

Chapter 12

The Execution

Cornelius had not three hundred paces to walk outside the prison to reach the foot of the scaffold. At the bottom of the staircase, the dog quietly looked at him whilst he was passing; Cornelius even fancied he saw in the eyes of the monster a certain expression as it were of compassion.

The dog perhaps knew the condemned prisoners, and only bit those who left as free men.

The shorter the way from the door of the prison to the foot of the scaffold, the more fully, of course, it was crowded with curious people.

These were the same who, not satisfied with the blood which they had shed three days before, were now craving for a new victim.

And scarcely had Cornelius made his appearance than a fierce groan ran through the whole street, spreading all over the yard, and re-echoing from the streets which led to the scaffold, and which were likewise crowded with spectators.

The scaffold indeed looked like an islet at the confluence of several rivers.

In the midst of these threats, groans, and yells, Cornelius, very likely in order not to hear them, had buried himself in his own thoughts.

And what did he think of in his last melancholy journey?

Neither of his enemies, nor of his judges, nor of his executioners.

He thought of the beautiful tulips which he would see from heaven above, at Ceylon, or Bengal, or elsewhere, when he would be able to look with pity on this earth, where John and Cornelius de Witt had been murdered for having thought too much of politics, and where Cornelius van Baerle was about to be murdered for having thought too much of tulips.

"It is only one stroke of the axe," said the philosopher to himself, "and my beautiful dream will begin to be realised."

Only there was still a chance, just as it had happened before to M. de Chalais, to M. de Thou, and other slovenly executed people, that the headsman might inflict more than one stroke, that is to say, more than one martyrdom, on the poor tulip-fancier.

Yet, notwithstanding all this, Van Baerle mounted the scaffold not the less resolutely, proud of having been the friend of that illustrious John, and godson of that noble Cornelius de Witt, whom the ruffians, who were now crowding to witness his own doom, had torn to pieces and burnt three days before.

He knelt down, said his prayers, and observed, not without a feeling of sincere joy, that, laying his head on the block, and keeping his eyes open, he would be able to his last moment to see the grated window of the Buytenhof.

At length the fatal moment arrived, and Cornelius placed his chin on the cold damp block. But at this moment his eyes closed involuntarily, to receive more resolutely the terrible avalanche which was about to fall on his head, and to engulf his life.

A gleam like that of lightning passed across the scaffold: it was the executioner raising his sword.

Van Baerle bade farewell to the great black tulip, certain of awaking in another world full of light and glorious tints.

Three times he felt, with a shudder, the cold current of air from the knife near his neck, but what a surprise! he felt neither pain nor shock.

He saw no change in the colour of the sky, or of the world around him.

Then suddenly Van Baerle felt gentle hands raising him, and soon stood on his feet again, although trembling a little.

He looked around him. There was some one by his side, reading a large parchment, sealed with a huge seal of red wax.

And the same sun, yellow and pale, as it behooves a Dutch sun to be, was shining in the skies; and the same grated window looked down upon him from the Buytenhof; and the same rabble, no longer yelling, but completely thunderstruck, were staring at him from the streets below.

Van Baerle began to be sensible to what was going on around him.

His Highness, William, Prince of Orange, very likely afraid that Van Baerle's blood would turn the scale of judgment against him, had compassionately taken into consideration his good character, and the apparent proofs of his innocence.

His Highness, accordingly, had granted him his life.

Cornelius at first hoped that the pardon would be complete, and that he would be restored to his full liberty and to his flower borders at Dort.

But Cornelius was mistaken. To use an expression of Madame de Sevigne, who wrote about the same time, "there was a postscript to the letter;" and the most important part of the letter was contained in the postscript.

In this postscript, William of Orange, Stadtholder of Holland, condemned Cornelius van Baerle to imprisonment for life. He was not sufficiently guilty to suffer death, but he was too much so to be set at liberty.

Cornelius heard this clause, but, the first feeling of vexation and disappointment over, he said to himself, --

"Never mind, all this is not lost yet; there is some good in this perpetual imprisonment; Rosa will be there, and also my three bulbs of the black tulip are there."

But Cornelius forgot that the Seven Provinces had seven prisons, one for each, and that the board of the prisoner is anywhere else less expensive than at the Hague, which is a capital.

His Highness, who, as it seems, did not possess the means to feed Van Baerle at the Hague, sent him to undergo his perpetual imprisonment at the fortress of Loewestein, very near Dort, but, alas! also very far from it; for Loewestein, as the geographers tell us, is situated at the point of the islet which is formed by the confluence of the Waal and the Meuse, opposite Gorcum.

Van Baerle was sufficiently versed in the history of his country to know that the celebrated Grotius was confined in that castle after the death of Barneveldt; and that the States, in their generosity to the illustrious publicist, jurist, historian, poet, and divine, had granted to him for his daily maintenance the sum of twenty-four stivers.

"I," said Van Baerle to himself, "I am worth much less than Grotius. They will hardly give me twelve stivers, and I shall live miserably; but never mind, at all events I shall live."

Then suddenly a terrible thought struck him.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "how damp and misty that part of the country is, and the soil so bad for the tulips! And then Rosa will not be at Loewestein!."