streaming with tears.

She went up to Cornelius, crossing her arms on her heaving breast.

"Oh, sir, sir!" she said, but sobs choked her utterance.

"My good girl," Cornelius replied with emotion, "what do you wish? I may tell you that my time on earth is short."

"I come to ask a favour of you," said Rosa, extending her arms partly towards him and partly towards heaven.

"Don't weep so, Rosa," said the prisoner, "for your tears go much more to my heart than my approaching fate, and you know, the less guilty a prisoner is, the more it is his duty to die calmly, and even joyfully, as he dies a martyr. Come, there's a dear, don't cry any more, and tell me what you want, my pretty Rosa."

She fell on her knees. "Forgive my father," she said.

"Your father, your father!" said Cornelius, astonished.

"Yes, he has been so harsh to you; but it is his nature, he is so to every one, and you are not the only one whom he has bullied."

"He is punished, my dear Rosa, more than punished, by the accident that has befallen him, and I forgive him."

"I thank you, sir," said Rosa. "And now tell me -- oh, tell me -- can I do anything for you?"

"You can dry your beautiful eyes, my dear child," answered Cornelius, with a good-tempered smile.

"But what can I do for you, -- for you I mean?"

"A man who has only one hour longer to live must be a great Sybarite still to want anything, my dear Rosa."

"The clergyman whom they have proposed to you?"

"I have worshipped God all my life, I have worshipped Him in His works, and praised Him in His decrees. I am at peace with Him and do not wish for a clergyman. The last thought which occupies my mind, however has reference to the glory of the Almighty, and, indeed, my dear, I should ask you to help me in carrying out this last thought."

"Oh, Mynheer Cornelius, speak, speak!" exclaimed Rosa, still bathed in tears.

"Give me your hand, and promise me not to laugh, my dear child."

"Laugh," exclaimed Rosa, frantic with grief, "laugh at this moment! do you not see my tears?"

"Rosa, you are no stranger to me. I have not seen much of you, but that little is enough to make me appreciate your character. I have never seen a woman more fair or more pure than you are, and if from this moment I take no more notice of you, forgive me; it is only because, on leaving this world, I do not wish to have any further regret."

Rosa felt a shudder creeping over her frame, for, whilst the prisoner pronounced these words, the belfry clock of the Buytenhof struck eleven.

Cornelius understood her. "Yes, yes, let us make haste," he said, "you are right, Rosa."

Then, taking the paper with the three suckers from his breast, where he had again put it, since he had no longer any fear of being searched, he said: "My dear girl, I have been very fond of flowers. That was at a time when I did not know that there was anything else to be loved. Don't blush, Rosa, nor turn away; and even if I were making you a declaration of love, alas! poor dear, it would be of no more consequence. Down there in the yard, there is an instrument of steel, which in sixty minutes will put an end to my boldness. Well, Rosa, I loved flowers dearly, and I have found, or at least I believe so, the secret of the great black tulip, which it has been considered impossible to grow, and for which, as you know, or may not know, a prize of a hundred thousand guilders has been offered by the Horticultural Society of Haarlem. These hundred thousand guilders -- and Heaven knows I do not regret them -- these hundred thousand guilders I have here in this paper, for they are won by the three bulbs wrapped up in it, which you may take, Rosa, as I make you a present of them."

"Mynheer Cornelius!"

"Yes, yes, Rosa, you may take them; you are not wronging any one, my child. I am alone in this world; my parents are dead; I never had a sister or a brother. I have never had a thought of loving any one with what is called love, and if any one has loved me, I have not known it. However, you see well, Rosa, that I am abandoned by everybody, as in this sad hour you alone are with me in my prison, consoling and assisting me."

"But, sir, a hundred thousand guilders!"

"Well, let us talk seriously, my dear child: those hundred thousand guilders will be a nice marriage portion, with your pretty face; you shall have them, Rosa, dear Rosa, and I ask nothing in return but your promise that you will marry a fine young man, whom you love, and who will love you, as dearly as I loved my flowers. Don't interrupt me, Rosa dear, I have only a few minutes more."

The poor girl was nearly choking with her sobs.

Cornelius took her by the hand.

"Listen to me," he continued: "I'll tell you how to manage it. Go to Dort and ask Butruysheim, my gardener, for soil from my border number six, fill a deep box with it, and plant in it these three bulbs. They will flower next May, that is to say, in seven months; and, when you see the flower forming on the stem, be careful at night to protect them from the wind, and by day to screen them from the sun. They will flower black, I am quite sure of it. You are then to apprise the President of the Haarlem Society. He will cause the color of the flower to be proved before a committee and these hundred thousand guilders will be paid to you."

Rosa heaved a deep sigh.

"And now," continued Cornelius, -- wiping away a tear which was glistening in his eye, and which was shed much more for that marvellous black tulip which he was not to see than for the life which he was about to lose, -- "I have no wish left, except that the tulip should be called Rosa Barlaensis, that is to say, that its name should combine yours and mine; and as, of course, you do not understand Latin, and might therefore forget this name, try to get for me pencil and paper, that I may write it down for you."

Rosa sobbed afresh, and handed to him a book, bound in shagreen, which bore the initials C. W.

"What is this?" asked the prisoner.

"Alas!" replied Rosa, "it is the Bible of your poor godfather, Cornelius de Witt. From it he derived strength to endure the torture, and to bear his sentence without flinching. I found it in this cell, after the death of the martyr, and have preserved it as a relic. To-day I brought it to you, for it seemed to me that this book must possess in itself a divine power. Write in it what you have to write, Mynheer Cornelius; and though, unfortunately, I am not able to read, I will take care that what you write shall be accomplished."

Cornelius took the Bible, and kissed it reverently.

"With what shall I write?" asked Cornelius.

"There is a pencil in the Bible," said Rosa.

This was the pencil which John de Witt had lent to his brother, and which he had forgotten to take away with him.

Cornelius took it, and on the second fly leaf (for it will be remembered that the first was torn out), drawing near his end like his godfather, he wrote with a no less firm hand: --

"On this day, the 23d of August, 1672, being on the point of rendering, although innocent, my soul to God on the scaffold, I bequeath to Rosa Gryphus the only worldly goods which remain to me of all that I have possessed in this world, the rest having been confiscated; I bequeath, I say, to Rosa Gryphus three bulbs, which I am convinced must produce, in the next May, the Grand Black Tulip for which a prize of a hundred thousand

guilders has been offered by the Haarlem Society, requesting that she may be paid the same sum in my stead, as my sole heiress, under the only condition of her marrying a respectable young man of about my age, who loves her, and whom she loves, and of her giving the black tulip, which will constitute a new species, the name of Rosa Barlaensis, that is to say, hers and mine combined.

"So may God grant me mercy, and to her health and long life!

"Cornelius van Baerle."

The prisoner then, giving the Bible to Rosa, said, --

"Read."

"Alas!" she answered, "I have already told you I cannot read."

Cornelius then read to Rosa the testament that he had just made.

The agony of the poor girl almost overpowered her.

"Do you accept my conditions?" asked the prisoner, with a melancholy smile, kissing the trembling hands of the afflicted girl.

"Oh, I don't know, sir," she stammered.

"You don't know, child, and why not?"

"Because there is one condition which I am afraid I cannot keep."

"Which? I should have thought that all was settled between us."

"You give me the hundred thousand guilders as a marriage portion, don't you?

"And under the condition of my marrying a man whom I love?"

"Certainly."

"Well, then, sir, this money cannot belong to me. I shall never love any one; neither shall I marry."

And, after having with difficulty uttered these words, Rosa almost swooned away in the violence of her grief.

Cornelius, frightened at seeing her so pale and sinking, was going to take her in his arms, when a heavy step, followed by other dismal sounds, was heard on the staircase, amidst the continued barking of the dog.

"They are coming to fetch you. Oh God! Oh God!" cried Rosa, wringing her hands. "And have you nothing more to tell me?"

She fell on her knees with her face buried in her hands and became almost senseless.

"I have only to say, that I wish you to preserve these bulbs as a most precious treasure, and carefully to treat them according to the directions I have given you. Do it for my sake, and now farewell, Rosa."

"Yes, yes," she said, without raising her head, "I will do anything you bid me, except marrying," she added, in a low voice, "for that, oh! that is impossible for me."

She then put the cherished treasure next her beating heart.

The noise on the staircase which Cornelius and Rosa had heard was caused by the Recorder, who was coming for the prisoner. He was followed by the executioner, by the soldiers who were to form the guard round the scaffold, and by some curious hangers-on of the prison.

Cornelius, without showing any weakness, but likewise without any bravado, received them rather as friends than as persecutors, and quietly submitted to all those preparations which these men were obliged to make in performance of their duty.

Then, casting a glance into the yard through the narrow iron-barred window of his cell, he perceived the scaffold, and, at twenty paces distant from it, the gibbet, from which, by order of the Stadtholder, the outraged remains of the two brothers De Witt had been taken down.

When the moment came to descend in order to follow the guards, Cornelius sought with his eyes the angelic look of Rosa, but he saw, behind the swords and halberds, only a form lying outstretched near a wooden bench, and a deathlike face half covered with long golden locks.

But Rosa, whilst falling down senseless, still obeying her friend, had pressed her hand on her velvet bodice and, forgetting everything in the world besides, instinctively grasped the precious deposit which Cornelius had intrusted to her care.

Leaving the cell, the young man could still see in the convulsively clinched fingers of Rosa the yellowish leaf from that Bible on which Cornelius de Witt had with such difficulty and pain written these few lines, which, if Van

Baerle had read them, would undoubtedly have been the saving of a man and a tulip.