

Chapter 13

What was going on all this Time in the Mind of one of the Spectators

Whilst Cornelius was engaged with his own thoughts, a coach had driven up to the scaffold. This vehicle was for the prisoner. He was invited to enter it, and he obeyed.

His last look was towards the Buytenhof. He hoped to see at the window the face of Rosa, brightening up again.

But the coach was drawn by good horses, who soon carried Van Baerle away from among the shouts which the rabble roared in honour of the most magnanimous Stadtholder, mixing with it a spice of abuse against the brothers De Witt and the godson of Cornelius, who had just now been saved from death.

This reprieve suggested to the worthy spectators remarks such as the following: --

"It's very fortunate that we used such speed in having justice done to that great villain John, and to that little rogue Cornelius, otherwise his Highness might have snatched them from us, just as he has done this fellow."

Among all the spectators whom Van Baerle's execution had attracted to the Buytenhof, and whom the sudden turn of affairs had disagreeably surprised, undoubtedly the one most disappointed was a certain respectably dressed burgher, who from early morning had made such a good use of his feet and elbows that he at last was separated from the scaffold only by the file of soldiers which surrounded it.

Many had shown themselves eager to see the perfidious blood of the guilty Cornelius flow, but not one had shown such a keen anxiety as the individual just alluded to.

The most furious had come to the Buytenhof at daybreak, to secure a better place; but he, outdoing even them, had passed the night at the threshold of the prison, from whence, as we have already said, he had advanced to the very foremost rank, unguibus et rostro, -- that is to say, coaxing some, and kicking the others.

And when the executioner had conducted the prisoner to the scaffold, the burgher, who had mounted on the stone of the pump the better to see and be seen, made to the executioner a sign which meant, --

"It's a bargain, isn't it?"

The executioner answered by another sign, which was meant to say, --

"Be quiet, it's all right."

This burgher was no other than Mynheer Isaac Boxtel, who since the arrest of Cornelius had come to the Hague to try if he could not get hold of the three bulbs of the black tulip.

Boxtel had at first tried to gain over Gryphus to his interest, but the jailer had not only the snarling fierceness, but likewise the fidelity, of a dog. He had therefore bristled up at Boxtel's hatred, whom he had suspected to be a warm friend of the prisoner, making trifling inquiries to contrive with the more certainty some means of escape for him.

Thus to the very first proposals which Boxtel made to Gryphus to filch the bulbs which Cornelius van Baerle must be supposed to conceal, if not in his

breast, at least in some corner of his cell, the surly jailer had only answered by kicking Mynheer Isaac out, and setting the dog at him.

The piece which the mastiff had torn from his hose did not discourage Boxtel. He came back to the charge, but this time Gryphus was in bed, feverish, and with a broken arm. He therefore was not able to admit the petitioner, who then addressed himself to Rosa, offering to buy her a head-dress of pure gold if she would get the bulbs for him. On this, the generous girl, although not yet knowing the value of the object of the robbery, which was to be so well remunerated, had directed the tempter to the executioner, as the heir of the prisoner.

In the meanwhile the sentence had been pronounced. Thus Isaac had no more time to bribe any one. He therefore clung to the idea which Rosa had suggested: he went to the executioner.

Isaac had not the least doubt that Cornelius would die with the bulbs on his heart.

But there were two things which Boxtel did not calculate upon: --

Rosa, that is to say, love;

William of Orange, that is to say, clemency.

But for Rosa and William, the calculations of the envious neighbour would have been correct.

But for William, Cornelius would have died.

But for Rosa, Cornelius would have died with his bulbs on his heart.

Mynheer Boxtel went to the headsman, to whom he gave himself out as a great friend of the condemned man; and from whom he bought all the clothes of the dead man that was to be, for one hundred guilders; rather an exorbitant sum, as he engaged to leave all the trinkets of gold and silver to the executioner.

But what was the sum of a hundred guilders to a man who was all but sure to buy with it the prize of the Haarlem Society?

It was money lent at a thousand per cent., which, as nobody will deny, was a very handsome investment.

The headsman, on the other hand, had scarcely anything to do to earn his hundred guilders. He needed only, as soon as the execution was over, to allow Mynheer Boxtel to ascend the scaffold with his servants, to remove the inanimate remains of his friend.

The thing was, moreover, quite customary among the "faithful brethren," when one of their masters died a public death in the yard of the Buytenhof.

A fanatic like Cornelius might very easily have found another fanatic who would give a hundred guilders for his remains.

The executioner also readily acquiesced in the proposal, making only one condition, -- that of being paid in advance.

Boxtel, like the people who enter a show at a fair, might be disappointed, and refuse to pay on going out.

Boxtel paid in advance, and waited.

After this, the reader may imagine how excited Boxtel was; with what anxiety he watched the guards, the Recorder, and the executioner; and with what intense interest he surveyed the movements of Van Baerle. How would he place himself on the block? how would he fall? and would he not, in falling, crush those inestimable bulbs? had not he at least taken care to enclose them in a golden box, -- as gold is the hardest of all metals?

Every trifling delay irritated him. Why did that stupid executioner thus lose time in brandishing his sword over the head of Cornelius, instead of cutting that head off?

But when he saw the Recorder take the hand of the condemned, and raise him, whilst drawing forth the parchment from his pocket, -- when he heard the pardon of the Stadtholder publicly read out, -- then Boxtel was no more like a human being; the rage and malice of the tiger, of the hyena, and of the serpent glistened in his eyes, and vented itself in his yell and his movements. Had he been able to get at Van Baerle, he would have pounced upon him and strangled him.

And so, then, Cornelius was to live, and was to go with him to Loewestein, and thither to his prison he would take with him his bulbs; and perhaps he would even find a garden where the black tulip would flower for him.

Boxtel, quite overcome by his frenzy, fell from the stone upon some Orangemen, who, like him, were sorely vexed at the turn which affairs had taken. They, mistaking the frantic cries of Mynheer Isaac for demonstrations of joy, began to belabour him with kicks and cuffs, such as could not have been administered in better style by any prize-fighter on the other side of the Channel.

Blows were, however, nothing to him. He wanted to run after the coach which was carrying away Cornelius with his bulbs. But in his hurry he overlooked a paving-stone in his way, stumbled, lost his centre of gravity, rolled over to a distance of some yards, and only rose again, bruised and begrimed, after the whole rabble of the Hague, with their muddy feet, had passed over him.

One would think that this was enough for one day, but Mynheer Boxtel did not seem to think so, as, in addition to having his clothes torn, his back bruised, and his hands scratched, he inflicted upon himself the further punishment of tearing out his hair by handfuls, as an offering to that goddess of envy who, as mythology teaches us, wears a head-dress of serpents.