

Chapter 14

The Pigeons of Dort

It was indeed in itself a great honour for Cornelius van Baerle to be confined in the same prison which had once received the learned master Grotius.

But on arriving at the prison he met with an honour even greater. As chance would have it, the cell formerly inhabited by the illustrious Barneveldt happened to be vacant, when the clemency of the Prince of Orange sent the tulip-fancier Van Baerle there.

The cell had a very bad character at the castle since the time when Grotius, by means of the device of his wife, made escape from it in that famous book-chest which the jailers forgot to examine.

On the other hand, it seemed to Van Baerle an auspicious omen that this very cell was assigned to him, for according to his ideas, a jailer ought never to have given to a second pigeon the cage from which the first had so easily flown.

The cell had an historical character. We will only state here that, with the exception of an alcove which was contrived there for the use of Madame Grotius, it differed in no respect from the other cells of the prison; only, perhaps, it was a little higher, and had a splendid view from the grated window.

Cornelius felt himself perfectly indifferent as to the place where he had to lead an existence which was little more than vegetation. There were only two things now for which he cared, and the possession of which was a happiness enjoyed only in imagination.

A flower, and a woman; both of them, as he conceived, lost to him for ever.

Fortunately the good doctor was mistaken. In his prison cell the most adventurous life which ever fell to the lot of any tulip-fancier was reserved for him.

One morning, whilst at his window inhaling the fresh air which came from the river, and casting a longing look to the windmills of his dear old city Dort, which were looming in the distance behind a forest of chimneys, he saw flocks of pigeons coming from that quarter to perch fluttering on the pointed gables of Loewestein.

These pigeons, Van Baerle said to himself, are coming from Dort, and consequently may return there. By fastening a little note to the wing of one of these pigeons, one might have a chance to send a message there. Then, after a few moments' consideration, he exclaimed, --

"I will do it."

A man grows very patient who is twenty-eight years of age, and condemned to a prison for life, -- that is to say, to something like twenty-two or twenty-three thousand days of captivity.

Van Baerle, from whose thoughts the three bulbs were never absent, made a snare for catching the pigeons, baiting the birds with all the resources of his kitchen, such as it was for eight slivers (sixpence English) a day; and, after a month of unsuccessful attempts, he at last caught a female bird.

It cost him two more months to catch a male bird; he then shut them up together, and having about the beginning of the year 1673 obtained some eggs from them, he released the female, which, leaving the male behind to hatch the eggs in her stead, flew joyously to Dort, with the note under her wing.

She returned in the evening. She had preserved the note.

Thus it went on for fifteen days, at first to the disappointment, and then to the great grief, of Van Baerle.

On the sixteenth day, at last, she came back without it.

Van Baerle had addressed it to his nurse, the old Frisian woman; and implored any charitable soul who might find it to convey it to her as safely and as speedily as possible.

In this letter there was a little note enclosed for Rosa.

Van Baerle's nurse had received the letter in the following way.

Leaving Dort, Mynheer Isaac Boxtel had abandoned, not only his house, his servants, his observatory, and his telescope, but also his pigeons.

The servant, having been left without wages, first lived on his little savings, and then on his master's pigeons.

Seeing this, the pigeons emigrated from the roof of Isaac Boxtel to that of Cornelius van Baerle.

The nurse was a kind-hearted woman, who could not live without something to love. She conceived an affection for the pigeons which had thrown themselves on her hospitality; and when Boxtel's servant reclaimed them with culinary intentions, having eaten the first fifteen already, and now wishing to eat the other fifteen, she offered to buy them from him for a consideration of six stivers per head.

This being just double their value, the man was very glad to close the bargain, and the nurse found herself in undisputed possession of the pigeons of her master's envious neighbour.

In the course of their wanderings, these pigeons with others visited the Hague, Loewestein, and Rotterdam, seeking variety, doubtless, in the flavour of their wheat or hempseed.

Chance, or rather God, for we can see the hand of God in everything, had willed that Cornelius van Baerle should happen to hit upon one of these very pigeons.

Therefore, if the envious wretch had not left Dort to follow his rival to the Hague in the first place, and then to Gorcum or to Loewestein, -- for the two places are separated only by the confluence of the Waal and the Meuse, -- Van Baerle's letter would have fallen into his hands and not the nurse's: in which event the poor prisoner, like the raven of the Roman cobbler, would have thrown away his time, his trouble, and, instead of having to relate the series of exciting events which are about to flow from beneath our pen like the varied hues of a many coloured tapestry, we should have naught to describe but a weary waste of days, dull and melancholy and gloomy as night's dark mantle.

The note, as we have said, had reached Van Baerle's nurse.

And also it came to pass, that one evening in the beginning of February, just when the stars were beginning to twinkle, Cornelius heard on the staircase of the little turret a voice which thrilled through him.

He put his hand on his heart, and listened.

It was the sweet harmonious voice of Rosa.

Let us confess it, Cornelius was not so stupefied with surprise, or so beyond himself with joy, as he would have been but for the pigeon, which, in answer to his letter, had brought back hope to him under her empty wing; and, knowing Rosa, he expected, if the note had ever reached her, to hear of her whom he loved, and also of his three darling bulbs.

He rose, listened once more, and bent forward towards the door.

Yes, they were indeed the accents which had fallen so sweetly on his heart at the Hague.

The question now was, whether Rosa, who had made the journey from the Hague to Loewestein, and who -- Cornelius did not understand how -- had succeeded even in penetrating into the prison, would also be fortunate enough in penetrating to the prisoner himself.

Whilst Cornelius, debating this point within himself, was building all sorts of castles in the air, and was struggling between hope and fear, the shutter of the grating in the door opened, and Rosa, beaming with joy, and beautiful in her pretty national costume -- but still more beautiful from the grief which for the last five months had blanched her cheeks -- pressed her little face against the wire grating of the window, saying to him, --

"Oh, sir, sir! here I am!"

Cornelius stretched out his arms, and, looking to heaven, uttered a cry of joy, --

"Oh, Rosa, Rosa!"

"Hush! let us speak low: my father follows on my heels," said the girl.

"Your father?"

"Yes, he is in the courtyard at the bottom of the staircase, receiving the instructions of the Governor; he will presently come up."

"The instructions of the Governor?"

"Listen to me, I'll try to tell you all in a few words. The Stadtholder has a country-house, one league distant from Leyden, properly speaking a kind of large dairy, and my aunt, who was his nurse, has the management of it. As soon as I received your letter, which, alas! I could not read myself, but which your housekeeper read to me, I hastened to my aunt; there I remained until the Prince should come to the dairy; and when he came, I asked him as a favour to allow my father to exchange his post at the prison of the Hague with the jailer of the fortress of Loewestein. The Prince could not have suspected my object; had he known it, he would have refused my request, but as it is he granted it."

"And so you are here?"

"As you see."

"And thus I shall see you every day?"

"As often as I can manage it."

"Oh, Rosa, my beautiful Rosa, do you love me a little?"

"A little?" she said, "you make no great pretensions, Mynheer Cornelius."

Cornelius tenderly stretched out his hands towards her, but they were only able to touch each other with the tips of their fingers through the wire grating.

"Here is my father," said she.

Rosa then abruptly drew back from the door, and ran to meet old Gryphus, who made his appearance at the top of the staircase.